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RESEARCH PAPER

# The Masks We Wear: False Self as a Response to Existential Isolation in *No Longer Human*

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**ABSTRACT**

This research analyses Yozo Oba, the protagonist of Osamu Dazai's No Longer Human (1958) and his existential dilemma of isolation alongside his need to belong. Such a conflict creates anxiety, leading to fabricated personas, and the study investigates its sociological impacts as well as Yozo's lack of resolution. Through the application and integration of Irvin Yalom's existential isolation and Donald Winnicott's false self, the study interprets Yozo as ultimately hiding behind the mask of this false self and failing to realise his truth. The research employs close reading and qualitative analysis of the text to reveal that in a world littered with elaborate facades and social pressures, to be human is to embrace one's truth, cast off one's mask and navigate the delicate balance between isolation and Additional research is required to explore the relationship between existential isolation and the false self and its representation within the literary domain.

**KEYWORDS** Yozo Oba, False Self, Existential Isolation, The Need to Belong

## Introduction

Humanity has long pondered the question of individuality and its intricate relation to society at large. Discussions about the meaning of life and one's connection to the world are not concerns exclusive to the modern era; they are present in several historical texts as well, including the *Old Testament*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* the teachings of Buddha and the works of Plato and Aristotle (Iacovou & Dixon, 2015, p. 3). Each era, in response to its prevailing intellectual climate, has developed its own philosophical currents to address such existential questions and understand individual experiences. Inspired by the Greeks, Enlightenment thinkers favoured a universal truth and valued rationality as the primary means to acquire the ultimate knowledge of human existence. In doing so, the subjective truths of human experience were fervently disregarded.

As time went on, such a standpoint led to a detached and alienated society in which an individual's emotions were overlooked while conformity to universally held beliefs was strictly expected (English, 1966, p. 154). Eventually, as a reaction to this staunch rationalism, some philosophical thinkers in the nineteenth century emphasised that the ultimate reality could not be approached and experienced solely through an objective standpoint. The personal subjective lens of the individual was equally essential to reach it. This perspective was much later labelled as Existentialism by French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) (Reynolds, 2014, p. 4).

*No Longer Human* vividly portrays an individual who grapples with the disconnect between his inner self and the external social world. From a very young and vulnerable

age, Yozo Oba frequently experiences societal scrutiny and invalidation. These experiences create deep-rooted insecurities, compelling him to develop a false self as a form of protection. He hides his true self, believing that presenting a more acceptable version of himself will help him avoid isolation and find a place in his community. This fear of isolation becomes a driving force, leading him to observe and adapt to the expectations of others constantly.

**Literature Review**

Regarded as a literary genius by his admirers and dismissed as an "abnormality" (McCarthy, 1992, p. 227) by his critics, Osamu Dazai has remained one of the most celebrated yet controversial figures in Japanese literary history. He is often viewed as advocating the truth of "the subjective self" (Lyons, 1981, p. 100) due to his raw and seemingly confessional writing style. This candid writing has led many critics to classify his work as part of the "*Shishosetsu* genre" or the Japanese I-Novel (Wolfe, 1990, p. 48).

Hence, it is no surprise that most research concerning Dazai and *No Longer Human* focuses on connecting the author's biography to his literary output. For instance, David Brudnoy regards Yozo as an isolated man, "the ultimate extension of all Dazai had been suggesting throughout his career" (Brudnoy, 1968, p. 472). In this manner, Brudnoy characterises Dazai as an outsider and describes his writing style as an exaggeration, which introduces an element of insincerity into his writings. This insincerity, Brudnoy argues, mirrors Dazai's real-life behaviour as an alienated outcast who exaggerates "to conceal the shame" (Brudnoy, 1968, p. 459). This deception of Dazai, and through him many of his characters', is seen as a reaction to the indifference and hostility he received from the world and his failure to overcome internal despair. By connecting these personal struggles with Dazai's artistic expression, Brudnoy concludes immutable despair to be the central idea of Dazai's oeuvre.

Japanese scholar Masao Miyoshi offers a much harsher critique of the autobiographical nature of Dazai's writing. Referring to him as a "sardonic clown" (Miyoshi, 1974, p. 122), Miyoshi asserts that Dazai is continuously unable to establish a fictional distance from his works. He observes his stories as exaggerated versions of his own life and therefore characterises them as meta-autobiographical. This commitment to excessive confessionalism comes at the cost of narrative coherence as the 'I' of his I-Novel is "insufficiently filled out to constitute a truly independent character in the book" (Miyoshi, 1974, p. 125). Miyoshi regards Dazai as a writer who does not possess the ability to analyse and comprehend his society to the extent necessary to address its complexities. Finally, in his analysis, he likens Dazai to a "cannibal" (Miyoshi, 1974, p. 127) who devours his own life and the minds of his readers, leaving behind works that are highly personal but fragmented.

