

A JAPANESE AUTHOR UNDER ROMANIAN LENSES - KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract:

*Kazuo Ishiguro is a well-known Japanese author, whose books have been highly awarded. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) received the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize of the Royal Society of Literature, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a Booker Prize-winning novel which was also dramatised in an Oscar movie, and *An Artist of the Floating World* brought Ishiguro the Whitbread Book of the Year in 1986, to mention just a few of his achievements.*

This paper aims to discuss, from postcolonial, psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives, the opposition between the traditional Japanese culture, and the new, modern lifestyle promoted by the Anglo-American model, opposition characterising Ishiguro's life and which he also borrows to his fiction.

Born in Japan in 1954 and educated in Great Britain since the age of five, Kazuo Ishiguro uses his fiction as “a mirror to reflect obliquely the characteristics of his two nationalities” (Rennison, 2005, p.91). Included “among the most successful of contemporary literary novelists writing in Britain” (Wormald, 2003, p.226), Ishiguro has created 7 novels (the latest- forthcoming in 2015), 2 short-stories collections and 2 plays for television, which also brought him international recognition: the Booker Prize-winning novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), awarded the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize of the Royal Society of Literature and *An Artist of the Floating World*, which was the 1986 Whitbread Book of the Year. Ishiguro is a widely acclaimed author, translated into over forty languages, for instance in Romania, Polirom Publishing House having already translated 6 of his books. We should also mention the film adaptations of his novels, the famous Oscar-winning *The Remains of the Day*, casting Emma Thompson and Anthony Hopkins (1993) and *Never Let Me Go* (2010) with Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan and Andrew Garfield.

He is at home in neither place but his novels seem to describe a “fictive nation” (to use Roland Barthes's words), trying to determine the extent of its Japaneseness, or depicting “imaginary homelands” (in Salman Rushdie's phrase).

Regarding his novel *A Pale View of Hills*, the critique was positive, praising “a distinguished first novel” (*The Guardian*), “a macabre and faultlessly worked enigma” (*The Sunday Times*). This paper aims to analyse the novel from several different critical perspectives: the postcolonial, the psychoanalytical, and the feminist approach, relying on text analysis.

The main theme of *A Pale View of Hills* seems to be the opposition between the traditional way, i.e. the Japanese culture, and the new, modern lifestyle promoted by the American/ English model, the Orient versus the Occident, opposition which also characterises Ishiguro's life. According to the post-colonial theory, the concept:

involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. (Ashcroft et al. 2003, p.2)

From the very beginning, my attention was drawn by the constant dichotomy Japanese/ American, even if some of the characters are presented as living in England at a certain moment of the plot, which is not at all culturally represented. In terms of its "representational faithfulness", Ishiguro's Japan cannot be identified, as "it is a world in itself" (Lewis, 2000, p.26). However, we should not be falsely misled into interpreting Japan as a colony only because we are using postcolonial tools and we should also realise that Ishiguro resorts to his imagination and indirect access to information about the historical periods some of his novels describe (Wormald, 2003, p.227).

The author narrates the story of several characters after the bombing of Nagasaki and ends some decades later, mentioning the terrible disaster only three times, evasively enough to confirm Roland Barthes' idea of Japan being a "fictive nation". Repression and denial are the key words that summarise both the lack of information about the war and the characters' development along the plot.

America is the perpetual enemy, always present just as a vague impulse to remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and when mentioned by the old ones who had witnessed the disaster, the contradiction Japan/ America is even more enhanced.

The Americans, they never understood the way things were in Japan. Not for one moment have they understood. Their ways may be fine for Americans, but in Japan things are different, very different ... Discipline, loyalty, such things held Japan together once. That may sound fanciful, but it's true. People were bound by a sense of duty. Towards one's family, towards superiors, towards the country. But now instead there's all this talk of democracy. You hear it whenever people want to be selfish, whenever they want to forget their obligations. (Ishiguro, 1991, p.65)

This is one of the moments when Ogata-San, one of the secondary characters of the book, expresses his opinions about the present as compared to the past, Japan

as compared to America. What is really interesting is that we never find out Jiro's opinion, his son and the first husband of Etsuko, the narrator of the novel. He works for an electronics firm, expecting to be promoted quite soon, has continental habits, such as reading the newspaper and turns in early, exhausted after work. He is a man of the new world but in the relation with his wife the traditional borders of superior to inferior still exist. Etsuko is an obedient wife, doing the household chores and taking care of both husband and father-in-law, even though she is pregnant. She refrains from expressing her opinion on serious matters, "just as [I] had done on previous occasions" because she knows that her "husband would have considered it no business of [mine] to comment on such a matter" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.126). After an important business meeting, Jiro comes home and tells his father about it, without giving too many details. At a certain moment he notices Etsuko, listening in the doorway and addresses her quite violently: "Why are you standing there like that? ... I wouldn't mind some tea, you know" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.154).

