

## MASKING DESIRES: A LACANIAN ANALYSIS OF OSAMU DAZAI'S NOVELS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The research study offers a detailed exploration of Osamu Dazai's seminal novels, *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*, through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, aiming to scrutinize the intricate interplay between societal conformity and masking personal desires. It aims to elucidate the human condition by investigating how the characters' use masking as a defense mechanism to navigate society, thereby impacting their identity and relationships. Through a qualitative approach, this research study seeks to trace the utilization and evolution of masks throughout the narratives. The study further explores the consequences of prolonged masking, analyzing how the initial defense mechanism causes psychological conflict ultimately leading to alienation and despair. This research study is delimited to the character analysis of Dazai's novels, employing Lacan's theory of desire and lack. Drawing on Lacan's seminars and critical literature, the study examines how the use of masking leads to psychological turmoil and how the tension between the real and the ideal self culminates in alienation and despair. It determines that the pervasive struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal norms and expectations can cause psychological problems often leading to alienation and despair. By shedding light on this psychological struggle, the study not only offers insights into Dazai's literary works but also contributes to a deeper understanding of human psychology.*

**Key Words:** desire, lack, mirror stage, alienation, despair, ideal self, real self.

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Tsushima Shūji, known by his pen name Osamu Dazai (1909-1948), is among the most acclaimed authors in modern Japanese literature. He stands as a renowned figure in the field of academia, with an award named after him i.e. The Osamu Dazai Prize. In the Japanese world of elegant beauty portrayed through traditional poetry, such as tanka and haiku, Dazai with his wry, dark, gloomy tone carrying a tinge of farce humour, adds to the canonical Japanese literature by capturing the confusion of post-war Japan, the alienation, despair, nihilistic beliefs of the younger generation and most of all the tension between societal conformity and the yearning for authenticity in post-war Japan. He excavates the significance of 'human feeling' and the palpable clash between 'individual' and 'society'. Born in 1909, he hails from an aristocratic family in the Kanagi region of Japan, a remote countryside. Instead of finding the poetic beauty of the Japanese countryside, his works underscore the ever-present despair in man's existence. He led an extremely disorganized life right from childhood. The lack of sense of belonging and love caused him to adopt erratic behaviour. His life is associated with Tokyo where he moved for higher studies. There he led a life of drinking, dallying with communism, drug addiction and repeated suicide attempts. Ultimately his suicide attempt proved successful and he died in 1948 in Tmagawa Aqueduct, Tokyo in a double suicide with his lover.

Osamu Dazai, with his I-novel (Shishōsetsu) technique, seems to sketch a portrait of his own tortured consciousness in his oeuvre. Writing in the post-war era, he artfully captures the sensibilities of modern Japan, the alienation, despair, and Man's struggle to have a sense of

belonging and identity in a society that endorses uniformity. His works reflect the turbulent times he lived through and are steeped with themes of existentialism, the universal human struggle to find meaning in life and a sense of belonging, and dysfunctional families, which serve as a mirror of his battles against depression and inner turmoil. He is greatly influenced by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, who is a Japanese literary giant of his period. During the time, western culture and literature had well crept into Japan, authors like Dostoevsky and Kafka and their themes of alienation and despair and exploration of the human psyche contributed to the development of his own themes. He became a significant figure in Japanese literature and his writing became a melting pot of his personal experiences, literary influences and innovative and introspective techniques.

The research study comprehensively analyzes Dazai's *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun* translated by Donald Keene. *No Longer Human* unfolds the story of Yozo, a social loner, through three memorandums or 'notebooks'. Yozo, a man incapable of expressing his true self or communicating his feelings from childhood, learned to act as the clown. His role as a clown or his 'erratic' actions allows him to navigate social expectations and norms. His 'clownery' makes him more alienated from himself and his true feelings and this eventually makes him a drunkard and a drug addict and his "lack [of] qualifications of a human being" compels him to attempt suicide twice (Dazai 102). *The Setting Sun* unravels the decadence of an aristocratic family in post-war Japan. The narrative underscores the moral crisis in a changing Japanese society from a feudal society to a modern industrial Japan. The protagonist Kazuko, the unmarried daughter of a widowed aristocrat, lives with her mother, who ultimately rejects her aristocratic identity in order to find happiness while Kazuko strives to maintain the facade of her aristocratic title at the expense of her desires. The narrative ultimately unfolds Kazuko's alienation and despair, which her masking eventually leads to.

The research study aims to elucidate the human condition by exploring how characters mask their authentic desires to conform to societal norms and expectations. This masking can lead to psychological conflicts creating a battle with self-perception and the persona one has created for the society. The objective of this research is to trace the use of masks and their evolution throughout the narratives and how these masks initially affect characters' identities and relationships. This research study also intends to investigate the impact of sustained masking and how the initial defense mechanism becomes an inner conflict among the characters which ultimately causes alienation and despair.