While the autobiographical nature of Dazai's work cannot be disregarded, especially in *No Longer Human*, reducing his literary achievements to mere reflections of his life experiences risks overlooking many other significant aspects of his writing that make it unique and worthy of deeper analysis. Dazai Osamu himself despised the "bad habit of believing works of fiction to be revelations of scandals from the author's life" (as cited in McCarthy, 1992, p. 115). Although contrary to the author's wish to be regarded as entirely impersonal to his works, his narratives are undeniably personal to some extent. Yet they go beyond the boundaries of autobiography and reflect broader existential questions about identity, authenticity, modernity and the human condition—not merely despair. They explore what it means to be human in a complex world. The researcher argues that the brilliance of Dazai's creative talent shines when his works are appreciated

on their own terms, beyond the context of his personal struggles which reduce his characters to semi-fictional alter egos.

In his attempt to highlight individual aspects of *No Longer Human*, Yukihito Hijiya (1974) provides an insightful analysis of Yozo Oba's struggles with human connection and his use of clowning as a reflection of his moral failure to adapt to the rigid rules of a "religion of humanity" (p. 34). The writer argues that modern society expects people to subscribe to a set of unwritten rules related to social behaviour, connection and contribution. However, this humanist religion and the behaviour of its 'followers' creates a fear in Yozo who becomes possessed with the idea that he is always being watched by some "omniscient and omnipotent power" (Hijiya, 1974, p. 36). As a result, he perceives his clowning as part of his absolute sin, spiralling into despair and self-destruction. Although this moralistic and humanist reading of the novel provides a compelling argument, it reduces Yozo's character to a victim of moral disconnection. It touches upon his fear of human beings but fails to fully explore the nuanced nature of this fear, leaving unanswered questions about its possible psychological root causes. Instead, Hijiya solely relates the basis of Yozo's struggles with his extreme sensitivity towards the world, raising doubts about whether sensitivity alone can account for his profound disconnection.

While, Hijiya asserts the genuine humanity of Yozo, Akylina Printziou (2017) analyses his nonhumanity as a manifestation of his nihilism. She views him as someone lacking any sense of social beliefs and values, thereby relinquishing his human nature. He is seen as virtually "a dead person, loathing action and projecting his nihilism inwards" (Printziou, 2017, p. 4). Printziou also attributes his despair to an excessive sensitivity, arguing that "Yozo is overly sensitive and this is the primary reason for his suffering and despair" (Printziou, 2017, p. 7). This claim, which mirrors Hijiya's, again oversimplifies the complexity of Yozo's psychological state. Yozo's suffering is multifaceted, involving deep-seated existential fears, a pervasive sense of isolation and a chronic disconnection from others. Simply attributing his despair to sensitivity overlooks the intricate psychological dynamics at play. Another oversimplification of Yozo's despair found in the study is the suggestion that the leisurely, boring lifestyle introduced by Horiki to Yozo greatly influences his initial ideas of committing suicide. The lifestyle he adopts with Horiki may intensify his **feelings of emptiness**, but it is not the core reason for his thoughts of **suicide.** A deeper investigation into the roots of his despair is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of his character.

**Material and Methods**

Existential philosophy primarily emphasises human individuality, freedom and responsibility. It encourages the search for meaning and purpose in life despite the inherent anxieties of isolation and death (Iacovou & Dixon, 2015, p. 4). Rather than denying the validity of logical reasoning, Existentialism questions its ability to access the deep personal convictions that guide an individual's life. It prioritises an individual who lives authentically, in alignment with his true desires, instead of succumbing to the pressures of social norms and becoming a mere face in "the crowd" (Kierkegaard, 2007, p. 197).

As it flourished across mid-twentieth-century Europe, Existentialism's influence extended beyond traditional philosophy. In the realm of psychology, it led therapists across the globe to find alternatives to the deterministic and reductionist models of Freudian psychoanalysis. These therapists began to identify themselves as Existential Psychotherapists. In the United States, it was under the leadership of Rollo May (1909-1994) that existential psychotherapy developed into a distinct movement. In 1958, he published his seminal work *Existence* in which he introduced the writings and practices of

European existential philosophers and psychiatrists to the American audience (Deurzen et al., 2019, p. 247).

However, May (1958) explained that the existential movement in psychology did not arise as a rejection of other schools of thought but as an attempt to broaden the psychoanalytic understanding of "human beings in crisis" (p. 7). For instance, it expands on the assumption that psychological difficulties often result from defences against unconscious anxieties, focusing on existential givens of life, namely mortality, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness, which represent the root of human anxiety. It asserts that individuals avoid confronting these realities and push their awareness into the unconscious (Deurzen et al., 2019, p. 20).

