

# Japanese Identity in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro

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Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954, left Japan at the age of five and never visited his native country until 1989. Now a British citizen, he writes in English for English readers using Western literary techniques; and yet his novels in a way reflect his Japanese identity. In his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), the main setting is Japan shortly after its defeat in World War II. At that time the people of Japan were subjected to abrupt changes and faced a crisis of identity. Both novels explore this post-war cultural displacement through the thoughts and memories of the protagonists, a middle-aged woman and an elderly man, both of whom are haunted by a sense of guilt or remorse. In this paper I would like to examine how Ishiguro reflects his Japanese identity through his way of presenting the main theme of guilt.

In an interview with Ikeda Masayuki, a Japanese professor, Ishiguro mentioned that his image of Japan was created mainly by his memory, imagination and the Japanese films of the 1950s, especially those of Ozu Yasujiro.<sup>(1)</sup> Ozu, considered “the most Japanese” of all Japanese film directors, takes as his subject matter the family, and one of his recurrent themes is its dissolution. He repeatedly staged the conflict between the traditional and the modern as seen through the changing relationships in the Japanese family. In Ishiguro’s first two novels, the family and other

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Japanese forms of human relationship play an important role in the presentation of the main theme.

In *A Pale View of Hills* a Western notion of individualism is set against the traditional Japanese family system and family ties. The protagonist of this novel is Etsuko, a Japanese widow living in England. The novel is framed by the five-day visit of Niki, Etsuko's younger daughter from her marriage to an English journalist; her discussion with this daughter about her older daughter, Keiko, who committed suicide, sends her back to the days when she was pregnant with Keiko in Nagasaki in the early 1950s. Haunted by a sense of guilt about the suicide of her daughter whom she uprooted from Japan, she recalls her past life with her first husband and also tells the story of Sachiko, a war widow with a small daughter, Mariko.

Sachiko is the surrogate figure of the narrator Etsuko; they both consider their own lives before their daughters' and in a sense drive them to death. Sachiko pursues an American soldier thus neglecting her small child; eventually she chooses a life with him at the expense of her daughter's happiness. She drowns the kittens which Mariko loves on the eve of their departure for Kobe, an act which symbolizes her murdering of the child.

Sachiko's way of life differs from that of the traditional Japanese woman. In fact, she was brought up under Western influences. She tells Etsuko about her childhood:

"I never saw a great deal of my father. He was abroad much of the time, in Europe and America. When I was young, I used to dream I'd go to America one day, that I'd go there and become a film actress. My mother used to laugh at me. But father told me if I learnt my English well enough, I could easily become a business girl. I used to enjoy

learning English.” (2)

Sachiko knows well that she should return to the large house owned by a relative of her dead husband and live with “the uncle” and his unmarried daughter if Mariko’s interests come first. Most Japanese women at that time would have chosen this alternative; but Sachiko, who knows something of Western culture and is attracted to it, now released from social pressure, puts priority on her own happiness and refuses to live a life of self-sacrifice and resignation. Life in his house would be intolerable to her. As she says to Etsuko:

“But what of it?” said Sachiko. “What difference does it make? Why shouldn’t I go to Kobe? After all, Etsuko, what do I have to lose? There’s nothing for me at my uncle’s house. Just a few empty rooms, that’s all. I would sit there and grow old. Other than that there’ll be nothing. Just empty rooms, that’s all.”(170-171)

Etsuko feels uneasy about Sachiko’s choice and is apprehensive for Mariko, but later she herself, just like Sachiko, chooses a life with an English journalist at the expense of her daughter’s happiness. It is interesting to note that Niki, who was born and brought up in England, approves of her mother’s choice and reassures her that she is not responsible for Keiko’s death. From her Western individualistic point of view, it is natural that her mother did not sacrifice her life for her daughter; Niki’s words remind us of Sachiko’s:

“Anyway,” she said, “sometimes you’ve got to take risks. You did exactly the right thing. You can’t just watch your life wasting away.”... “It would have been so stupid,” Niki went on, “if you’d just accepted

everything the way it was and just stayed where you were. At least you made an effort.”(176)

