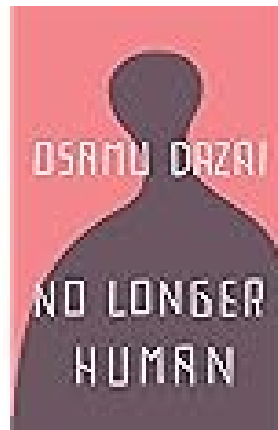


Existential Angst and Dehumanization in Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*

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Abstract

Osamu Dazai, one of the most prominent Japanese writers is known for his introspective writing style and existential angst. *No Longer Human* which means 'Disqualified as a human being' is a Japanese modern fiction published in 1948. It is considered as the final work of Osamu Dazai before his suicide. The work depicts Dazai's own life through the eyes of protagonist Oba Yozo. Dazai's works often explore the themes of human suffering, isolation, identity crisis and sense of despair. Dazai shows strong inclination towards existentialist and nihilist explication of human suffering. The novel is a powerful exploration of an individual's existential crisis. It traces Yozo's development of experiences and his perception from his childhood to adulthood.

Keywords: *No Longer Human*, identity crisis, Dazai, existentialism, nihilism, death.

Existentialism is a philosophy that explores the problems of human life with an emphasis on the individual facing a seemingly meaningless world and seeks to create meaning in the world without inherent meaning. The fundamental question, “what is the meaning of life?” arises in individuals. Existentialist philosophy is most commonly associated with several 19th and 20th century philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Frederich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Satre and Albert Camus. However, many of these thinkers never used the term existentialist to describe themselves as they all had different approach to it, while they did share the common template of existentialism. Satre became popular with his famous maxim “Existence precedes Essence.” While existentialism often grapples with the question of individual freedom and meaninglessness, Camus focused on the concept of ‘Absurd’. The novel *No Longer Human* expounds these existential ideas by the portrayal of the character Oba Yazo.

Dazai’s central character Oba Yozo deals with several personality traits such as masking his true identity, self-deception, and self- destructive behavior. Also, various characteristic features like skepticism, escapism and nihilism are prominent in his character making him a very complex individual. This novel is a powerful exploration of an individual’s existential crisis. Yozo Oba, the main protagonist, narrates his whole life in three notebooks. The story is written in the first-person narrative. Yozo’s books act as memoir- each of them showcasing different stages of his life from childhood up to 27th year. Yozo fails to understand the basic needs of humans such as ‘having meal’. “Why must human beings eat three meals every single day?” (Dazai 24)

The first notebook depicts his childhood days, grew up in a wealthy family in the countryside of northeast Japan like Dazai, Oba Yozo was the youngest child among his brothers and sisters. His personality traits can be noticed from his childhood as he is inclined towards self- deception and exhibits eccentric behavioral patterns. Yozo holds bizarre thoughts about almost everything that he observes including people’s behavior and things.

“I was convinced that the bridge had been provided to lend an exotic touch and to make the station premises a place of pleasant diversity... I remained under the delusion for quite a long time... I discovered that the bridge was nothing more than a utilitarian device, I lost all interest in it” (Dazai 21-22). As a child, it is common to find delight in things without knowing their

real purpose. However, Yozo is always in a delusion that things around him exist purely for artistic touch or created with no real purpose but when he discovers the actual purpose of those things it drives him to acknowledge the dullness of human beings.

Yozo often finds himself in a chaotic situation when he observes how other people live life in very logical and unaesthetic manner. He lives with a perception that he lacks the strength to live according to his true self and assumes he is disqualified from living with other people. Whenever he encounters some people, he observes their behavior and struggles to understand them. His sense of detachment and alienation makes him feel uncomfortable to communicate with others. Yozo likes to act like a clown to gain affection from people around him. He thinks that the last resort to be liked by people is to pretend to be a clown and make people laugh. Acting like a clown act as healing therapy to him. Not just Yozo's eccentric behavior but also his traumatic experiences of sexual abuse by the hands of one of his maids made him alienated and misfit in the society. As Yozo states, "Already by that time I had been taught a lamentable thing by the maids and servants; I was being corrupted" (Dazai 35).

The second notebook shows his life from teenager to adulthood. Yozo moved to a new place and maintains the fake personality. He states - "my clowning had by this time become so much part of me that it was no longer such a strain to trick others." (Dazai 42). He intentionally acts funny and clumsy making people laugh at him. Yozo. He intentionally would create a funny scene by falling on the ground during physical training period but this failure was entirely premediated and everybody burst out laughing as he planned. He achieves a kind of self-satisfaction from each successful act. However, his act soon gets figured out by his classmate Takeichi who realizes that he is doing it on purpose.

Yozo carries forward his flaws from childhood to adulthood. His self-harming persona becomes more prominent later in his life. This includes excessive drinking of alcohol, taking overdose of morphine and suicidal thoughts. Yozo had been concealing his fears and stress from childhood, keeping them to himself. With alcohol in his life, Yozo finds a way to release his burden. Indulging in excessive drinking allows him to cope with his anxiety and internal struggle and when his physical condition deteriorated, he starts to consume morphine and abuses himself with drugs which led to the weakening his already fragile body even more.