Ishiguro uses a very useful tool in his novel, the first person narrative, in order to offer the reader the inner perspective of Etsuko, who is telling her story. Not only does Etsuko react promptly to her husband's "orders", but she also goes on with the story, without even reacting to the incident, as if she was not even aware of the heavy words.

What is unbelievable for Ogata-San is young women's disrespect towards their husbands, marked by the two spouses having different political views during the elections:

Husband and wife voting for different parties. It's a sad state of affairs when a wife can't be relied on in such matters any more ... A wife these days feels no sense of loyalty towards the household. She just does what she pleases, votes for a different party if the whim takes her. That's so typical of the way things have gone in Japan. All in the name of democracy people abandon obligations. (Ishiguro, 1991, p.65)

For the Westerner this seems a clear misunderstanding of the concepts of democracy and gender equality that will be discussed below employing feminist theory. It is a reiteration of the patriarchal values and this time, the two worlds are no longer separated, as in terms of women's submission by the men Japan and America share the same values.

Technology is another issue debated upon by the two generations. Spending money to buy a washing machine or replacing the traditional kimono demonstrate the abolition of a closed national culture in theory only: "Young women these days are all so headstrong. And forever talking about washing-machines and American

dresses ... Spending all that money, when you had two good hands to work with” (Ishiguro, 1991, p.152).

In spite of all these, the reader knows that the story is told years later, when the perspective over the facts is changed and when memory is no longer reliable. By the end of the novel Etsuko realises that events might not correspond to the reality as “memory ... can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers” (Ishiguro, 1991, p.156). The effects of all the years of suffering, denial, repression are seen later in the overlapping of characters and events, in the slippage of memory. Fascinated with memory, Ishiguro resorts to the same device in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, “because it’s foggy and obscure”, provides “opportunities for self-deception” and the inner thoughts of the characters about the events rather than the actual events (interview with Ishiguro qtd. in Rennison, 2005, p.92). The writer resorts to this literary device in good faith, the characters genuinely admitting the flaws of the human mind. Both Masuji Ono, the famous painter who also undergoes a journey into the past in *An Artist of the Floating World* and Mr. Stevens, the butler of Darlington Hall in *The Remains of the Day* question themselves the truthfulness of their exact words from the past as compared to the present recollection.

For the elderly the new Japan after the war is unrecognisable. In fact, parents and children, old and young never discuss openly about the changes in their lives. The old ones comment about them, but are no longer sure of the validity of their values, the young ones seem to have appropriated the American/English way but they cannot neglect their Japanese background. Hybridity describes best the state of affairs, i.e. “the mingling of once separate and discrete ways of living” but also “the recognition of the fact that all culture is an arena of struggle” (Smith, 2004, p.251, 252) and brings about the following concepts: equality, mutual respect, openmindedness, and multiculturalism. Big words for the country that survived the American bombing, and whose image, before the war, used to be associated with “geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples” (Ishiguro, 1986, p.69) in the foreigners’ fantasies!

Even if both America and England clearly oppose Japanese traditions, there are differences between the two that cannot be omitted. The American dream of prosperity and success in the “*brave new world*”, the colonists’ hope for a better life, are to be encountered in Sachiko’s destiny and her plans for her daughter’s future. Sachiko used to be a rich woman but war reduced her to vagrancy. She has an American lover who keeps leaving her and coming back again (persistently echoing Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, as suggested by Barry Lewis). Despite the times

when she seems to vibrate with true love for her lover, Sachiko's plan is very simple: she must get to America to offer her daughter a better life:

And Mariko would be happier there. America is a far better place for a young girl to grow up. Out there, she could do all kinds of things with her life. She could become a business girl. Or she could study painting at college and become an artist. All these things are much easier in America, Etsuko. Japan is no place for a girl. What can she look forward to here? (Ishiguro, 1991, p.170)