In contrast to this Western concept of individualism, Ishiguro presents the traditional Japanese family system through the description of the casual scenes of Etsuko's daily life in Nagasaki. Etsuko in those days plays a role of an ideal traditional Japanese woman who always tries to show consideration for others. She is a dutiful and obedient wife: she never complains to her husband, Jiro, the self-absorbed businessman “who was often tired after a day's work and not in the mood for conversation;” she entertains his drunken colleagues with tea and cakes without showing the least sign of reluctance when they visit their house at night unexpectedly. She is also a kind and affectionate daughter-in-law toward her husband's father, Ogata-san. She is concerned about the aging father-in-law, packs him a lunch-box when he goes out, and shows him around Nagasaki in place of his busy son. She is a good mother who always thinks of her expected child. The family members sit around the dining table and have cups of tea just like in a typical Japanese “home drama,” and after supper the father and the son enjoy a game of chess. Their polite, reserved and aimless conversation helps to convey the atmosphere of everyday Japanese life. Etsuko's daily life looks ordinary and peaceful and seems to continue for ever.

Beneath this seeming calmness, however, there are indications that the family will shortly cease to be what it has been. The dissolution of the family has already begun before Etsuko leaves it. Before the war it would have been a common practice for a widowed father to live with his oldest son and his family. Etsuko wants to observe this custom, but her husband prefers to have their own apartment and his father lives alone in Fukuoka. Etsuko's father-in-law, a retired educator, is the embodiment of old

Japan. He is bewildered by the change brought about by defeat in the war, yet still believes in old values such as discipline, loyalty and obligations.

It is interesting to note that Etsuko seems to like him better than her husband. The affectionate relationship between a young wife and her father-in-law is a common theme of Japanese novels and films, as we see in Ozu's *Tokyo Monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*) or Kawabata's *Yama no Oto* (*The Sound of the Mountain*).

She also seems to approve of the traditional Japanese family system. Niki (who was born and brought up in the Western tradition whereby leaving a family is considered to be a sign of maturity and a husband and a wife form a social unit,) thinks that her mother was relieved about not having to live with her husband's father. But Etsuko says: "On the contrary, Niki, I would have been happy if he'd lived with us. Besides, he was a widower. It's not a bad thing at all, the old Japanese way." (181)

Etsuko and Sachiko live in a period of cultural change and confusion just after the war, and both of them choose the Western individualistic way of life at the expense of their daughters' happiness. Etsuko comes to recognize her own guilt through recalling the surrogate figures of Sachiko and her daughter. Her nostalgic remarks near the end of the novel about the traditional family system reveal her remorse for the choice she made. Moreover, they also seem to reflect Ishiguro's own nostalgia for the passing of old Japanese ways.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, too, the traditional Japanese and Western cultures are juxtaposed, and the novel is full of nostalgia for older ways. An old man left confused by Japan's defeat, a minor character in the first novel, is the protagonist of Ishiguro's second novel. Masuji Ono, an aging painter, is forced to reassess his commitment to nationalism and militarism during the war years, and here in this novel, too, the family

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plays an important role in presenting the theme of protagonist's guilt.

The story evolves in a confined family setting, which reminds us of the films of Ozu. The characters, an elderly widower and his daughter of marriageable age, are also typical characters in his later films. Ono, who lost his wife and only son during the war, lives with his younger daughter, Noriko, in a large, dignified house. Sometimes he has a visit from his older daughter, Setsuko, and his grandson, Ichiro. Their conversation often takes place around a dining table or over a cup of tea on the verandah as in a Japanese "home drama," and the main topic of their conversation is Noriko's marriage negotiations.

In the previous novel her daughter's visit sends the protagonist back into her past, and this time Ishiguro uses his daughter's marriage negotiations to make the aging painter think back over his life. The traditional idea of marriage in Japan is that of a family affair. It establishes links between two families rather than the union of two individuals and the social standing of the other party is taken into consideration. In this novel Ono's past association with militarism during the war years puts his family in a difficult position. One negotiation of the daughter has already broken down without any clear reason at the last moment.

When Ono looks back over his life and recalls his past, at first there is a slightly self-congratulatory tone in his narrative voice. He had not fulfilled the expectation of his father who was a merchant and instead had become a painter. He was happy to be a faithful and leading pupil of a painter of "the floating world" and tried to capture the transitory and illusionary qualities of love and pleasure. But in the wave of militarism he was made aware of a world of other values and turned away from the fragile light of the pleasure world to the bold black outlines of propaganda painting. He seems to be proud of becoming a successful painter. Underneath, however, he is bewildered, and haunted by a sense of guilt.

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He still lives in “traditional” Japan which his large, dignified house represents, but everything has changed after the war. He feels that his belief is denied, and his former ideal has failed.

