

Identity and Nation in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Abstract

An Artist of the Floating World (1986) looks back to Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and anticipates his third, *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The painter Ono worries about a possible interference in his daughter marriage negotiations as a consequence of his support to the nationalist government, which compels him to undertake a self-evaluation of his career.

By focusing on the Americanisation of the Japanese culture and the generational gap created during the postwar period in Japan, the present article discusses universal conflicts that emerge from verticalised familial and social relationships through the lens of Ono who is having trouble dealing with his sense of guilt and internal conflict regarding his active participation as a nationalist propagandist artist of the empire during the war. His reminiscing reveals mechanisms of self-deception and repression to bury intolerable and unwelcome memories insofar as they are discussed against the backdrop of a unique fluid historical moment of intense upheaval and cultural change in Japan.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro; *An Artist of the Floating World*; memory; identity; World War II

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan and moved to England at the age of five. In his early years of school, he experienced what might be called culture shock, finding himself 'a curiosity in the playground' and adjusting to a new reality.¹ The novelist has declared on a number of interviews that he considers himself an international author, which means that he is able to move in different linguistic universes since he is actually creating from a cultural cross-road.

One of the recurrent themes explored in Ishiguro's narratives is wartime, especially moments of intense political and social upheaval. Memory and identity are elements that the novelist uses strategically in his narratives, contextualising them in a world where old values are crumbling, hence generating conflicts that stem from reminiscing unreliable narratives in the context of social and historical shifting values.

In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) narrator Masuji Ono dwells on his personal history: his early endeavours as an artist around 1913, when he studies as an apprentice; his subsequent fame, reaching its pinnacle around 1938; and finally his post-war decline. The main narrative is set between October 1948 and June 1950. As the story opens we learn his wife and son have died in the war, leaving him with two daughters. Setsuko is the older married daughter and Noriko is the younger. Noriko lives with her father and is still single. We learn Ono is indirectly

¹ Brian W. Shaffer, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2008) 1-2.

held accountable for the death of his wife Michiko, who was in one of the bombings in Nagasaki, as well as the death of his son, Kenji, who fought overseas in Manchuria. Suichi, Setsuko's husband, believes Ono is to be blamed for their deaths since the painter endorsed the ultranationalist group that 'led the country astray' and has led millions of the emperor's soldiers and sailors to death, who were killed on the course of 'that hopeless charge across the minefield'.²

Ono is worried about the possibility that his support of the nationalist government will interfere in his daughter's marriage negotiations, and this compels him to undertake a self-evaluation of his career. He takes the reader back to the time when they had difficulties with each other; to the time when he worked at the art studio that produced cheap copies of stereotypical images of Japan; to the time when he worked at the bohemian Mori-san's villa trying to capture the floating world; and back to his success as a nationalist painter. Always navigating on the blurred edges of these worlds, the narrative is presented with blind spots where the reader might suspect that Ono is leaving information out or that there could be different versions of the same facts.

Beedham observes that the critical readings of the novel have gone in different directions, revealing many of the issues that have captured the interest of the readers, some towards a socio-historic interpretation, others towards its cinematic qualities.³ The language used in the novel, an atypical English that conveys a Japanese-like sensibility, has also been the subject of investigation: despite writing in English, the author creates a discourse that mimics the voice of an old Japanese artist. Norman Page suggests that as part of the solution was to create an 'English dialogue that is quite unlike contemporary speech in the English-speaking world in its extreme and sometimes archaic formality'.⁴ Ishiguro explains that Ono

is supposed to be narrating in Japanese; it's just that the reader is getting it in English. In a way the language has to be almost like a pseudotranslation, which means I can't be too fluent and I can't use too many Western colloquialisms. It has to be almost like subtitles, to suggest that behind the English language there's a foreign language going on. I'm quite conscious of figuring these things out when I'm writing, using a certain kind of translationese. Sometimes my ear will say: 'That doesn't quite ring true, that kind of language. Fine if these were just English people, but not here.'⁵

For King this pseudotranslation implies the mood of what goes on behind the formalities:

one of the delights of the novel is the notation of Japanese speech. Ishiguro shows how conventions of politeness and fear of showing disrespect lead to artificial behaviour, absurd conversation and failure of communication. The characters avoid shaming each

² Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Random House, 1986) 56-7. Further references to this work will be included as page numbers in the text.