This characterisation of the existential givens is most closely associated with the American psychiatrist Irvin Yalom (1931-), who quickly became one of the most influential figures in Existential Psychology. Existential isolation, in particular, is defined by him as "an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being…a separation between the individual and the world" (Yalom. 1980, p. 355). Awareness of this isolation, he argues, can evoke deep fear, especially in a species so dependent on social connection and validation (Helm et al., 2022, p. 97). Individuals become uncertain about their place in the world which inevitably restricts their emotional and psychological growth.

This distressing state motivates them to deny their isolation through various relational strategies that create a sense of connection. Among these strategies, conformity stands out as the most common method. Individuals conform to social expectations, even if these are inconsistent with their true identity, by adopting false selves that comply with the beliefs or standards of the external world (Helm et al., 2018, p. 151). While this approach might temporarily ease the anxiety of isolation, it inevitably widens the internal divide between the individual's authentic self and the persona presented to the world. As a result, it further perpetuates feelings of disconnection and existential unease.

American psychoanalyst Mark Leffert (2021) noted such similarity between the patients of Existential Psychologists and those discussed in case reports by Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), describing him as an "unsung Existentialist" (p. 72). Winnicott was a British psychoanalyst whose work on the environment's role in shaping an individual's sense of self continues to be influential globally. In his analysis of an individual's psychological and emotional development, he presented his theory of the false self. According to this theory, when a person experiences an environment in which his feelings and perceptions constantly conflict with those of others, it creates a sense of humiliation and fear of isolation in his mind (Daehnert, 1998, p. 254). As a result, he suppresses his "true self" (Winnicott, 2017, p. 161) and presents a socially acceptable version to gain acceptance from others and fit in with social norms and expectations (Vargova, 2019, p. 3-4). Winnicott (2017) names this version, the "false self" (p. 165) of a human being.

In this way, the researcher observes that the theories of existential isolation and false self revolve around an individual's unique identity. They analyse his struggles with social connection, validation and the inauthenticity that arises when these needs overshadow his true sense of self. Given this shared focus, the study employs these theories to examine Yozo Oba in Dazai's *No Longer Human*. The novel, presenting the tormenting depths of human existence through the complex portrayal of a modern man, is inspired by Dazai's personal tragedies and the overall despair of his time. Born as Tsushima Shuji in 1909, Dazai's early years were replete with emotional negligence and a high sense of insecurity. He constantly felt unwanted and isolated within his home as if "[he] wasn't the legitimate child of [his] mother and father…that [he] was an outcast" (Wolfe, 1990, p. 5).

These feelings of alienation appear to have created his disdain for conventional family structures and society (Brudnoy, 1968, p. 459) wherein he identified with the plight of the outsiders and the oppressed.

This identification intensified as he became drawn to Marxist ideologies and works of authors like Pushkin and Dostoevsky. These influences enriched his understanding of an individual's struggles in a highly flawed social system. Many scholars have noted that "from his earliest published work, *Twilight Years* (1936), to his final work, *No Longer Human*, Dazai's recurring theme is about man's struggle in life" and within society (Hijiya, 1974, p. 34), thus providing ample material to explore existentialism in his works.

**Results and Discussion**

Earning praise for its exploration of the struggles of the human mind and the deep sense of disconnection that many people feel from the world around them (Osamu, 1958, p. 9), *No Longer Human* has added to Dazai's image as a genuinely alienated writer. The novel is regarded as a Japanese I-novel that presents an intimate portrayal of its protagonist, Yozo Oba, by documenting his innermost reflections on his existence. These reflections are divided into three notebooks, each dedicated to a certain period of his life and are compiled into a single narrative by an unknown narrator. Through this carefully crafted form, Dazai invites his readers to intimately engage with an individual's most harrowing yet vulnerable emotions.

**Experience of Existential Isolation**

Each human has a unique identity shaped by their desires, thoughts and emotions. Ernest Becker argued in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1971) that even our most fulfilling connections with others remain superficial and external (p. 28) because every person perceives his or her distinct subjective reality. This concept can be vividly seen in the first notebook of *No Longer Human* which traces the childhood experiences of Yozo Oba.

From a young age, Yozo navigates a utilitarian world, one that judges the value of objects and experiences based on their practical usefulness or benefit for the majority. Yet, instead of following society's perceptions, he finds wonder and delight in the peculiarity and beauty of things around him. For instance, initially unaware of its functional purpose, he imagines the train station bridge as "a place of pleasant diversity, like some foreign playground" (Osamu, 1958, p. 21) rather than a platform for people to move from one place to another. Similarly, his imagination of subway trains as creations for a "novel and delightful pastime" (Osamu, 1958, p. 22) of underground travelling rather than practical inventions out of necessity in a busy society, also represents his individual perspective.

