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**AN INTRODUCTION TO KAZUO ISHIGURO AND THE
NOVELS *A PALE VIEW OF HILLS, AN ARTIST OF THE
FLOATING WORLD, AND WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS***

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Western writer raised in a Japanese family, schooled in a Western country (England) using Japan and China as backdrops in his selected works to be discussed here *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *When We Were Orphans*. One must take this element into account while analyzing these works and consider the relevance of the setting to the contribution of the characters' decisions and outlook on life. Western writers tend to see Asia from a Western perspective and this gives rise to the question of whether this distorts reality and whether this matters in any important sense.

The majority of Western language fiction about Asian cultures turns on stereotypes though this has changed a great deal in literary fiction over the last twenty years. This aside, neither cliché nor stereotype is necessarily wrong. Some expressions become clichés by virtue of embodying some universally recognized truths, while the stereotype, a term normally thought to encompass prejudicially negative attitudes, may promote sympathy when used, not with intellectual understanding, but towards and together with compassion as in Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*.

Yet there is still the problem of entering Asian societies through Western fiction. To what extent do we, as readers, apply our preconceived notions of the understanding of a culture based on our learned knowledge or accept what is being put forth as truth? At the turn of the twentieth century:

[...] anthropologists... attempting to account for the rapid submission of entire populations to Western rule, describe a 'primitive mentality' or wrote broadly of 'How Natives Think' – the title of Lucien Levy-Bruhl's work, first published in French in 1910 – and thus encouraged the assumption that all Africans, all Chinese or all Malays were alike [...] (Winks and Rush (1990:1–13)).

It is difficult not to have set in our minds a vivid, if not compelling, and magical picture of what Asia is like through the work of Amy Tan and Junichiro Tanizakit or perhaps even a horrifying and dark vision as has so often been depicted in such works as Kenzaburo Oe's *Teach Us To Outgrow Our Madness* or J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*.

At the same time, on another level, Westerners were entranced and positive admiration arose in response to the apparently superior virtues of Asian religions and ways. Not surprisingly, deeper and more complex Western responses appeared when Europeans confronted Asia's older, culturally dominant civilizations in India, China and Japan ultimately giving them much to brood about. This has given rise to a new genre of Western language literature which has also shaped our perceptions. In this literature, the old tension between East and West, between what is known and safe and what is alluring and dangerous, is *often internalized as conflict between generations, between (Asian) tradition and (Western-driven but also Asian) modernity* (Winks and Rush (1990:1–13)).

Kazuo Ishiguro uses these nuances and very ideas of our preconceived notions on Asia to manipulate us through the realm of his fiction and his characters using both Western and Eastern philosophy and ideals. He lends his insiders perspective of being a Western-educated Asian writer to achieve a seriousness in the realm of imaginative writing, which prefers characterization to plot development and which aspires to pass beyond descriptive accuracy. It must be remembered that Ishiguro is primarily concerned with interior worlds as he works toward presenting a sensitive and careful portrayal of the desires of complex individual natures in a context created by outside social forces having both historical and psychological consequences.

In the three works, *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *When We Were Orphans*, it is more important what goes on in the minds of the characters than any "real world" that might be out there, even though he does have a tendency to put his novels in some sort of "real world" economic or political catastrophe which causes an interesting tension. He states that the bigger political world does not touch on the small personal world. The settings are never described in great detail so each scene needs to be visualized internally. There is much which is not said in Kazuo Ishiguro's work and silence is at times the very condition of speech. The various themes of self-deception, distancing of families, disappointment in relationships, the tension of not fitting in, and devalued ideals are all understood and attained through the unspoken word. What is not said is possible to infer or deduce given the time frame in history or the relevance of the situation.

The history of pain becomes the writing of silence – of many silences. This is one of the ways which novels and stories may get history to think again. Everything depends on the tone and the timing with which a silence is broken and on the writer's fidelity to what words can't reach (Wood 1998).

What distinguishes Ishiguro's novels is that his characters, although intelligent and perceptive, at times, choose not to see what is directly in front of them. Whereas all of Ishiguro's books address the subject of control, *Pale View of Hills* and *Artist of the Floating World* emphasized more the taking of wrong turns along a path underlying the assumption that every person has an agenda to live out and recognizing how those agendas have not been accomplished. His characters tend to take on the more demure aspects of the Japanese-English mix of cultures. They are extremely polite, suppress their emotions, are inexplicit, and remain loyal to a fault. They are very careful to fit into the mainstream, and they place a great deal of importance on honor. The protagonists shed the complacency earned by old age to reevaluate the choices they have made, choices which ultimately ruined the lives of others. As they navigate the mine fields of their pasts, self-respect gives way to self reproach and quiet desperation. Paradoxically, confronting their past redeems them, even as they lapse into old patterns of self-deception. Ishiguro has stated that he was not so interested in what had happened to certain characters in the past but more in what they told themselves had happened, how they hid from certain versions and played around with their own history. The "cat-and-mouse game" one plays with one's own memories, one's own version of oneself.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* concerns the post-World War II remembrances of a middle-aged Japanese woman, the narrative's first person Etsuko, who made a permanent move to England when she met and married an English journalist, (Sheringham, a now deceased correspondent who covered Japanese affairs), with whom she had her younger daughter, Niki. Her elder daughter, Keiko who has committed suicide, was the offspring of her earlier marriage in Japan to a Japanese businessman, Jiro Ogata. The narrative moves back and forth between Etsuko's memory and daydreams, the present and the past, England and Nagasaki.