The research study employs Lacan's theory of registers or orders that shape a subject and the construct of desire as the foundational concepts to analyse the character's use of masks, the psychological turmoil and the proceeding isolation and despair. Jacques Lacan is a renowned French psychoanalyst and philosopher. He is known as an influential rethinker of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, emphasizing the role of language, desire, and the "mirror stage" in understanding human psychology and identity. The research is substantiated by Lacan's concept regarding desire and lack which proposes that the object does not conceal a deeper order of objects, but rather masks fundamental emptiness. Zizek while explaining this Lacanian concept articulates, "what the objects, in their given positivity, are masking is not some other, more substantial order of objects but simply the emptiness, the void they are filling out" (221). This void is created in the mirror stage when the child envisions himself in the mirror. He longs to become complete like the image that appears in the image but in reality, he is 'fragmentary'. The child is then projected into the 'symbolic order': "the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society" (Eagleton 145). The symbolic order would then, shape the subjectivity of the child, influencing their desires and aspirations. The symbolic order or the society would



ultimately have an impact on his desires. To navigate in the society, the child would attempt to conform to the symbolic order, “which is constitutive for the subject” (Lacan 7) and hence, the child endeavors to conform to this order.

The significance of the research lies in its exploration of the masking of authentic desires by the characters as defense mechanisms in the narratives *The Setting Sun* and *No Longer Human*. By studying the evolution and consequences of masking within these narratives, the research sheds light on the profound and universal human struggle to conform to societal norms while concealing inner desires and feelings. It offers insights into the toll this internal conflict takes on individuals, leading to feelings of alienation and despair. Moreover, this research provides a psychoanalytic lens through which to examine how Dazai's characters grapple with their authentic selves in the face of a rapidly changing post-war Japanese society, making it valuable for understanding literary works and the broader human condition.

This research study answers the following questions:

How do the characters in Dazai's selected novels employ masking as a defense mechanism to navigate societal pressures and expectations?

How does the masking of authentic desire ultimately lead to a growing sense of isolation and despair, emphasizing the impact on their true selves within the changing societal context?

The research study is structured into four chapters i.e. Introduction, Literature Review, Research Methodology and Discussion and Analysis. The first chapter introduces the author, the primary texts and the theoretical framework to substantiate the research. The second chapter reviews significant literature related to the study and corroborates the research gap. The third chapter gives a brief methodology for the research. The fourth chapter, Discussion and Analysis, answers the above-stated research questions through references from the novel. It establishes how the use of masks as a defense mechanism causes internal conflict and ultimately leads to alienation and despair. Furthermore, it concludes that the struggle to conform to societal expectations by masking authentic desires can cause psychological quandaries surrounding one's sense of self.

## CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contextualizes the psychoanalytic theory as elaborated by Lacan in relation to Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*, aiming to delineate the intricate relationship between the masking of desires, a concept central to Lacanian theory, and the consequent manifestations of alienation and despair depicted in Dazai's narratives. The foundational exploration of the concept of desire is discussed, which finds its origins in Sigmund Freud's exploration in his collection of essays *Ecrits*. Lacanian concepts are further interpreted and extrapolated by Slavoj Žižek in his writings. The chapter proceeds with a review of literature directly pertinent to the primary texts under study. Subsequently, the chapter conducts a comprehensive review of pertinent literature conceptualizing the Lacanian psyche, desire and lack.

Osamu Dazai is a prominent Japanese author known for his introspective and darkly existential novels. In *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*, he focuses on the inner turmoil of the characters, their alienation and despair in a post-war Japanese society. Being a modern writer, he is engrossed in the exploration of the inner state of consciousness rather than external reality. His novels serve as a poignant reflection of his own tumultuous life and psychological battle, his existential despair and alienated self. Alan Stephen Wolfe in his book *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* asserts that Osamu Dazai is the “earliest post-war manifestation of the genuinely alienated writer” (4). He has shown his alienation in his characters.

Through his characters he is creating a self-perception of himself, not an objective self, that self serves as a “tool, a diversified rhetorical device situated somewhere between reality and fiction” (Wolfe 116). He has created a self-portrait through his characters.

Likewise David Brudnoy in his article “The Immutable Despair” maintains that his oeuvre might be taken as a mirror of “his own tortured consciousness” as if he has “transformed his grief into the stuff of his writing”(458). Correspondingly, George T. Sipos in his article “Masks of the Author in Dazai Osamu’s Fiction” establishes that Dazai employs the shishōsetsu (I-novel) technique by attempting to revisit the conventional placement of Dazai’s work within the tradition of the modern Japanese literary category of the shishōsetsu (47). Brudnoy, through the comparison of his life and his works, establishes that his oeuvre “in its entirety … creates the dominant idea—despair” (473). His nihilistic and existential nature is reflected through his characters, mainly Yozo who struggles with societal integration causing existential despair, identity crises and alienation.