While there always remains a separation between individuals and their world, a positive connection between them is crucial for their emotional, psychological and social well-being. It contributes to their sense of stability and self-esteem, thus, playing an important role in the development of a person. For someone to grow into an emotionally stable human who can balance one's social connection with one's individuality, their emotions and experiences must be validated by the people around them.

Existential psychologists posit that humans have an inherent need to form meaningful bonds with others. In childhood, when humans depend on their parental figures, establishing a strong emotional connection with them is essential (Helm et al., 2020, p. 2) because they are responsible for guiding the child to navigate and comprehend the complex world around them. When the child's experiences are constantly validated and

supported by attentive caregivers, he or she is likely to develop into a mature individual with a deeper understanding of themselves and their relationship to society. Ultimately, such an individual "gradually establishes boundaries demarking where he or she ends and others begin and becomes self-reliant, independent, and separate" (Yalom, 1980, p. 361).

However, not everyone experiences a supportive and nurturing environment through which they can perceive the world as secure and reliable. Children who grow up under inconsistent or unavailable parents, often have their thoughts, emotions and desires repeatedly ignored and invalidated. Such a repeated or prolonged influence shapes an individual's perspective over time, forcing them to develop and rely on their fragmented sense of reality (Helm et al., 2018, p. 150). Throughout the novel, Yozo describes his father as a domineering and emotionally distant figure, stating, "It was most unusual for Father to behave affectionately with the children" (Osamu, 1958, p. 30). His father dedicates his focus entirely to his political career and frequently spends weeks away from home, detaching himself from familial ties. Yozo's mother, on the other hand, is an even more absent character in his life, leaving the care of her eight children to her house servants.

Furthermore, during his adolescence, Yozo develops a deep interest in the art of painting, particularly in self-portraits by employing the techniques of "ghost style" (Osamu, 1958, p. 56). Painting quickly becomes a secret haven for him, an outlet through which he expresses his authentic identity and innermost feelings without the fear of scrutiny and rejection. As his passion grows, Yozo begins to imagine a future where he could turn his hobby into a profession. However, instead of having his thoughts and desires acknowledged or approved, Yozo is expected to suppress them and obediently follow his parents' expectations. He reflects, "I wanted to enter an art school, but my father put me into college, intending eventually to make a civil servant out of me. This was the sentence passed on me and I, who have never been able to answer back, dumbly obeyed" (Osamu, 1958, pp. 56-57).

Being raised in such an environment bereft of affection, Yozo expresses a deep disconnection between himself and his family, "I could not fully understand even my own parents" (Osamu, 1958, p. 35). These experiences lead him to view the world as a cruel, unforgiving and unreliable place where he could never hope "to appeal for help to any human being" (Osamu, 1958, p.35). In this way, his experiences within society create his disconnection with it, as he consistently fails to comprehend or share the concerns and desires of those around him. When individuals repeatedly experience the world differently from others, they may feel as if no one understands or shares their perspectives (Pinel et al., 2017, p. 55). This lack of social validation causes them to perceive themselves as existentially isolated. They believe that they are entirely alone in their experience which, in turn, provokes profound anxiety.

Yozo's "apprehension on discovering that [his] concept of happiness seemed to be completely at variance with that of everyone else was so great as to make [him] toss sleeplessly and groan night after night in [his] bed. It drove [him] indeed to the brink of lunacy" (Osamu, 1958, pp. 24-25). The vast gap between his subjective experience and that of others pushes him to a breaking point, depicting his overwhelming anxiety due to his fear of existential isolation. His apprehension at being seen as a "social outcast" (Osamu, 1958, p. 67) in a society he considers unforgiving and reckless leaves him trapped in a never-ending cycle of misery and self-doubt.

Studies concerning existential isolation state that it arises in the case of two forms of experiences. The first one is an acute, deeply personal yet singular experience evoking the feelings of existential isolation. If addressed properly, it is unlikely to affect an

individual's personal development. The second form is chronic which refers to an enduring sense of disconnection between a person's subjective experience and the norms of his or her society (Helm et al., 2018, p. 150). Yozo struggles with chronic existential isolation, continuously dealing with frustration and anxiety at being unable to relate to others, "All I feel are the assaults of apprehension and terror at the thought that I am the only one who is entirely unlike the rest. It is almost impossible for me to converse with other people. What should I talk about, how should I say it? I don't know" (Osamu, 1958, p. 26). His feeling of isolation seems so absolute and immense to him that he is incapable of even engaging in the most basic social interactions.