The "past" of the novel is centered mainly upon several weeks of one summer in the late forties or early fifties in an eastern section of Nagasaki where Etsuko is living. World War II had recently ended but there was still fighting going on in Korea. People were in shock by Nagasaki's nuclear devastation. Etsuko is in her third or fourth month of pregnancy with her future daughter, Keiko. It is towards the beginning of that same summer that Etsuko befriends Sachiko and her daughter, Mariko. They have arrived here, being originally from Tokyo, in order to live with her uncle because she lost her husband in the war. Sachiko, who is in her thirties, and her ten year old daughter, Mariko, move into a shabby run-down cottage without electricity or running water situated across a barren field from Etsuko and Jiro's modern, postwar apartment complex while awaiting news from the uncle. During this time she has attached herself to an American lover who promises to take her to the United States.

A Pale View of Hills uses the West as a freeing element to escape the pressures of life in post-war Japan with both protagonists going West in the hopes of starting life over. Ishiguro uses the backdrop of intense historical events in order to provide a ripe setting for the instrument needed to bring about the examination or change within the protagonists' world. The main focus of the novel is not on the horrendous incidents which occurred, or the devastated minds and lives of the survivors nor the immense devastation of the war and the atomic bomb, but on the depiction of the people, their individual psychology and the choices made. More specifically, on the way other people's stories are used to conceal their own stories and yet, paradoxically, reveal what they have been trying to hide from themselves as well as from others.

In many ways, *An Artist of the Floating World* continues the ideas put forth in Ishiguro's first novel *A Pale View of Hills*. This novel, however, focuses more intensely on the relationship between the private, psychological life and worldly, political affairs. The central character in *An Artist of the Floating World* is a Japanese painter, Masuji Ono, who does not know how much he should or can regret his prewar patriotism. In his youth, he had lived and moved in the "floating world" which was the *night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all our paintings* (Ishiguro 1987).

This was the realm of bohemian pleasure which shaped the artistic aesthetic of prewar Japan. Masuji Ono rebelled against his teachers and his vision of a stronger, more vital Japan led him to use his art for propagandistic campaigns that served the imperialist movement leading Japan into World War II. There was at that time a:

[...] *struggle within Japan, which pitted the liberal, democratic forces embodied in the trade unions, the intellectuals and the commercial classes against the nationalistic, authoritarian forces embodied in the zaibatsu, the army and the bureaucracy, [which] had been decided in the latter's favor [...]* (Lammers 1990:195–214).

These were the political conditions of prewar Japan, yet he reminisces and agonizes over his career as an artist in Japan during the war years. He has carried with him since the war, unarticulated feelings of guilt as well as unacknowledged regrets about his earlier wartime activities. He wonders if he should apologize for his complicity in that militaristic world or if the idea that he made any kind of contribution to the horrors of the time are purely an exaggeration of his own role.

Ono finds himself reconsidering his life and his work, even his own part in creating the world that has now come to reject him. He drifts through his partially dilapidated house or the rubble-strewn pleasure district of the city, all the time wandering in and out of a shifting kaleidoscope of his past. He recalls his youth as an artist of the floating world, and his later days as a *sensei*, a master teacher greatly revered by his students. Ishiguro's interest lies in what happens to people's values when they have invested all their energies and their lives in the prevalent set of social values, only to see them change. He takes a period of

immense transformation and sees what happens to people when, at the end of their lives, they find the world has altered their minds about what is good and what is bad. But for this particular individual, it is too late. They had the best intentions, but history has proved them to be either foolish or perhaps even someone who contributed to the evil.

Like Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*, he alters his history in order to make it more palatable. Masuji Ono believes that if he says he has no reason to feel guilt, then he is bound not to be guilty, but that does not mean that he is innocent either. But the question arises for him as to who he should tell this to. The novel begins in 1948 and his wife and only son are dead, casualties of World War II, possibly due to his involvement. He has two daughters, Setsuko, the elder of the two who is in her late twenties, married and the mother of a son, Ichiro; and the younger, Noriko, who is in her mid-twenties, unmarried and still living with her father.