His bewilderment is shown through his relationships with the younger generations in his family. His grandson, Ichiro, admires American heroes such as Lone Ranger and Popeye instead of the great samurai warriors. Setsuko tells him that Ichiro’s father, “Suichi believes it’s better he likes cowboys than he idolize people like Miyamoto Musashi. Suichi thinks the American heroes are the better models for children now.”<sup>(3)</sup> Suichi suffered and returned from the war in Manchuria. He represents the young generation who show signs of bitterness and resentment toward those who are responsible for the war. After the burial ceremony of Ono’s son who died in the war, Suichi tells him angrily: “...Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility....To my mind, that’s the greatest cowardice of all.”<sup>(58)</sup>

Those words of Suichi linger in Ono’s mind, and he has to admit that he was wrong. As a father he is afraid that his past may damage his daughter’s future. Ishiguro chooses *miai* for Noriko as an occasion for Ono to admit his guilt. *Miai* has a strong association with the traditional family system. All the parties concerned attend this formal meeting arranged by a go-between, and it allows a man and a woman seeking a marriage partner to observe and assess each other. In the novel the delicate atmosphere of the meeting is presented through the exchange of the words of the family members. Ono tries to grasp what his prospective son-in-law’s family are thinking by the expression on their faces, their glances and gestures, and before them he openly admits his mistakes:

‘There are some who would say it is people like myself who are

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responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. I admit this. You see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily.’ (123)

In addition to the family, another traditional Japanese form of human relationship, the teacher-pupil relationship, plays an important role for the presentation of the protagonist’s guilt in this novel. At first Ono joined a group of bohemian painters led by Mori-san who was labeled “the modern Utamaro.”

He recalls that in the group the devotion to the teacher and to his principles was “fierce and total.” The pupils tried hard to grasp the essentials of the teacher’s art and they even acquired some of his mannerisms — the way he raised his hand when he was explaining something or the tone of his voice or his favorite phrases. As the veneration for the teacher and the loyalty to the group were strong, if a pupil saw some shortcomings in his teacher’s work or developed his own views divergent from those of his teacher, it was considered “treachery” and that pupil was labeled “a traitor” by the group. Ono rebelled against his teacher and turned to patriotic propaganda painting. He formed his own group, and when his leading pupil, Kuroda, began to paint “unpatriotic” painting, he reported this “disloyal” pupil to the authorities. Kuroda was arrested and put into prison, and his paintings were burned.

His betrayal of Kuroda is at the heart of Ono’s tragedy, but he merely suggested to the authorities that “someone come around and give Kuroda a talking-to for his own good,”(183) and he was bewildered at the unexpected result. In fact Ishiguro seems to suggest that Ono is neither a



hero nor a villain; he is just an ordinary man with good intentions. As his former colleague Matsuda tells him:

‘But there’s no need to blame ourselves unduly,’ he said. ‘We at least acted on what we believed and did our utmost. It’s just that in the end we turned out to be ordinary. Ordinary with no special gifts of insight. It was simply our misfortune to have been ordinary men during such times.’(199-200)

Though Ono is disillusioned and still has longings for his past great days, he strives to accept life’s disappointments and attain serenity in the end after marrying off his daughter and fulfilling his responsibility as a father, as most of the characters in the films of Ozu do. Seeing that the brightly lit bars in the pleasure quarters which he frequented before the war and all the people gathered beneath the lamps have now been replaced by large office buildings and young office workers, he thinks:

...I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well.(206)

It is a traditional Japanese way to recognize the mutability of this world and accept things as they are.

As we have seen, in his first two novels Ishiguro uses the traditional Japanese forms of human relationship to present the theme of the protagonists’ guilt, and the causes of their guilt are somewhat related to the post-

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war cultural change. Ishiguro's way of writing is subtle, and he does not necessarily affirm Japanese old ways, but both novels are full of nostalgia for the passing of them. This Japanese-born and British-bred writer seems to be more conscious of "Japaneseness" and more concerned for old Japan than the Japanese writers in his generation, but he is different from Western writers who tend to emphasize exoticism or give stereotyped pictures of Japan. It seems to me that these two novels are, in a sense, a nostalgic investigation of the lost roots of his own identity.

### Notes

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1. Kazuo Ishiguro, "The Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro 2," by Masayuki Ikeda, *Honyaku no Sekai* (July 1988): 115.
2. Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 109.
3. Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 36.