**False Self as a Response to Existential Isolation**

For a species so dependent on social acceptance and connection, the awareness of existential isolation inevitably produces an extremely distressing state. It threatens an individual's need for belonging within a collective, leaving them considerably vulnerable to feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem and a deep sense of being misunderstood. Yozo's paralysing sense of anxiety over his existential isolation renders him incapable of even feeling confident in his ability to "speak and act like a human being" (Osamu, 1958, p. 28). His insecurity leads him to question his very humanity, feeling essentially disqualified from being a human.

This self-perception reaches its lowest point when Yozo degrades his self-worth by claiming that he is "an animal lower than a dog, lower than a cat. A toad" (Osamu, 1958, p. 122). By reducing himself not only below the standards of humanity but also below those of common animals, he loses his sense of self. Whenever someone criticises him, instead of defending his honour, he accepts their words as the ultimate truth, regardless of how demeaning they might be.

I felt convinced that their reprimands were without doubt voices of human truth speaking to me from eternities past; I was obsessed with the idea that since I lacked the strength to act in accordance with this truth, I might already have been disqualified from living among human beings. This belief made me incapable of arguments or self-justification…I always accepted the attack in silence, though inwardly so terrified as almost to be out of my mind. (Osamu, 1958, p. 27)

Yalom (1980) argued that such anxiety over existential isolation is "not tolerated by the individual for long. Unconscious defences work on it and quickly bury it, outside the purview of conscious experience" (p. 362). For Yozo and his fragmented sense of self, the only option left to create a connection with humanity and alleviate his existential isolation is to form an inauthentic self. He keeps his agitation hidden and feigns an innocent optimism, gradually perfecting himself in the role of a farcical eccentric. He believes that "As long as [he] can make [the others] laugh, it doesn't matter how, [he] will be all right" (Osamu, 1958, p. 28). In this way, he excruciatingly maintains a façade and aligns himself with the emotions, thoughts and desires completely foreign to him.

This façade of a "clown" (Osamu, 1958, p. 27) is Yozo's false self. In response to an environment that contradicts his subjective reality and does not affirm his authentic identity, his true self, he learns to hide it beneath a meticulously constructed persona. Individuals who develop a false self often deny certain aspects of themselves and mimic what is perceived as socially acceptable (Winnicott, 2017, p. 165). They constantly wear a mask, obscuring their true selves, as other people's expectations become of overriding importance.

Yozo reflects on a particularly rare instance where his father asks him and his siblings what presents they would like him to bring back from his business trip. However, as it is unusual for his father to show such affection, Yozo becomes quite anxious about disappointing him and failing to meet any expectations he might have. He considers saying nothing and can only stammer when asked directly if he would like a lion mask. This lack of response from Yozo only upsets his father which, in turn, intensifies Yozo's dread and self-doubt.

Unable to act according to his father's expectations, he considers himself an utter failure and so sneaks into his father's room at night to write LION MASK in his notebook, despite having no genuine wish for it. This act shows Yozo's desperate need for approval and validation, even when it involves sacrificing his own desires. He confesses, "I had not the faintest wish for a lion mask. In fact, I would actually have preferred a book" (Osamu, 1958, p. 31), which reflects the lengths to which he is willing to go to conform to others' expectations in an attempt at forming a connection.

It is only through this false self that Yozo escapes the perceived danger of being isolated and ostracised from his world and experiences social communion and validation. Frank Crewdson suggested that the false self can function in two distinct ways. One form is passive absorption where the individual becomes overly compliant and self-effacing. The other is active manipulation where the false self is crafted to influence the perception of others and draw out a "sought-after response" (Crewdson, 1996, p. 42). Yozo possesses the latter since he always begins his façade by observing his environment and then, accordingly, fabricating an image of himself to gain the desired reaction from others.

One such moment occurs when he submits a school composition recounting an incident. In the story, Yozo pretends to mistake a spittoon for a urinal, deliberately making a childish blunder with a tone of exaggerated innocence. His purpose isn't simply to recount an event but to gain his teacher's approval by entertaining him, ensuring that he is perceived as mischievous. As Yozo follows his teacher to the staff room, he observes him reading the composition, "snickering" (Osamu, 1958, p.34) at first before bursting into uncontrollable laughter. After acquiring the desired reaction, Yozo feels a sense of accomplishment and states, "I [have] succeeded in appearing mischievous", while simultaneously confessing that his "true nature, however, [is] one diametrically opposed to the role of a mischievous imp" (Osamu, 1958, p. 35).