In “Nihilism and (Non) Humanity in Dostoevsky’s Demons and Dazai’s *No Longer Human*” Akylinna Printziou in a comparative analysis with Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *Demons* explores Dazai’s *No Longer Human* from a nihilistic perspective. Printziou argues that *No Longer Human* implicitly deals with the “themes of nihilism and post-war depression” and “turns them inwards” instead of projecting them outward onto society as Dostoevsky’s *Demons* does (2). Printziou further argues that Yozo is a passive dehumanised nihilist as opposed to Stavrogin as he mirrors a “dead person”, loathes “action” and projects his “nihilism inwards” (3). Dazai’s work resonates with personal despair and captures a nuanced portrayal of nihilism’s existential consequences.

Furthermore, Andrea Marín Gil in “Through the Mask. Behind Osamu Dazai’s Smile” explores the intermingling of Dazai’s life, historical context, and sociopolitical conditions that influenced his literature and eventual suicide and substantiates that “Dazai brought his own nature to light through his novels” (201) and further asserts that Dazai presents “the lack of affection and the irrepressible need to seek it in the hands of women who in his novels are shown with maternal attitudes (Kazuko and Naoji’s own mother or Yozo’s wife)” (200-201). Moreover, Dazai wrote a number of his works using a female narrator including *The Setting Sun*. It has been argued that he uses this female voice to further critique the Dazai-like persona he has created through his shishōsetsu technique. Jamie Walden Cox in his thesis titled “Dazai’s Women: Dazai Osamu and his Female Narrators,” Dazai juxtaposes “thoughtful, intelligent, pensive, strong-willed, hard-working, and creative” women characters alongside “violent, alcoholic, selfish, self-deprecating, drug addicted, and womanizing” men not because he was an “early male-feminist” (1). He uses this juxtaposition and women narrators as a tool to further critique himself by making “the human weakness in the Dazai persona” more apparent (Cox 64). Hence, the female narrators for Dazai appear simply as another means for self-critique.

Osamu Dazai, in all his works, has highlighted the inner turmoil and psychological battles of the characters and how the childhood experiences of the characters eventually impact their self-perception and identity. Hye Yun Choi and Jee Hyun Ha’s “Psychoanalytic Perspectives of Social Phobia: Based on Dazai Osamu’s Novel ‘Human Lost’ explores ‘social phobia’ or social anxiety experienced by Yozo in *No Longer Human*. The character of Yozo has been psychoanalytically analysed and it is revealed an absent mother-child relationship in the pre-oedipal stage and a troubled oedipal stage relationship of father and child results in insecure attachment. Yozo had absent father and mother figures in his developmental years which served as a basis for his social anxiety or social phobia that continued from childhood until his suicide.

Jacques Lacan provides a distinctive theoretical framework that revisits and expands upon the conventional Freudian concepts. Lacan introduces innovative perspectives on the concepts of the unconscious and the formation of the ego. Lacan's psychoanalysis puts emphasis on the symbolic order, where language and cultural symbols shape human subjectivity. While emphasizing the role of the unconscious in the formation of the self, he further asserts that language is a tool for communication as well as alienation. One of the most important concepts in the development of self-identity is the mirror stage, where the subject identifies with one's own image via a mirror, thereby causing *méconnaissance* or misrecognition. This process introduces the subject to the intricacies of the Imaginary realm. The tripartite structure, comprising the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, proposes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of human subjectivity. Central to Lacanian psychoanalysis is the concept of desire, which asserts is perpetually influenced by an elusive object of desire. The actual desire is the desire for completeness that emerges in the lack first encountered in the mirror stage. In the therapeutic process, the focus is on unravelling the symbolic meanings and uncovering unconscious desires with the ultimate goal of attaining self-understanding within the broader socio-political context.

The word 'desire' "was introduced into French by Ignace Meyerson's inaccurate translation of the Freudian term *Wunsch* (wish)" (qtd. in Ragachewskaya). Freud is considered the Copernicus of psychoanalysis. He explores the multifaceted nature of desire in his groundbreaking work *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud's conception of desire is intricately linked with his theories of the unconscious, where he puts forth the idea that human behavior is often shaped by unconscious desire and conflicts. Desires, including those of a sexual nature, often stem from repressed or unfulfilled childhood wishes. In his work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he argues that dreams serve as a pathway for repressed desires and unresolved conflicts. "They are concealed realizations of repressed desires." (Freud 50). Desire innervates the subject, moreover, his exploration of the Oedipus complex lights his claim of how unconscious wishes and desires contribute to the complexity of character development.

However, Lacan's exploration of desire is deeply influenced by the reinterpretation of Freud's concepts. He argues that when a subject sees his complete image in the mirror stage through a literal or symbolic mirror, he visualizes a unitary, complete self. He later realizes that the unitary image he saw in the mirror is not reality. The desire emerges from this very 'lack'. As he elucidates, "Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists" (Lacan 223). The desire originates in the subject's entry into the symbolic order, marked by language, cultural norms, and social structures, it is mediated through language. He introduces the Saussurian principles of linguistics into psychoanalysis, emphasizing the alienated nature of language. As James Mellard asserts "Linguistic is the constitutive trope in Lacan's rethinking of Freudian Discourse" (501).

