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THE MOTIF OF ALIENATION AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTION IN “NO LONGER HUMAN” BY OSAMU DAZAI

The novel *No Longer Human* was first published in 1958 and remains one of the most famous books in Japan due to its heavy existential themes. It is somewhat ironic that one of Dazai Osamu’s most troubling – particularly in terms of the protagonist’s behavior – yet deeply sincere novels has achieved such widespread recognition. Today, it is considered a classic of Japanese literature and is often included in school curricula. In this respect, it can be compared to the Ukrainian classic *Fedko Khalamydnyk*: both works are commonly read in school and often leave readers with a strong sense of melancholy.

The narrative centers on the protagonist, Oba Yozo, who is characterized by a profound sense of alienation from humanity. His life, as recorded in his notebooks, is marked by what he describes as “much shame”:

“Mine has been a life of much shame. I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being” [1, p.18].

This alienation initially manifests as a sense of confusion toward others, which gradually develops into fear. Yozo perceives people as a collective, almost “eldritch” force capable of overwhelming and destroying him. He questions the true nature of humanity and its functions, making his own inductive reasoning:

“What, I wondered, did he mean by “society”? The plural of human beings? Where was the substance of this thing called “society”? I had spent my whole life thinking that society must certainly be something powerful, harsh and severe, but to hear Horiki talk made the words “Don’t you mean yourself?” come to the tip of my tongue. But I held the words back, reluctant to anger him.

Society won’t stand for it. It’s not society. You’re the one who won’t stand for it—right? If you do such a thing society will make you suffer for it. It’s not society. It’s you, isn’t it? Before you know it, you’ll be ostracized by society. It’s not society. You’re going to do the ostracizing, aren’t you?” [1, p.82].

Finally, he reached a general conclusion:

“From then on, however, I came to hold, almost as a philosophical conviction, the belief: What is society but an individual?” [1, p.82].

Yozo stopped questioning the world early in childhood, realizing it rarely made sense. Since no adult could explain the “whys” – only judging him when he did not behave as expected – he observed and learned the silent rules of society to fit in. Every day was as terrifying as it was confusing. This disorientation eventually forced him to confront reality: a “safe space” never existed. This realization – that there is no place where one can truly be genuine – freed him from the burden of being “left out of the loop”, but it also deepened his misery.

This mentality likely stemmed from his childhood trauma. Born into a wealthy family with a reputation to uphold, Yozo was sexually assaulted by his servants. Because of his family’s status, he could not tell anyone about it. It clearly impacted him, as he later developed an immense fear of human beings and even misogynistic views, but in a way that feared women's strength rather than condemning it.

To survive, Yozo adopts a mask: the role of the jester. He believes that if he can make people laugh, they won't hurt him. However, this performance becomes a "buffoonery of defeat". By tailoring his life to appease others, he became the sole reason for his own misery. Even when praised for his funny attitude, he feels no joy – only relief that he hasn't been "found out" as a fake.

As Yozo drifts into adulthood, his self-betrayal turns into self-hatred. He descends into a spiral of alcohol and hollow romances, viewing himself as a "disqualified" human being. He treats those who love him with a destructive egoism born out of despair. Oba Yozo is so convinced of his own isolation that he cannot recognize the genuine kindness offered by those around him:

"I was frightened even by God. I could not believe in his love, only in his punishment. I could believe in hell, but it was impossible for me to believe in the existence of heaven" [1, p.80].

For Yozo, the concept of God is terrifying because it implies being "fully perceived" and punished for his "monstrous nature." The idea of an otherworldly being seeing through his carefully maintained layers is dreadful. Consequently, death became his only true escape. He desired to fully cease, fearing that, if heaven or hell existed, he would simply be trapped in another cycle of insufferable existence. Interestingly, Yozo found a strange comfort in irrationality:

"Irrationality. I found the thought faintly pleasurable. Or rather, I felt at ease with it. What frightened me was the logic of the world" [1, p.48].

This fear led to coping mechanisms: Yozo used substances not to feel life more, but to dull it. He reveled in "disguised insincerity" to avoid the perceived brutality of human logic. This path led to a "suicide in slow motion." While he initially felt free in brothels among prostitutes (he saw them as outcasts, just like he was), this freedom was an illusion. Addiction became a hole he could not escape. Eventually, imprisonment turned into comfort. He knew that he was running from reality, and Oba Yozo found addiction as his salvation. He was holed up in a cheap room that became his dear home, drinking and smoking daily. He did not have another home to run to, since at one point in the story his father kicked him out for such a shameful lifestyle. In the end, Yozo succeeds in taking his own life, never realizing how many people cared for him.

Ultimately, Yozo's tragedy was his inability to believe in redemption. He became a bitter person underneath. Ugly, too. He's like a wilted flower that could have bloomed beautifully but never did. He begins as a martyr – perhaps to make up for the love he could not give the world – and ends with a mind so clouded that he fails to realize how damaging he is to others.

The novel utilizes unreliable narration: in the epilogue, a bar madam describes Yozo as a "good boy and an angel," flatly contradicting his self-portrait as a monster. This leaves us with a question: was Yozo truly "no longer human," or was he simply a man who tortured himself with a twisted self-image until he made his damnation a reality? We will never know.

Have I told you that this is a biographical prose? Dazai's real life mirrored the novel in many ways. He was from a wealthy family, had numerous affairs, and had complicated marriages. In his works, Dazai Osamu used women as a tool to further critique himself. By writing from a woman's point of view, he could judge his own life and personality from the outside. Sometimes these characters acted just like him, and other times they were used to criticize characters who shared his flaws [2, p.33-34]. Dazai Osamu was reliant on drugs and alcohol, as well as frequented bars, so these topics were often brought up in his stories. Contemporary peers, critics, and acquaintances of Osamu Dazai often viewed him as a brilliant but deeply troubled, decadent figure. While recognized for his talent, he was frequently

criticized for his tumultuous personal life, scandalous relationships, and perceived “small-town” antics, often characterized by his own brand of “confessional” literature. They described him as a man of humour, but also as someone sensitive to words and timid, desperate for approval, often making others laugh to mask his own insecurity [3, p.17-36].

That is why I describe it as somewhat ironic that the novel has become so popular. No, it is not his first pessimistic novel. The “irony” lies in the novel’s extreme honesty, as it is the only work in which Dazai is so transparent about his own perceptions of the world. It is also the only novel that contains such a strong degree of similarity to his own life. Dazai Osamu died by suicide just a few months after writing *No Longer Human*, after several previous attempts. His most famous quote is: “*Living itself is the source of sin*” [1, p.111].

Dazai’s final success was not in his escape from life, but in his failure to disappear. His blood seeping into this earth ensured his eternal existence in the world, specifically the world of Japanese literature. *No Longer Human* remains popular because it dares to voice the “shameful” thoughts that most people spend their lives hiding. Its enduring popularity suggests that the “gap” Oba Yozo, and in turn, Dazai Osamu felt between himself and humanity wasn’t as wide as he believed. In his account of feeling “disqualified” to be even considered human, he ironically found a way to connect deeply with hundreds of readers. Most of the story was numbing and repulsive, lacking traditional plot twists and action – it was a gradual descent of a human being into its worst form – but it was eye-opening on how mental health can affect a person, and it speaks to those that struggle to define themselves [3, p.33].

REFERENCES

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