As time progresses, Yozo becomes more skilled in forging his connections with others through his false self. During his college days in Tokyo, he gets involved in the activities of an underground Marxist group. Having no genuine concern for the group's agendas, he finds the sombreness of his comrades "uproariously amusing…as though they were discussing matters of life and death" (Osamu, 1958, p. 66). However, despite his internal indifference, he religiously attends their meetings, gaining popularity through his clownish antics. While his comrades perceive his behaviour as a genuine reflection of shared camaraderie, Yozo admits that his actions are entirely performative, "These simple people perhaps fancied that I was just as simple as they, an optimistic, laughter-loving comrade, but if such was their view, I was deceiving them completely" (Osamu, 1958, p. 66). He displays docile compliance, completing every task he is assigned with an unruffled confidence, solely to gain their approval and maintain a sense of connection.

By presenting this false self to the world, he achieves an external social connection and protects the vulnerability of his true self. However, even though others appreciate and perceive him as normal, he finds it difficult to internalise their opinions or feel truly connected to them. For individuals like Yozo, the relief acquired from social validation is

momentary as it offers no lasting comfort or a real sense of belonging. Instead, they suffer a constant state of anxiety, fearing that their false self will be exposed if they are not careful.

Yozo becomes trapped in this paradox of desperately wanting to escape his existential isolation while simultaneously fearing the possibility of being found out as a fraud. For him, a person who has gained the acceptance and respect of others is merely someone who has "succeeded almost completely in hoodwinking people" (Osamu, 1958, p. 34). Yet, he sees such an accomplishment as risky because it makes the individual vulnerable to an omniscient, omnipotent person who can ruin and subject him to a shame worse than death. This idea of being unmasked and facing the wrath of those he has tricked becomes a hair-raising thought for Yozo which depicts the continuous anxiety accompanying his dependence on the false self.

**Sociological Impacts of Existential Isolation and False Self**

While Yozo's false self helps him deal with his anxiety of existential isolation, it doesn't alleviate it. Instead, the more Yozo adopts and relies on his false self, the more he becomes trapped within it, further widening the split between his fabricated image and his authentic self. Winnicott (2017) asserts that the false self of such an individual becomes so dominant that it completely masks the true self. As a result, others tend to believe it is the individual's genuine identity (p. 162). In this way, the false self fails to provide the stability it promises, reinforcing the very isolation it seeks to resolve.

Yozo is often successful in gaining the approval of those around him through his manipulation and façade but his connection with them remains superficial. He admits, "Though I have always made it my practice to be pleasant to everybody, I have not once actually experienced friendship…I have frantically played the clown…only to wear myself out as a result" (Osamu, 1958, p. 107). Rather than reaching out to people to form authentic connections, individuals who desperately crave such social validation and connection, flail at others to avoid drowning in the dark abyss of isolation (Yalom, 1980, p. 363). In other words, they do not truly relate to or care for others but only use them to escape their anxiety.

When Yozo arrives in Tokyo to pursue his studies, his fear of scrutiny and isolation leaves him unable to perform even the most basic tasks. He describes feeling a severe sense of dread in public, such as when boarding streetcars, entering restaurants or simply paying a bill, "My awkwardness when I handed over the money... arose from excessive tension, excessive embarrassment, excessive uneasiness and apprehension" (Osamu, 1958, p. 61). This fear exacerbates his existential isolation. It is in this condition of vulnerability that he decides to befriend Horiki, a fellow student, and uses him as a means of avoiding his anxiety. In fact, Yozo acknowledges his disdain for Horiki, stating "I despised him as one fit only for amusement" (Osamu, 1958, p. 60) and admits that their friendship is merely surface-level.

When a person's primary reason for creating connections with others is to escape feelings of existential isolation, it leads to a concerning dynamic. In this scenario, that person turns other people into tools to fulfil his or her emotional and psychological needs. Such a dynamic entirely transforms the nature of the relationships from authentic friendship and companionship to mere objects. Yozo represents this behaviour through his manipulative and deceptive interactions. His actions are not limited to his so-called friends and acquaintances; he also engages with his romantic partners through the mask of his false self. In contrast to his usual innocent and mischievous demeanour, Yozo adopts a

different approach to his romantic relationships. He presents himself as a feeble and pitiable person, as a result, arousing sympathy from the women he is involved with.

Shizuko, a twenty-eight-year-old widow, meets Yozo at Horiki's house when she comes to collect Horiki's artwork for a magazine. Shizuko's perception of him begins to take shape as soon as she notices his quiet demeanour. She comments to Yozo, "You look like someone who's had an unhappy childhood. You're so sensitive, more's the pity for you" (Osamu, 1958, p. 112). The impact of Yozo's false self is so immediate on Shizuko that she allows him to move into her house that same day. In this way, although, his false self acquires him a social connection, it is due to pity rather than genuine admiration.