Hence, Lacan deviates from Freud and moves from "Freud's concept of the wish [which is] subjective, private and regressive to [his] concept of desire [which is] intersubjective, public and future-oriented" (Wright 619). In the article, "Another Look at Lacan and Literary Criticism", Wright critically explores Lacanian psychoanalysis and its impact on literary criticism. It is further explored in the article that although emerged from Freudian studies, the concepts and aims of Lacanian psychoanalysis are distinct. As she asserts that a reader who returns to Freud via Lacan "does not look in the text for latent wishes or for a defense against those wishes, but for a recognition of her or his desire" (Wright 620). Hence, in Lacanian literary criticism desires are recognized for gaining a profound understanding of the self rather than the conventional search for latent wishes and defenses against them.



Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, has extensively interpreted desire and extended his ideas within the social order. According to Žižek, Lacanian desire is not about fulfilling a lack, or finding satisfaction in a particular object. Instead, desire is perpetual and can never be fully satisfied. This dissatisfaction is inherent in the structure of desire itself. Žižek often discusses the concept of *objet petit a* in Lacanian theory, which he interprets as a stand-in for the impossible object that desire is always chasing but can never attain. Žižek often discusses the concept of "false needs" or "masked desires" in the context of consumer culture, ideology, and the way desires are shaped within society. According to Žižek, individuals are often misled by what they think they desire, as these desires are manipulated by cultural and ideological forces. This process, in turn, contributes to a form of alienation.

Moreover, the concept of *objet petit a* is further explained by Lewis A. Kirshner in his article "Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit A* In Lacanian Theory". He asserts that "The concept of the *objet petit a* is central to Lacan's theory of desire" (Kirshner 53). *Objet petit a* is an elusive object of desire that is forever unattainable; it is a gap between the conscious and unconscious desires that manifests itself through various forms. As Krishner maintains *objet petit a* "is a fantasy attempting to bridge the gap between separate symbolic existence and the unmediated biological "real" of a harmonious mix-up with the primal other" (89). It is an effort by human beings to overcome the inherent lack, identified when a subject enters into the symbolic order after realizing his/her fragmentary self. The cause of desire or *objet petit a* is hence "an expression of the lack inherent in human beings" (Kirshner 101). Its identification with the self can lead to an impossible reunion with the "real", posing a threat to the well-being of the subject.

Lastly, more recently in 2021 Wengqiu Wang and Y. Jia in "Lacan's Theory of Desire and its Practical Value" by Wengqiu Wang and Y. Jia the author begins by elucidating Lacan's assertion that "the desire of man is the desire of the Others," emphasizing the influence of Hegel and Kojeve on Lacan's theory. The author explores Lacan's concept of desire as an alienated subject, shaped by the pursuit of the *Objet petit a*, a fantasy formed in the quest for what Freud termed 'Das Ding', and delves into the subject's two brutal alienations, first in the mirror stage, where the false subject is constructed, and later in the symbolic realm, where the subject enters language and societal norms. The article connects Lacanian desire with the concepts of Fantasy and the *Objet petit a*, highlighting their roles in the perpetuation and maintenance of desire. It is further substantiated that the subject's attempt to grasp the *Objet petit a* can lead to the collapse of desire and pave the road to despair. Furthermore, the text extends Lacan's theory to critique contemporary society, specifically the materialistic nature of a consumer-driven culture and draws parallels with Jean Baudrillard's views on symbolic consumption and highlights the transient and insatiable nature of desire in a society obsessed with status and symbols.

Hence, it can be concluded that the theory of desire in the psychoanalytical framework has been subjected to evolution, originating in Freud, extrapolated by Lacan and further interpreted and extended by critics like Zizek and Miller to different fields. Elizabeth Wright substantiates Lacanian psychoanalysis and his concept of desire from conventional psychoanalytic criticism. Lewis A. Kirshner further emphasizes Lacanian *objet petit a*'s centrality in his conception of desire. Lastly, Wang and Jia explained the Lacanian concepts of desire and *objet petit a* and further draw a parallel between Lacan and Jean Baudrillard's views about the insatiable nature of desire in a consumption-based society.

Considerable research has been conducted on Dazai's novels as autobiographical and his use of shishōsetsu (the I-novel technique). The characters' struggle, particularly Yozo's, has been analyzed from a nihilistic and existential perspective. The literary corpus on Dazai and his oeuvre

reveal that there remains a research gap in analyzing the psychoanalytic understanding of characters. The research study aims to fill this research gap by analyzing how characters masking their desires in a post-war modern society can serve as a stemming point for alienation and despair. To address the gap the research study intends how the sustained masking of desires eventually causes alienation and despair by using the Lacanian concept of desire and lack.

### CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study employs a qualitative approach. The primary texts under study are Japanese author, Osamu Dazai's novels, *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun*. The characters in Dazai's selected novels mask their authentic desires in response to societal pressures and expectations. The research study proves how this masking impacts their identity and relationships and how the initial defense mechanism when prolonged leads to alienation and despair in the evolving societal context of post-war Japan. This is realized through the study of Dazai's novels through Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concepts of desire and lack as discussed in his collection of seminars *Ecrits*. The research study is delimited to the character analysis within the context of the transitioning period of post-war Japan.