³ Matthew Beedham, *The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 25-6.

⁴ Norman Page, 'Speech, Culture and History in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro' in *Asian Voices in English* edited by Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991) 166-7.

⁵ Gregory Mason, 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', *Contemporary Literature* 30 (1989) 345.

other by denying that anything of a critical nature is intended; yet their subtle hints can be the cause of suicide.⁶

Ono's denials and motivations, expressed through what he reveals and does not reveal, convey an original instability to the reader's interpretation. This experiment is not Ishiguro's first, according to Shaffer, who asserts that Ono is the 'fleshed-out version of Ogata-San', Etsuko's first husband in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982): 'both are former artists and art teachers, former fascists, and aging widowers who have children whose political views contrast sharply with their own.'⁷

Ono's narrative is set against the backdrop of an ambiguous and contradictory society that has taken an abrupt turn towards a new direction in history. Working as a painter to support the fascist government, the artist struggles to adapt to a new scenario in Japan once the Second World War is over and is caught in the intersection between his individual narrative and the collective conflicting tensions surrounding the changing and fluid values that his society has been forced to adopt during the aftermath of the war. Through his eyes the reader is able to observe conflicting positions that emerge from different ideologies in dispute at a time of intense political upheaval in Japan, insofar as the characters expose their divergent values in face of the changes the nation has to make to move from being a colonial empire to accepting a new system of democracy imposed by the victors.

In the process of narrating his collaboration with the nationalist party before and during the war, Ono's own conflicting perceptions about whether his past deeds were good or bad inevitably emerge. In one passage he ironically finds himself a 'freethinking, critical artist-citizen' as he declares: 'I do not think I am claiming undue credit for my younger self if I suggest my actions ... were a manifestation of a quality I came to be much respected for in later years – the ability to think and judge myself, even if it meant going against the sway of those around me' (69). He remarks he is proud of defying 'authority' and in never joining 'the crowd blindly' (73), despite his trajectory proving otherwise.

Shaffer detects irony in a passage where Ono urges Shintaro, his former student, to 'face up to the past' since 'there is no need to lie about yourself' (103-4), something Ono seems to be telling himself indeed. Moreover, he highlights the fact that Ono approaches the matter only when addressing a student, showing that the tensions embedded in verticalised relationships such as those between student and *Sensei* (teacher and master) are at the heart of the novel.⁸ Ono's development in becoming an artist, against his father's wishes, progresses from being initially discouraged, to being apprenticed and eventually to becoming a leader as a famous *Sensei*, depicting 'the tensions ... between authoritarian art teachers and rebellious students [that] mirror the broader social and political events leading Japan into World War Two'.⁹ Ishiguro explains: 'I needed to portray this world where a leader figure held this incredible psychological sway over his subordinates. And for subordinates to break free, they had to display a remarkable amount of

⁶ Bruce King, 'The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro', *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991) 208.

⁷ Shaffer 39.

⁸ Shaffer 49.

determination. I'm pointing to the master-pupil thing recurring over and over again in the world.'¹⁰

If on one hand Ono is subservient to the fascist cause, on the other hand he has broken free from what was expected of him as a child, since pursuing the artistic career was seen as an alternative to fixing his flawed character from his family's perspective. There is a genuine level to Ono's experiences that deny authority and break free from the authoritarian impositions of his businessman father, who regards a career in finance as useful in opposition to a useless career in the arts. He recalls a priest predicting that Ono was born 'with a flaw in his nature. A weak streak that would give him a tendency towards slothfulness and deceit' (45), and that therefore, 'we've had to combat his laziness, his dislike of useful work, his weak will [since] artists ... live in squalor and poverty. They inhabit a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved' (46). As a result, the father burns his paintings. Against this opinion Ono responds: 'I have no wish to find myself in years to come, sitting where Father is now sitting, telling my own sons about accounts and money ... What are these meetings I'm so privileged to attend? The counting of loose change. The fingering of coins, hour after hour' (47-8).

Ono stands up to his father in terms of pursuing an artistic career, despite showing subordination in surrendering his paintings to be destroyed. This situation occurs again when his master Mori-san accuses him of artistic insubordination and treason for exploring 'curious avenues' (142). The punishment should be the confiscation of the paintings and the traitors 'would then abandon the painting, or in some cases, burn it along with the refuse' (140). Since Ono refuses to bring his paintings this time, he is expelled from the villa. Mori-san assures him: 'You will no doubt succeed in finding work illustrating magazines and comic books', but 'it will end your development as a serious artist' (180).