On the other hand, England is mentioned as the place where Etsuko found her happiness, where her family lived until her husband died but where Keiko, her Japanese-born elder daughter committed suicide. For Sachiko, America is the symbol of life, while for Etsuko, England is the opposite, the symbol of death and estrangement from family. In retrospect, Etsuko confesses to Niki, her British-born daughter that she had assumed that her Keiko would not fit the new world and the only vague explanation that Ishiguro seems to give us is that she could not adapt to the English life, as she was a genuine Japanese, whose grandfather, Ogata-San had brought up and had taught the traditional values. Moreover, Etsuko regrets the fact that she now lives on her own in a big house in the idyllic and quiet countryside, while her only daughter lives away in London, a fact Etsuko does not fully agree with, even if she had always lived away from her parents.

He, himself caught between nations, Kazuo Ishiguro searches his personal identity by means of his characters. The loss of fix identity is exemplified by the shift from Japan to America and to England: Japanese heroes are inspired by the American lifestyle and values but live in England, in the countryside, where "it's so truly like England out here" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.182). The power of imagination is great, but I wonder how much Japanese really know about the English landscape, as Etsuko affirms she had found the house of her dreams. "When your father first brought me down here, Niki, I remember thinking how truly like England everything looked. All these fields, and the house too. It was just the way I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.182). Born and raised in Nagasaki, Etsuko re-marries another man, who we can only assume was British, although the mystery is kept about the destiny of the first husband. The England she likes is the England she had imagined, filtered through her Japanese lenses.

This takes us back to the same Ogata-San, the traditional teacher, who, unexpectedly, used to agree with young couples' living away from their parents' home, even when Jiro and Etsuko were still married in Nagasaki:

I expect they'd [Jiro's sister and brother-in-law] like some place like this, Etsuko, an apartment like this just to themselves. It's no bad thing, young couples living away from the parents. More and more couples do it now. Young people don't want overbearing old men ruling over them for ever. (Ishiguro, 1991, p.134-5)

Niki reiterates this attitude, not only by living on her own (or presumably with a boyfriend), but also by her very western attitude towards the women's role in society, life, husband, and children. "‘So many women’, she said, ‘get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they're just miserable. But they can't pluck up the courage to do a thing about it. They'll just go on like that for the rest of their lives’" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.89-90), "Why should I get married? What's the point of that?" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.179). However, the American dream that Sachiko had for her daughter, either to become a business woman or an artist, has not clearly come true for Niki in London, because, although independent, she does not seem to have or at least prepare for any career. We can only make further assumptions that she indirectly portrays Betty Friedan's "happy housewife heroine" (Friedan, 1983, p.28), probably bound to relive her mother's initial destiny in Japan, still echoing the Nazi decree "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" (Friedan, 1983, p.32).

An attentive psychoanalytic approach discloses an essential element in Ishiguro's novel: there are no obvious complexes such as Jung's mother-figure complex, father-figure complex or Freud's Oedipus complex, mainly because the families are split and one parent raises the children. Jiro's mother is never mentioned, he does not identify himself with his father either, therefore there is no "prototype of an object-choice on the anaclitic model" (Freud, 1998, p.93), no competition with the parent of the same gender for the affection of the parent of the opposite gender. The father is perceived rather as an obstacle to Jiro's becoming a true modern man. Ogata-san is still his link to a background that he cannot ignore, thus becoming the Mandarin that anyone, at a certain moment, dreams of killing "by a mere act of will" (Weber, 1997, p.103). Weber mentions Freud's *Timely Thoughts on War and Death* which ends with the fictional story of the Mandarin, "a fantasy as old as modernity itself: that of freeing oneself from the burden of the past, from the traditions of forefathers and fathers, in order to reign without restriction" (Weber, 1997, p.104). In my opinion, the above quote perfectly matches Jiro's dilemma, being trapped between two civilisations, the only relation to the Japanese culture being his father.

The father-son relationship is distinct from what I imagined a Japanese family might be like. Several issues are discussed, during Ogata-San's visit to Nagasaki, such as voting, education in the past and at present. When they tackle the topic of education, they relate it to the article written by Shigeo Matsuda, Jiro's former class-

mate and friend and Ogata-San's former student. The article criticises the traditional system of education and its teachers, implicitly, which for Ogata-San is an offence that his son should make amends. Apparently, Jiro disagrees with his father, agreeing thus with Shigeo, but he is not willing to express his point of view, but just a passing remark: "But surely there were some faults in the old system, in schools as much as anywhere" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.66). Obviously, this leads to a new dichotomy: old versus new, traditional versus modern, Japanese versus American between father and son.