The research study uses Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, mainly his theory of desire which is linked with the 'symbolic order' in order to achieve its aims and objectives. Lacan argues in his Seminar X i.e. "Anxiety" that desire emerges from the lack. In the 'mirror stage', the child identifies with the complete image, but he is 'fragmentary' From here arises the desire to be complete. Lacan in his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function" posits:

"It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase" (76).

Furthermore, when the child enters into the 'symbolic order', language is introduced and because of the slipping nature of language, the child is unable to express his true desire i.e. of uniting with the 'Thing' or the mother. As Lacan says, "Language creates a veil over desire (50)" The concept of desire is intertwined with the concept of '*Objet petit a*'. The *objet petit a* represents the unattainable object of desire. It is not a specific, concrete object but a stand-in for that which is missing or unfulfilled. *Objet Petit a* is the objects' desire attempt to fill the fundamental lack (stemming from the mirror stage and entry into the symbolic order) which is exacerbated by the need to conform to societal norms. Since symbolic order often indicates what is acceptable or not and shapes the desires, the objects may pursue what genuinely do not fulfil their actual desires leading to dissatisfaction. This aspect of Lacanian psychoanalysis is highlighted in Dazai's selected novels.

The secondary sources consulted in the research study include book-length studies of the author by different critics and scholarly articles from online databases such as JSTOR. Alan Stephen Wolfe's *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* greatly aided in contextualizing the author and his novels in post-war transitioning Japan. Due to the lack of scholarly articles, dissertations were consulted to further understand the characters in social and cultural contexts. The research study faced certain limitations; one of the main ones was the limited criticism of the author, particularly the selected novels.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter delves into the detailed analysis of Osamu Dazai's novels, *The Setting Sun* and *No Longer Human*, translated by Donald Keene. The chapter examines how the characters in the narratives use masks to conceal their inner desires as a defense mechanism. This sustained masking, which initially served a defensive purpose, aggravates their sense of alienation and despair. The research study further probes how the struggle to conform to society by concealing inner desires ultimately leads to inner turmoil. To vindicate the argument, the Lacanian psychoanalytic lens is employed which assists in further scrutinizing the subjectivity of human beings. In his collection of essays *Écrits*, Lacan argues "Man's desire is the desire of the Other," which underscores the profound influence of societal norms and expectations on individual desire, urging individuals to adopt masks in an attempt to conform to the rules. The misalignment between the true self's desires and the symbolic order's demands intensifies the individual's sense of lack, contributing to psychological distress.

*No Longer Human* is a dark and introspective journey of a man struggling to find his place in the world. The novel provides a raw and contemplative exploration of human nature and the masks one often wears to find one's place in society. The narrative revolves around Yozo who struggles to assimilate into society right from his childhood. He struggles to blend in the family and society, causing him to feel alienated. To navigate and function in the society, he attempts to integrate in the society by suppressing his feelings. He adopts the facade of 'clownery' to hide his inner turmoil and to comply with societal expectations. His clownery only adds to his alienation. Years later, he goes to college and is introduced to drinking and smoking by his friend. Despite moments of fleeting hope, his relationship with Shizuko and his marriage with Yoshiko, he moves deeper and deeper into the spiral of self-destructive behavior. He continues feeling unhuman and ultimately resorts to suicide as the weight of his internal struggles becomes exceedingly burdensome.

*The Setting Sun* is a compelling novel that centers on the female protagonist Kazoku who belongs to an aristocratic family now struggling to grapple with the transitioning reality of post-war Japan. The daughter of an aristocratic widow, caught between the traditional values and the changing social landscape, fights her demons while taking care of her mother and alcoholic brother. She and her mother are forced to move to a smaller house in the countryside where she struggles with poverty and her mother's deteriorating health. She is a complex character, a generation trapped in a changing world where she tries to make sense of her identity and the world around her. She suppresses her desires and love for the writer Uehara to assimilate in the society and to take care of her sick mother. After her mother dies, she goes on to pursue her love and decides to become the mother of her lover's child, fighting against societal and cultural norms. Meanwhile, her brother fails to grasp the change becomes a drug addict and ultimately succumbs to the burden of his internal struggles and commits suicide.

#### 4.1 Masking as a Defensive Strategy

In Dazai's *No Longer Human*, Yozo is a complex character, who is deeply marked by a sense of alienation and detachment. The novel presents Yozo's notebooks. The unnamed speaker begins by describing his childhood, explaining that certain aspects of society and humanity never made much sense to him. From the outset, he was distinct from his peers and family and faced persistent challenges in assimilation in the society. Yozo begins his retrospective journey with "I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being" (17). He reveals he "had not the remotest idea of the nature of the sensation of hunger" (18). Still, he would eat a great deal

not out of hunger because he was “seeking to please” (18). He further reveals how his idea of happiness was completely at “variance with that of everyone else”. This difference would make him toss sleeplessly. This illustrates a profound sense of alienation and detachment that permeates his life from early childhood onward. He feels incapable of understanding human beings and at the same time unwilling to show his true nature, so he adopts the technique of ‘performing’ for his people, attempting to conform to societal expectations of charm and sociability. For that, he becomes a ‘clown’ to mask his alienation or to bridge the gap between his real and ideal self. Through his childhood, he “had become an accomplished clown” (21). This masking initially aids him to navigate in the society. He became the class favorite in his high school, he “could always convulse the classroom with the laughter” (Dazai 32).