As their relationship develops, Yozo reflects on his new existence under Shizuko's care, expressing, "I led for the first time the life of a kept man" (Osamu, 1958, p. 113). Through this arrangement, Shizuko becomes someone Yozo can depend on for connection and validation. In other words, a reliable tool. Her perception of his false self as a weak and timid man further enforces this dynamic. However, eventually, rather than alleviating Yozo's feelings of existential isolation, this connection further deepens it as he struggles to constantly maintain his false self.

According to the theory of false self, individuals who exploit others and create such facades may suffer greatly in these relationships as time goes on (Neff & Harter, 2002, p. 854). The connection Yozo feels in his romantic relationships is only fleeting while the apprehension he experiences over being found out as a fraud becomes overwhelming. Reflecting on this tormenting fear, he says, "I was cursed by the unhappy peculiarity that the more I feared people the more I was liked, and the more I was liked the more I feared them" (Osamu, 1958, p. 117). He becomes suspicious of even Shizuko's five-year-old daughter, Shigeko. When Shigeko innocently expresses a desire for her real father, who had passed away three years ago, Yozo feels an immense shock, An enemy. Was I Shigeko's enemy, or was she mine? Here was another frightening grown-up who would intimidate me. A stranger, an incomprehensible stranger, a stranger full of secrets… I knew that from then on I would have to be timid even before that little girl. (Osamu, 1958, p. 117-118). This reaction reveals the depth of Yozo's paranoia and inability to trust. In his eyes, Shigeko transforms from an innocent child to a threatening stranger as he projects his fears of judgment and rejection onto her. In his fractured psyche, even a small child represents a danger to his fragile false self, capable of exposing it before the world.

This perceived danger forces him to distance himself from both Shizuko and her daughter, avoiding them by leaving the house whenever Shizuko returns from work. Spending the night out, he frequently visits the bars where he acts the "part of a ruffian, [kissing] women indiscriminately" (Osamu, 1958, p. 123) and drinking himself into oblivion. His only source of income comes from drawing cartoons for second-rate children's magazines, earning just enough to buy the cheap liquor he now depends on to escape his thoughts. Regardless of whether he masquerades as a toad, a clown or a kept man, Yozo, unfortunately, suffers devastatingly at the hands of existential isolation and the false self, falling deeper into despair.

**Confrontation and Resolution of Existential Isolation and the False Self**

The formation of a fabricated persona and reliance on inauthentic connections to deal with one's feelings of isolation may initially seem like helpful coping mechanisms. However, with time, these facades reveal themselves as ineffective long-term solutions (Helm, 2022, p. 107). They create a much greater divide between one's true self and those around him or her, leaving one trapped in a perpetual state of frustration and hopelessness.

Dazai depicts Yozo's downward spiral into this state of despair as he struggles to maintain his false self.

Under the weight of this façade, his defensive walls eventually begin to crumble. He dwells on his life with Shizuko, stating, "Whenever I [think] of my situation I [sink] all the deeper in my depression, and I [lose] all my energy" (Osamu, 1958, p. 115). These dark and depressive thoughts push him towards alcohol, which in turn only worsens his misery. As his alcohol addiction grows, Yozo directs his resentment towards Shizuko, whom he blames for his downfall, despite knowing internally that he is the only one responsible for it. Their relationship turns abusive as they constantly engage in ridiculous arguments.

A year goes by in this bleak state until one night, after a drinking spree, he returns home and overhears Shizuko and Shigeko sharing a moment of genuine happiness. As Yozo secretly watches the two of them playing with a small white rabbit toy, he realises how he has tainted their happiness through his deceit. He admits, "They were happy, the two of them. I'd been a fool to come between them" (Osamu, 1958, p. 124). This tragic realisation uncovers a bitter irony; in his desperate attempt to forge a relationship with them and escape his isolation, he has only become more alienated.

After witnessing their simple happiness, Yozo silently leaves, never to return. However, rather than a sign of emotional growth, his retreat is merely an escape. He runs back to a bar in Kyobashi, owned by a madam who provides him with food and shelter. In this environment, he continues his life as a kept man, spending yet another year drowning his sorrows in liquor and drawing cartoons not only for children's magazines but also for pornographic ones. In this way, he keeps sinking further into his despair.

Clinging to his false self, he becomes desperate for "some great savage joy, no matter how immense the suffering that might ensue" (Osamu, 1958, p. 128). It is at this moment that Yoshiko enters his life. She is a seventeen-year-old girl who works in a tobacco shop across from the bar where Yozo resides. An honest and innocent person, she frequently expresses concern for his health, regularly pleading with him to stop drinking. As an individual who has a perpetual distrust of others, Yozo becomes captivated by her ability to always see the good in everyone and have blind trust in them.