Yozo's mind was enveloped with suicidal thoughts he is overwhelmed by despair and meaninglessness of life and considers suicide as a means to become free from everything. He tried to attempt suicide with a bar waitress as their relationship was marked by sense of despair and struggle for belongingness. He says "something impure dark reeking of the shady character always hovers above me." (Dazai 161)

Kierkegaard has explored the concept of despair in his work *Sickness unto Death*, he states that "Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self, and so can have three forms: being unconscious in despair of having self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself and wanting in despair to be oneself." (Kierkegaard 43). Kierkegaard depicts despair as some sort of illness or sickness which he calls self. Yozo struggles with self-awareness, relies on earthly pleasures, and the sensuality dominates over his intellect.

Escapism is a complex response to existential despair and there is an inherent sense of escapism in Yozo's mentality. An individual seeks pleasure or relief as a means to escape from harsh realities of daily life. It provides a sense of detachment from the difficulties of real world. Yozo's character exhibits a nihilistic tendency. Nietzsche in his book *The Will to Power* has discussed nihilism. "The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism." (Nietzsche 7). Nihilism is a conviction where human values are devalued and it is evident in Yozo's character his response always comes a 'nothing'.

In Sartrean existentialism, alienation primarily revolves around the idea of 'bad faith'. Sartre talks about two ways of bad faith one is playing a masked role and another one is treating oneself as material thing. Yozo constantly plays the role of a clown masking his true characteristic trait and eventually he becomes prisoner of this role and gradually it created depression and existential angst in him. Alienation emerges as a natural consequence of an existential dilemma. Losing faith in God and trust in others along with anguish and anxiety makes life absolutely absurd, meaningless and futile. It is what Camus called as Sisyphean act. Albert Camus emphasizes that alienation arises from the conflict between the human desire for meaning and indifference of the world. The novel explores how Yozo feels completely disconnected and out of place in society. He observes everything about people's behavior and finds it hard to comprehend with. He becomes

overwhelmed by the feeling of meaninglessness and struggles to find his place in the world. Alcohol and drugs provide him temporary escape from his loneliness. This sense of escapism is related to the existential theme of absurdity and the search for meaning.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Satre had different views on existentialism. According to Satre, absurdity exists independently in our consciousness, while Camus's idea of absurd is influenced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche that states the absurdity as a result of the absence of God. Camus holds some critical opinion on existentialism. He defines existentialism in the purview of absurdism. He defines it as a conflict between 'search for meaning' and meaninglessness of the world exploring the human condition in front of irrational world. The concept of absurdity contains the idea that life only has the meaning that we decide to give it and there is no inherent meaning beyond that.

Camus discussed the idea of absurd reasoning as he states, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus 3). He describes how a person realizes there is no profound reason for living feels like a stranger or alien and have nothing to look forward. Camus labelled this recognition of feeling as absurdity. About suicide he says "it is the one truly serious philosophical problem because it invites individuals to judge whether life is worth living? In the novel suicide is a recurring theme as the main character Yozo goes through absurdity and tries to attempt suicide multiple times as a response to its existential suffering. Yozo considers death as something that should not be feared to, but something to be welcomed. From this explanation, it can be seen that Yozo considers death as a form of freedom and happiness with a sense of despair and alienation, viewing death as a potential escape from the struggles and challenges he faces in life. Yozo's suicide attempt reflects the notion of confronting the absurdity of life. Camus argues that suicide is the natural response to the absurd, it presents a possible escape from the sense of meaninglessness as depicted in the novel how he tries to end his life several times. Suicide is an act of confession and the person who commits it confesses that he is not able to comprehend life.

Absurdity and hopelessness devour Yozo and his intent to commit suicide grew more intense as he starts thinking that living is an act of sin. However, his intent didn't succeed and he was sent to a mental asylum, later he left Tokyo and lived in an isolated place in countryside. "Now I have neither happiness nor unhappiness" (Dazai 169). It reflects the passive acceptance of fleeting moments of life. He realizes the futility of his attempts to connect with others.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus presents the idea of absurd hero who rebels against meaninglessness of life by embracing the absurd. However, Yozo's response to absurd doesn't align with Camus's notion of revolt. Yozo's actions including his struggle, alienation, despair and self-destructive behavior depicts his surrender to absurd as he desperately looks for the way to escape these feelings. Unlike Sisyphus, Yozo exhibits a resigned or disengaged approach to absurd at the end of the story.

No Longer Human serves as an insightful exploration of existential philosophy. The character Yozo deals with existential dilemmas illustrating Satre's core idea of existential angst and Camus's exploration of absurdity of life. The novel is playful interpretation of dehumanization, existential angst, idea of nihilism, death and decay of human values and. The novel rejects the idea of constructivism and projects unresolved emotions and festering wounds of a navigating soul misfit in the tenets of modern world.

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