Ironically, as a result of becoming supportive of the imperialist regime Ono will in turn be supported by the government to further his art through becoming a *Sensei*. This places him higher in the hierarchy than Mori-san, at a time when Ono involuntarily becomes an accomplice to the authorities burning one of his student's paintings. However, the affair worries Ono, when he hears the government's worker remark: 'Bad paintings make bad smoke' (184). The smell reminds him of the previous wartime: 'It's not so long ago it meant bombing and fire' (200).

Endorsing the imperialist regime means pursuing the aesthetics of purity which leads Ono to adopt a skeptical attitude towards Mori-San's art when he attempts to modernise the art tradition by using some European influences, expressing a certain degree of xenophobia in rejecting what is considered foreign. The former *Sensei*'s art is detailed, as if

he had, for instance, long abandoned the use of traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colors, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance. And no doubt he had taken his cue from the European in what was his most central concern: the use of subdued colors, Morisan's wish was to evoke a certain melancholy, nocturnal atmosphere around his women. (141)

As Ono is drawn closer to the nationalist ideology he criticises Mori-san for trying to embrace

¹⁰ Mason 340.

new European painting techniques, understood as ‘fundamentally unpatriotic’ (202-3). As he remarks to his former *Sensei*: ‘It is my belief that in such troubled times as this, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world’ (180). He claims to be aware of ‘the steady decline of Mori-san’s reputation in the city’ once he attempted to ‘bring European influence into the Utamaro tradition’. Consequently, Mori-san’s art is marginalised and regarded as unpatriotic and he is exiled to smaller exhibition venues (202).

This is quite different to his initial impression of Mori-san when he begins to work as his pupil. He asserts that the master’s art longs ‘to capture the fragile lantern light of the pleasure world’ (174), ‘the intangible and transient (beauty of the) pleasure houses after dark’ and to transcend reality in celebration of the ‘floating world’ (150). Shaffer observes that in a stereotypical bohemian world, they have no routine and indulge in heavy drinking and sensual pleasures, which is what Ono’s father most feared for him.¹¹ Despite the suggested freedom, Ono depicts the environment as just as authoritarian as the previous ones, when he describes their relationship:

We lived throughout those years almost entirely in accordance with his [Mori-san’s] values and lifestyle, and this entailed spending much time exploring the city’s ‘floating world’ – the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all of our paintings. (144-5)

Ono’s changing perceptions are also mirrored in the story of the Hirayama boy, a retarded child who mimics patriotic speeches and old military songs. Before the war, he was the object of popular approbation: people would ‘stop to give him money’ (61). After Japan’s defeat, the child would get beaten up for his chanting. Shaffer points out that the boy represents an irony in relation to Ono’s lack of vision and culpability, considering that he is also ‘shown to mimic patriotic themes and slogans, and to be incapable of understanding why his message no longer falls on sympathetic ears’.¹²

During that period, the idea of belonging to the nation suffers changes insofar as identity becomes less predetermined, hierarchical and non-negotiable, while it becomes more relevant on an individual basis. That is the moment in history when the global market and the idea of global migration, of both people and capital, coexists with the idea of nation, despite bringing the hierarchy of identities to an end.¹³ Ono’s narration begins three and a half years after the beginning of the occupation by the victors, in October 1948, and ends one year and ten months before the end of the occupation process, a time when

Japan had no sovereignty and accordingly no diplomatic relations. No Japanese were allowed to travel abroad until the occupation was almost over; no major political, administrative, or economic decisions were possible without the conquerors’ approval; no

¹¹ Shaffer 52.

¹² Shaffer 48.