The disconnection between his outer disposition and inner turmoil highlights his efforts to mask his true emotions to fit in. When these emotions exceed his capacity to manage, he starts creating disturbing paintings to convey his ‘true nature’. His impulse arises after an interaction with his friend Takeichi during which he refers to the self-portrait of Van Gogh as depicting a ghostly figure. He still kept his painting or ‘true nature’ hidden from everyone and only showed his painting to Takeichi. Years later when he went to Tokyo for college, his “fear of human beings” was still not diminished. He is introduced to drinking, smoking and the Communist Party by his friend Horiki. He runs errands for the party even though he finds these people ridiculous for their conviction in Marxist beliefs. He masks his true thoughts, pretends to feel the same way and becomes popular with his newfound comrades. Along with other masks, he continues with his initial mask of “clownery”, employing it as a means to assimilate into the society. But his “gloom and depression grew only more intense” (81) despite smoking, drinking and clownery and ultimately he commits suicide.

In Dazai’s *The Setting Sun*, Kazuko employs the defense mechanism of masking to navigate societal expectations and pressures. As a character shaped by the socio-political changes in post-war Japan, Kazuko grapples with a sense of dislocation and loss. In contrast to Yozo, she does not use clownery as a mask but her use of masking is evident in the way she presents herself to others, conforming to societal norms while concealing her internal struggles. She adopts the facade of stoicism and detachment. Despite her inner turmoil and longing to have a more meaningful existence, she appears calm and poised and adopts the role of a devoted divorced daughter of an aristocratic widow who is striving to hold the decadent aristocratic family in post-war Japan. In most of her reflective narrative, she seems concerned more about her mother, how she feels, her health and how she is coping with their impoverished state. She neglects her feelings, her love and her desires.

She articulates her feelings with acute intensity in letters addressed to a person called MC. She vividly portrays her internal struggle by using the metaphor of fire or a viper lodging inside her bosom. She says, “And in my breast a viper lodges which fattens by sacrificing Mother, which fattens however much I try to suppress it” (27-28) this conveys the depth of her internal struggles, how she attempts to cloak her desire which transforms into a burdensome weight on her heart. She loves the novelist Uehara and wants to be a mother which would give meaning to her otherwise meaningless life. She masks her desire and outwardly appears as a devoted daughter trying to hold together her decadent aristocratic family as she claims she is the victim of a “transitional period of morality” (130). This masking serves as a defense against the judgment and scrutiny of a society undergoing rapid transformation.

Lacanian theory posits that the mirror stage is a pivotal moment in an infant's development where the object recognizes its reflection, forming a foundation for identity. This process involves



a dual identification with the mirror image and an external ideal, shaping the individual's self-perception. Lacan emphasizes that this idealized image introduces a fundamental tension/lack, representing an unattainable standard. This tension persists, contributing to the perpetual human struggle with desire and the pursuit of elusive completeness throughout life. The mirror stage also marks the entry of the child in the symbolic order where he is introduced with the Name-of-the-father or the big Other which is the realm of language, cultural norms, and societal structures. "The Symbolic dimension is what Lacan calls the 'big Other', the invisible order that structures our experience of reality, the complex network of rules and meanings which makes us see what we see" (Zizek). The tension arising from the disparity between the real and the ideal in the mirror stage persists in the symbolic order, where individuals navigate societal expectations, language, and cultural norms in their pursuit of a coherent identity. The symbolic order (society) decides the acceptable conduct, actions and desires of the object.

Yozo becomes a clown grappling with the symbolic order and because of the slipping and conforming nature of language and society, he is unable to express his true desire, which is to feel connected and assimilated in society. This increases the tension between the real and the ideal self, making him more and more alienated. The symbolic order forces the characters to conform to society, creating a rift between the real self and the ideal self. Yozo Father at one point in the narrative "wanted to buy [him] a mask" which could be considered symbolic. In Lacanian terms, the father figure holds profound symbolic importance in the formation of individual subjectivity. As mentioned earlier father symbolizes initiation into the symbolic order which represents societal norms, rules and cultural values. Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction* explains that according to Lacan:

Our unconscious desire is directed towards this Other, in the shape of some ultimately gratifying reality which we can never have; but it is also true for Lacan that our desire is in some way always *received* from the Other too. We desire what others — our parents, for instance — unconsciously desire for us (151).