To him, she becomes the symbol of an uncorrupted "holy thing" (Osamu, 1958, p. 132) that could pull him out of his fear and misery and give him the great joy he has been craving all his life. In other words, he sees her as his ultimate escape from the relentless despair of existential isolation. Thus, with the help of his madam, he gets married to Yoshiko. For a time, things move smoothly between the couple and Yoshiko's genuine nature gradually fills Yozo with a glimmer of hope. He begins to believe that he might be able to trust others and "turn one of these days into a human being" (Osamu, 1958, p. 138), breaking free from his sense of isolation and becoming a part of the world.

However, this hope shatters into a million pieces when Yoshiko becomes the victim of an unimaginable tragedy. She is violated by a man who comes to their house to collect cartoon drawings from Yozo while he is busy with Horiki. However, Yozo fails to intervene when he witnesses the assault and instead, runs to his rooftop and collapses there. In the aftermath of the incident, his overpowering anxiety returns tenfold, so severe that his hair turns prematurely grey. He reflects, "I had now lost all confidence in myself, doubted all men immeasurably, and abandoned all hopes for the things of the world, all joy, all sympathy, eternally" (Osamu, 1958, p. 149).

This emotional and psychological decline represents the risks of forming inauthentic relationships and constructing false identities as mechanisms to cope with isolation. Individuals must resolutely confront their anxiety about feeling existentially isolated instead of retreating into their false selves. They must find a truth which is true for them, not what society decrees to be the truth. Only through this confrontation will they overcome their existential anxiety and actualise their unique potential (Solomon, 2001, p. 634).

After the traumatic incident with Yoshiko, Yozo's life turns into something worse than a nightmare. Consistently questioning Yoshiko's virtue of trustfulness as her sin, the reason for her destruction, he gets stuck in a dilemma. On one hand, he yearns to escape his sense of isolation, seeking oneness with others and consequently, avoiding their wrath. On the other hand, witnessing a world so cruel that it punishes even the purest of its souls isolates him further. Tormented by these conflicting emotions, he slowly begins to withdraw from everyone, yet remains unable to let go of his "immoderate clowning" (Osamu, 1958, p. 153). As his mind rapidly deteriorates, so does his body; he develops tuberculosis and subsequently falls prey to morphine. These painful circumstances only add to his misery, pushing him into a darker abyss. He becomes plagued by the thoughts that death might be the only way to rid himself of his anguish, I want to die. I want to die more than ever before. There's no chance now of a recovery. No matter what sort of thing I do, no matter what I do, it's sure to be a failure, just a final coating applied to my shame. All that can happen now is that one foul, humiliating sin will be piled on another, and my sufferings will become only the more acute. (Osamu, 1958, p. 163)

However, as a last resort, he turns to his father for help, explaining his problems in a lengthy letter. In response to his pleas, his family intervenes but not in the way he had expected. Instead of admitting him to a regular hospital, they send him to a mental institution. Forever branded as a "madman" (Osamu, 1958, p. 167), he is confined within its walls for three months. Yet, even after his release, he is not welcomed back into society. He is exiled to the countryside, never to return to Tokyo. There he lives in an old, thatch-covered house, purchased by his elder brother, on the outskirts of the village. Residing alone in such an abandoned house with peeling walls and worm-eaten woodwork and being looked after by a sixty-year-old woman sent by his brother, marks his life as a reject. He becomes what he feared the most.

Towards the end of his third notebook, he has spent three years in that house, isolated from the rest of the world. But in spite of his solitude, he never truly confronts his isolation or understands his individuality to realise a truth of his own. Rather, he considers his disconnection from society as proof of his failure, the ultimate flaw that makes him unworthy of being a human. He clings to the false self he spent his life constructing, not once truly embracing his true self. Ultimately, his mask never comes off and, burning in the hell he created, he lets life pass him by.

**Conclusion**

The gruelling journey of Yozo Oba presents the great conflict between his awareness of existential isolation and his desire to belong. Unable to liberate himself from his inner torment, he is symbolised by Dazai as a kite, tossed around and torn by the gusty winds but still stubbornly clinging to the telegraph wires. As he desperately clings to the mask of his false self, he fails to realise his truth. Hence, Dazai depicts the sheer tragedy of Yozo as a warning against the perils of clinging to facades. He reveals that in a world littered with elaborate facades and social pressures, to be human is to embrace one's truth,

cast off one's mask and authentically navigate the delicate balance between isolation and belonging.

**Recommendations**

Comparative analyses of this work with Western existential literature can illuminate how individuals from different cultural contexts psychologically cope with feelings of existential isolation. Additionally, more research is required to explore the relationship between existential isolation and false self and its representation within the literary domain. As demonstrated, the potential for more exploration in this direction is both promising and necessary.

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