¹³ Zigmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004) 24.

public criticism of the American regime was permissible, although in the end dissident voices were irrepressible.¹⁴

Dower points out that despite the arrogant idealistic agenda of demilitarisation and democracy that was imposed at first and the conservative post-war state, the ideals of peace and democracy became part of an experienced life rather than a borrowed vision, which was founded through many diverse and non-consensual voices. Nonetheless, there was no precedent for the kind of relationship that was established in the wake of the war: Japan was the symbol of the Oriental and pagan society that had succumbed to the colonial power enforced by the ‘messianic fervor of General Douglas MacArthur’.¹⁵ Therefore, World War II did not really end for the Japanese until 1952. Those years became, no matter how much the country developed economically, the hallmark for thinking about national identity and individual values: there was no ‘Japanese response to what had happened, but rather they reflected kaleidoscopic views’. The confusing vitality of the years that followed defeat created a space for debating other political models than state-led capitalism, which stimulated dreams of an international role instead of crawling under America’s nuclear umbrella. Dower agrees with Ishiguro about the fact that when we examine hardship in retrospective it has its attractions,

and nostalgia sometimes sweetens the recollections of that time. Personal memories have, in recent years, been buttressed by an outpouring of publications in Japan that shows little sign of abating. ... Many celebrities who made their names in the wake of defeat are only now passing away; and each such departure is usually accompanied by a piercing and poignant evocation of those years, so long ago and yet still so palpably connected to the present.¹⁶

Despite the possible reinterpretations of the past, what remained crucial in those years of defeat and occupation was that the Japanese were forced to struggle in different ways and to question fundamental life issues to which ‘they responded in recognizably human, fallible, and often contradictory ways that can tell us a great deal about ourselves and our world in general’.¹⁷ The historical texture which Dower highlights is brilliantly captured in *An Artist* from the individual and intimate perspective of a first-person narrator, as Ono is propelled into reexamining his own experiences against the new values enforced in the post wartime period. Concerns with such fundamental life questions are intertwined with Ono’s reflections on wartime and emerge in a myriad of contradictory justifications, providing us with a picture of the fallible human condition.

Ono reminisces about a time when the majority of the Japanese people threw off a decade of militarist indoctrination, revealing the fragility of ideology of totalitarian regimes. If on one hand the Emperor’s warriors and sailors suffered contempt from society as they returned from the lost war, on the other hand their own misery contributed to the amnesia of the suffering they had

¹⁴ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999) 23.

¹⁵ Dower 23.

¹⁶ Dower 28.

¹⁷ Dower 29.

inflicted on others; that amnesia seems to be lurking in Ono's story as he struggles against his own denials.

Ono's trust in the ultranationalist discourse of a power nation has suddenly become displaced in the new context of the liberal discourse of modernisation, progress and internationalization. He faces an ideological clash when, for example, Setsuko, his oldest daughter remarks: 'Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong' (193). In another passage Ono's grandson, Ichiro, is enthusiastically playing at imitating Western superheroes like Zorro and Popeye, while the painter tries unsuccessfully to attract his attention and show the child his paintings. From a generational perspective, Maurice Halbwachs explains how old people, unlike the young, seem keen on reviving the past by going through old papers. However, that does not mean that they remember better than the young; thus, it is not the case that 'old images, buried in the unconscious since childhood, regain the power to cross the edge of consciousness only in the state of old age'.¹⁸ The cultural gap between grandfather and grandson is perceived in the way they invest positive values in conflicting images and icons of two different historical moments. According to Dower (1999, 110), if before 1945 boys played with headbands and wooden spears pretending they were heroic pilots and sailors who saved the country against mock-ups of Roosevelt and Churchill, now in defeat and in the absence of indoctrination, they replaced samurai helmets as they learned to fold paper into GI-style hats. They also bought a commercial ten-centimeter Jeep toy that was associated with Jeeps carrying cheerful GIs who handed out chocolate and chewing gum to the children in the streets. Most kids' first words in English were 'hello', 'goodbye, 'jeep', and 'give me chocolate'. In response to the context of displacement Ono uses the language of 'self-deception and self-protection',¹⁹ which 'tends to be the sort that suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning'.²⁰ As he offers his story reconstructions, he 'attempts to conceal the overbearing shame associated with [his] past',²¹ so that his truths are slowly revealed to the reader while he fails to see them himself. Ishiguro asserts that the protagonists in his novels:

know what they have to avoid and that determines the routes that they take through memory, and through the past. There's no coincidence that they're usually worrying over the past. They're worrying because they sense there isn't something quite right there. But of course memory is this terrible treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception.²²

In the passage when he expresses concern about his younger daughter's arranged marriage negotiation (*miai*) he mentions a conversation with Matsuda, a man who works for the *Okada-Shingen* (New Life) Society promoting the militarist and artistic cause; he asks Matsuda to answer any questions regarding their past 'with utmost delicacy' during the *miai* ceremony, to which Matsuda replies: 'I realize there are now those who would condemn the likes of you and

¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* edited and translated by Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 48).