Hence, when his father expresses the desire to purchase a mask for Yozo it could symbolize his attempt to shape and mold Yozo's individuality following societal expectations. As Lacan, conceptualizes, "the function of the symbolic is not to designate things, but to impose the structuring of the subject's world" (50). His ultimate desire becomes assimilation in the society and conforming to the no-of-the-father which he tries to achieve by masking his true identity.

Yozo's masking of his desires impacts his relationships, particularly with women he views as objects of desire rather than individuals deserving of genuine affection. His inability to form meaningful connections stems from his fear of exposing his true self, leading to shallow and superficial relationships devoid of intimacy. This is evident in his failed relationships with characters like Shizuko and Yoshiko, where his inability to be authentic contributes to their eventual breakdown.

#### 4.2 Masking Leading to Alienation and Despair

These masks when prolonged caused alienation and isolation in the characters. When individuals suppress their genuine desires to conform or meet external expectations, they create a dissonance between their authentic selves and the personas they present to the world. In *No Longer Human* Yozo found himself tangled in the threads of conformity with the masking of his authentic desires. The more he used his clowning to conceal "completely [his] true identity" (Dazai 32), the more morbid his "dread of human beings drew" (39). The three pictures of him at different stages in his life depict the progression of his deteriorating mental and emotional state. The first picture

shows him as a smiling child but when you look closer it shows, “the boy has not a suggestion of smile” and his fists are tightly clenched which shows the creeping anxiety of the child.

The second picture depicts his time in high school or college. On careful examination, his face in this picture fails “to give the impression of belonging to a living human being” (Dazai 12) instead there is a sensation of ‘pretense and artificiality. This may mark the period when he adopts the mask of clownery to navigate societal expectations. The third picture is the most ‘monstrous’ of all. The image reflects the further deterioration of his mental state because of the psychological turmoil. At this point, the sustained use of multiple masks to conceal his desires and inner struggles leads to a profound sense of disconnection from his true self and the people around him. The disconnection leaves him with “no individuality”

Moreover, he becomes popular among the people around him because of his clownery but his sense of despair deepens as he grapples with the futility of his existence. At one point he reflects, “I managed to maintain on the surface a smile which never deserted my lips; this was the accommodation I offered to others, a most precarious achievement performed by me only at the cost of excruciating efforts within”. With the increased use of clowning he comes close to “despairing himself (21). He, then, inclines towards painting despite society’s expectations of him to follow a predetermined part mainly because he is able to bridge the gap between his true self and the ideal self. As he says, “Here was the true self I had so desperately hidden” (Dazai 40).

In Tokyo, his internal struggle intensifies and he resorts to smoking and drinking. It is a desperate attempt to escape the stifling societal norms and the false self he portrays. In the end, he says, “I have frantically played the clown in order to disentangle myself from these painful relationships, only to wear myself out as a result” (Dazai 75). His alienation and despair reach a climax when he considers suicide as the only means to escape the cycle of self-deception and societal conformity. His ultimate suicides reflect the profound alienation resulting from the clash between his true desires, symbolized by the drugs, and the oppressive expectations of the symbolic realm. Dazai, through the tragic demise of Yozo, effectively portrays the devastating effect of masking on the human psyche.

In *The Setting Sun*, Kazuko masks her desire for societal norms, navigating linguistic structures and expectations. As Japan undergoes rapid modernization, traditional values are eroded, and Kazuko finds herself at odds with the changing societal norms. She calls herself a “revolution.” When her mother and brother die, she feels more alienated by conforming to society and being a noble moral woman, to the extent that she contemplates “what extreme misery is involved in being alive”(Dazai 109). Kazuko's desire for motherhood also carries personal significance. It becomes a symbol of stability and purpose in a world undergoing rapid change and decay. In the midst of personal and societal disintegration, the idea of motherhood represents a semblance of normalcy and connection to a more traditional past. Through this *objet petit a* she is the closest to being connected with the m(other). She articulates, “To give birth to the child of the man I love, and to raise him, will be the accomplishment of my moral revolution.” she is able to bridge the gap between her real self and ideal self by refusing to conform to society any longer and follow her own rules of morality and revolution.

In contrast, her brother like Yozo, Naoji struggles to come to terms with society, specifically his position in it as a decadent aristocrat. He is grappling with the profound struggle to reconcile his role as an impoverished aristocrat in society. He desperately attempts to evade the burden of his societal role and the existential crisis it poses. He writes in his note, “I ran riot and threw myself into wild diversions out of the simple desire to escape from my own shadow—being an aristocrat” (Dazai 120). He uses the diversions of alcohol and opium addiction and ultimately

commits suicide as these diversions prove insufficient in assuaging his sense of despair. He articulates in his suicide note, “I am better off dead. I haven’t the capacity to stay alive. I haven’t the strength to quarrel with people over money. I can’t even touch people for a hand-out” (121). His tragic end like Yozo, emerges as a consequence of his inability to reconcile the conflicting horns of his identity and societal expectations.