In psychoanalytical terms, Jiro makes use of several defenses, i.e. "unconscious desire not to recognize or change [our] destructive behaviour" (Tyson, 1999, p.17) in order to keep the repressed repressed. Selective perception is obvious when Jiro pretends reading the newspaper, denial of any conflicts with his father and displacement of his anger on to his wife. Based on these, we have one single clue why Jiro and Etsuko finally separate (or are they separated by the war?), probably because of his refusal to solve conflicts. "I can see now, with hindsight, how typical this was of the way Jiro faced potential awkward confrontation. Had he not, years later, faced another crisis in much the same manner, it may be that I would never have left Nagasaki" (Ishiguro, 1991, p.126).

On the other hand, Etsuko is extremely linked to her father-in-law, as if it was her own father, her parents being not mentioned either. Sachiko also raises Mariko, her daughter alone, as later on Etsuko will do with two daughters from different marriages. The problems their daughters share, Keiko commits suicide, and Mariko is a misfit, are caused by the "intensification of [the girl's] identification with her mother" (Freud, 1998, p.94). As far as Mariko is concerned, she rejects authority, as her mother does not represent an authorial figure for her; she runs away from home to play on the banks of the river, climbs trees, eats spiders, refuses to speak when she gets bored. But there is an explanation to her behaviour: when Mariko was almost six, she witnessed by chance, a woman drowning a baby, image that still haunts her. Mariko does not mention the incident for more than a month, and as she does not react to it promptly, it turns into a trauma, later on Mariko being not able to identify reality from illusion. She sees as well her mother drowning her beloved kittens which leads to the every ambiguous end of Etsuko's memories of her one-summer friendship with Sachiko and Mariko.

But the most important Freudian concept that extends over the lines of the novel is death drive or *thanatos*. Freud attempted to explain this biological drive, by accounting for the self-destructive behaviour in individuals and in whole nations. In relation to the rest of our psychological experience, death is an integral part. Thinking of their own death, people fear being abandoned, as when we die we each

die our own private death. Freud had wondered before at the cruelties of the First World War, at the “enormously increased perfection of weapons of attack and defense” (Freud qtd. in Weber, 1997, p.86), therefore, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would have been above his imagination. That is why in telling her story Etsuko denies the existence of such a trauma. The initial response to the atrocities of war was not adequate after the tragic events and in time, her memories are distorted. The first mention of the disaster is made in relation to the new neighbourhood that had been built and where she lived with Jiro. The second mention occurs in Chapter 8, when Etsuko takes her father-in-law to visit the peace memorial in the city centre park. However, there is a third mention of the bomb, not specified by Barry Lewis in his critique, intended to draw our attention on Etsuko’s deliberate repression of her memories about the chaos and pain caused by the attack. “You wouldn’t think anything had ever happened here, would you? Everything looks so full of life. But all that area down there – ‘I waved my hand at the view below us’ – all that area was so badly hit when the bomb fell. But look at it now” (Ishiguro, 1991, p.110-11). According to Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, we mourn the deaths of the loved ones, which reminds that each of us dies, but “we also rejoice in the death of loved ones, for they were in part still others, and as others, they appear to confirm by their disappearance the persistence and survival of the self” (Weber, 1997, p.98).

The death drive also characterises Mariko, even if she is just a child. The repressed memories of the events she had witnessed, her living in isolation and in an inappropriate milieu mark her destiny. Keiko’s suicide seems to be the continuation of her mother’s fate, the consequence of her mother’s actions (added to the explanations given above).

To conclude with, I would like to remark that “Things are different (now)” seems to be the leitmotif of the novel. Used by several characters (Etsuko, Ogata-San, Yasuko-San, Shigeo Matsuda), at different moments of the plot, it either expresses a remark on the state of affairs or disenchantment with a world that has turned upside down. Attempting a conclusion, we can notice that at the end none of the characters is at peace with himself or herself, none finds his/her identity (I would even state that Ishiguro does not find his own identity either), they still consider themselves migrants, outsiders who can no longer find their origins. Traumas are not solved, destinies are not followed to the end, and atrocities are not remembered. What results is an enigma, a work of subtlety, a “poetic stud[y] of individual Japanese trying to come to terms with the realities of the nation’s recent past” (Rennison, 2005, p.91), this is *A Pale View of Hills*!

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