¹⁹ Mason, 337.

²⁰ Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', *Mississippi Review* 20, (1991) 135.

²¹ Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005) 144.

²² Shaffer 9.

me for the very things we were once proud to have achieved' (94). Matsuda is the man who convinces Ono to serve the imperialist government, hence launching his successful career, which has become a dilemma now that the imperialist aspirations have suddenly gained a negative connotation.

While Ono reenacts his past by reinterpreting and relocating his memories along with the reconstruction of Nagasaki, he struggles and gradually finds consolation in an open and hopeful future towards the end of the narrative. Nonetheless, the artist keeps reassuring the reader, or primarily himself, that his past deeds are noble, seeking confirmation when talking to his former colleagues and *Sensei* Mori-san about how much they contributed to the nation. The artist's shameful past is echoed throughout his repetition of the word 'shame' which comes up in his conversations like when he declares: 'there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them' (125).

As Ono watches the place where the old night bar *Migi-Hidari* (Right-Left) used to be a symbol of the old days in the pleasure district of the floating world, now he sees a clear space with a few young trees and a single bench, a place where nobody now has time to stop and rest from their busy lives. While he struggles to come to terms with the new nation of the present, he somehow is able to keep alive his hope for a better future:

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).

King confirms the binary rationality of the world in which Ono lives stems from the opposition between the older and the younger generations: 'If the old order is tyrannical and unrepentant, the younger generation is necessarily selfish. The choice seems to be between the living death of the past, which provides protection and guidance, and the new American democratic way, which offers opportunities and insecurity.'²³ Beedham, nonetheless, insists that the novel cannot be contained in only one world and that its instability allows the reader to place it in other worlds presenting similar troubles in which the moral order is at stake.²⁴

In his interview with Mason, Ishiguro observes that Ono's mood at the end of the novel shows that he recognises the mistakes Japan has made but believes the nation will recover because its life is longer than a man's, and despite having his dignity taken away, in the end he finds a way to hold onto it. Ishiguro explains he used the diary method to allow Ono to write from four different emotional positions, creating some irony:

There are no solid things. And the irony is that Ono had rejected that whole approach to life. But in the end, he too is left celebrating those pleasures that evaporated when the

²³ King 207.

²⁴ Beedham 41.

morning light dawned. So the floating world comes to refer, in the larger metaphorical sense, to the fact that the values of society are always in flux.²⁵

The place where Ono used to spend pleasurable hours has now become an empty field, a passage alley, where new life struggles to be born; while he observes the trees from a bench, he understands they are not there for contemplation. He reflects on the new generation 'full of optimism and enthusiasm' that has no time to stop for reverie; though he is still observing them at a distance, their cheerful talk takes him back to the crowd that he used to meet at the Migi-Hidari in the past, and a thought suddenly comes to him: that that place had been the bridge between two contradictory worlds all along (204).

Conclusion

Ishiguro creates characters seeking redemption from acts they have committed, which they may not be proud of any longer, sometimes acknowledging their past as old homes which seem far away from their current paths. Ono's identity is depicted with great authenticity: he is a Japanese painter who struggles to understand where he belongs in a society undergoing deep changes during the aftermath of the war. His narrative brings to light the floating grounds of politics and history during wartime as he is caught between ambiguous values: he longs for the preservation of the ideal of the old customs, although he eventually comes to acknowledge the mistakes of a totalitarian regime, while wishing hopefully for the reconstruction of the country.

Insofar as the nation is driven towards a new political and ideological scenario, the artist examines his role in history. While agonising over his support for the fascist movement, he struggles to accept that his past actions may have endorsed an ideology which has become a shameful affair in face of the new liberal democratic ideas suddenly enforced after the rendition. Self-deception, memory and desire are at stake when the painter attempts to justify his nationalist contributions. Contradictory stories inevitably surface when he struggles to bury unwelcome memories. Eventually, the artist perceives that there is a floating territory full of cheerful young people in transit, walking across a bridge between two worlds; and he feels hopeful about their future. While he is contemplating them from a distance, his description reminds us of the *motifs* he used to paint at Mori-san's villa; paintings that had given him a glimpse of the floating world in the past, seem transmuted now into a floating optimistic hope for the future of the next generation.

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²⁵ Mason 341.

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