Lacan conceptualizes that desire itself is an alienated thing shaped by the pursuit of the *Objet petit a*, a fantasy formed in the quest for what Freud termed ‘Das Ding’, and delves into the subject’s two brutal alienations, first in the mirror stage, where the false subject is constructed, and later in the symbolic realm, where the subject enters language and societal norms (Benvenuto). Yozo and Kazuko, like Lacan’s alienated subjects, grapple with constructed identities: Yozo in his societal conformity, mirroring the false subject of the mirror stage, and Kazuko in the pursuit of elusive desires, akin to Lacan’s *Objet petit a* (cause of desire). As Lacan says, “One does not see oneself as one is, and even less so when one approaches oneself wearing philosophical masks” (736). Their narratives embody the brutal alienations within the realms of societal norms and personal fantasies.

Furthermore, in the mirror stage, this lack emerges in the mirror stage when we see a ‘complete’ image in the mirror while in reality is ‘fragmentary’. After this one is projected into the symbolic order and has to conform to the desire of the big Other, shaping one’s subjectivity. Real desire- connection with mother or fulfilling this initial lack, cannot be expressed because of language slippage/symbolic order. With this dissonance is created between ideal-i and the real i. This increasing tension between the two causes psychological problems. In the case of protagonists of both narratives, this tension is increased as they gradually navigate through society. Yozo had the authentic desire of wanting to fit in but he masked his desire to conform to the symbolic order which only resulted in increased tension between his real self and ideal self to the point that he ended up committing suicide. Lacan in his essay “The Function and Field of Speech 237 and Language in Psychoanalysis” posits that:

The subject's aggressiveness here has nothing to do with animals' aggressiveness when their desires are frustrated. This explanation, which most seem happy with, masks another that is less agreeable to each and every one of us: the aggressiveness of a slave who responds to being frustrated in his labor with a death wish. (Lacan 208)

The death wish here implies escape from the oppressive forces at play or hierachal social structures. The characters of Yozo and Naoji commit suicide because of this aggression that they feel towards the societal expectations that force them to conceal their desires and aggravate their psychological turmoil. In the case of Kazuko, she desired to be a mother because this was the closest he could feel to her m(other) in Lacanian terms. Hence, the characters concealed their true desires to negotiate with societal rules and expectations which eventually led to a fragmented sense of self, emotional distress and alienation. The strain of inner conflict erodes Yozo’s sense of identity and aggravates his estrangement from himself and others. To escape the cycle of disillusionment and inauthenticity he commits suicide. Kazuko, on the other hand, becomes a mother and defies the prescribed rules and norms of society. By doing so, she is able to regain her sense of identity.

## CONCLUSION

Osamu Dazai’s novels portray the psychological struggles of human beings caused by the established societal expectations, rules and regulations. He further uses his narratives to explore how humans struggle to conform to societal norms. People frequently employ different strategies to comply with societal norms, often resorting to masking their true desires or in some cases using

literal masks to conceal their real selves that do not align with societal expectations. This masking ultimately alienates them from their true selves. The sustained use of masking further exacerbates the tension between the real and the ideal self, escalating the sense of alienation and despair which in most cases leads to suicide. This is elaborated using Osamu Dazai's novels as examples through the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework which serves as a potent lens for understanding the intricacies of human subjectivity.

The research study analyzes the characters of Yozo, Kazuko and Naoji and explores how the characters used masks to conceal their true desires and cope with societal expectations. They employ masking as a defensive mechanism but the sustained use only deepened their sense of alienation and further propels them into the pit of despair. In the case of Yozo, he becomes a clown because this appeases people around him and helps him maneuver in society. This initially helps him as he becomes the class favorite, but gradually escalates his feelings of alienation. As the tension grows, he becomes an alcoholic and a drug addict and ultimately commits suicide.

Kazuko, on the other hand, conceals her desire, her love for the novelist in order to become the devoted daughter who struggles to hold the decadent aristocratic family in post-war Japan. In contrast to Yozo, she is able to abridge the tension between the real and the ideal self. She refuses to conform to the symbolic order entirely and after the death of her mother, fulfills her desire to love the novelist Uehara. She perceives becoming the mother of her love's child will bridge this gap. She becomes the moral revolutionary and is therefore able to somehow mitigate her inner struggle, by refusing to conform to societal expectations which is to become the noble, pure woman. Her brother, on the other hand, commits suicide because of the psychological struggle societal expectations have put him in.

Their narratives reflect the dual alienations of the mirror stage and the symbolic realm, how the symbolic realm or the big Other shapes one's subjectivity. One has to conform to the desire of the big Other to navigate in the symbolic realm. This exacerbates the tension between the true self and the ideal self, as this research study proves. Hence, this research study establishes that the pervasive struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations results in isolation and despair. The masking initially perceived as a defensive mechanism, unfolds as a conduit for profound psychological conflict, leading to isolation and despair. By unveiling the underlying psychological mechanism at play, analyzing the themes of alienation and despair, and character analysis, this research study revealed the intricate interplay between individual identity and societal norms. Consequently, it can be said the pervasive struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal expectations can cause psychological problems which can lead to alienation and despair.

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