An examination of Ono's youth through his complex mosaic of memory has been set in motion by the engagement of Ono's youngest daughter, Noriko, and the fear held by the elder daughter, Setsuko, that the engagement may be called off if Ono's imperialist past is discovered.

When We Were Orphans is similar to *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* in as much as it uses a first person narrator who at first seems reliable but as the novel progresses, his weaknesses are slowly uncovered and one must attempt to see through the protagonist to the reality of which he is in denial. It also deals with a return to the past, a negation of the past and the fall-out that comes from such a denial. It presents the reader with nostalgia for the past and the idealism which is the emotional equivalent to it, according to Ishiguro.

The novel, *When We Were Orphans*, is set in Shanghai. Immediately one does not just think about a historical Shanghai, but of the mythical Shanghai that is evoked by literature, old movies and Chinatown as well. It is as much a place of myth as it is of history. The Chinese who live in Shanghai serve only to frame the plot which is in fact concerned with Westerners. It is a city located in a country that has remained multi-layered in our consciousness which can serve as an ethos, a backdrop against which could be formulated a political statement drawn from another culture. *When We Were Orphans* is set against just such a backdrop of corrupt bureaucracies and extravagant habits, the Chinese civil war and the conflicts among the various forces in the Shanghai equation.

The crisis within China came to head as the nationalist armies under Chiang Kai-shek sought to consolidate their hold over the great international treaty-port city of Shanghai, while the Chinese communist party tried to develop the workers movement there as a prelude to a wider revolutionary upsurge inland. At the same time, the international arm of the Soviet Communist party, the Comintern, sought to dissuade the Chinese communists from over-violent actions which would alienate the nationalists irredeemably and the powerful financial interests of Shanghai – Western European, American and Japanese – watched the conflict anxiously, determined to protect their enormous investments in the area (Winks and Rush (1990:100–116)).

With this as the introductory political setting, the plot moves back and forth through time from Shanghai to England and back again to the Shanghai of the Sino-Japanese War, a journey that represents a voyage into the protagonist's repressed subconscious.

Christopher Banks, the narrator and main protagonist of *When We Were Orphans*, was raised in colonial Shanghai but is brought back to England when he is ten after the mysterious disappearance of first his father and then his mother. His mother, was an outspoken, ardent opponent of the opium trade, the unspoken, shady-business side of the company his father worked for. There seem to be two possibilities as to the abduction of the couple: either by criminals involved in drug trafficking or foreign business interests intent on silencing his mother's protests. After their disappearance, he goes to live with an aunt and from the substantial inheritance the reader and Banks assume he received, he is given a privileged education. Though given an ultra-English upbringing, he still remains unnatural in British society, "an odd bird".

Ostensibly, *When We Were Orphans* is a detective story. When he was a young boy, Christopher and his best friend, Akira Yamashita, used to play at being detectives and solving the case of his missing father. As an adult, Christopher is on his way to becoming a detective of well-known repute and standing who moves through London's elite society during the 1920s and 1930s. It is here that Christopher meets his counterpart in the woman, Sarah Hemmings. He also adopts an orphaned child, Jennifer. However, there are certain riddles and inconsistencies about his past that are not clear, and his life is suspended in a solution mixed from the reality of the moment and his memory and dreams, both reliable and not.

With his rising fame, Christopher is under the illusion that he can use his acumen to restore order to the world around him. He comes to believe that his ability to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance somehow holds the key to containing the world's "growing turmoil" from the Chinese-Japanese conflict to the escalating crisis in Europe, and that it is his duty to return there, not only to regain his family but to save all of civilization. He seems to be driven by nostalgia and a primal desire to put things right even as the world grows more bizarre and menacing. As Ishiguro himself says:

[...] *it gets a little strange. There is a boy, Christopher Banks, who loses his parents at an early age. When he grows up and becomes an adult, there's a part of him that remains that small child who has lost his parents. He thinks that all bad things in the world would be put right if only he could find his parents. Many, many years later, there's a part of him that thinks, 'It's still not too late. If only I could get back to that place, Shanghai, on the other side of the world, I'll still find my parents, held up somewhere in some shack by the kidnappers. And then all the bad things in the world would go away.'* A picture in 'When We Were Orphans' is painted of the world that bends around that crazy logic, which allows Christopher Banks to have that logic, rather than the one that tells him he's mad (Ishiguro and Feeney (2000)).

Ishiguro believes that in many people, there is some small irrational core of motivation. In *Banks*, Ishiguro has created a protagonist who is trying to repair his damaged childhood. If he were actually sensible and logical about what happened to him in his childhood and the resulting consequence, he would realize that it is actually far too late to change anything. *When We Were Orphans* is an adventure of the mind which might have been different had another country and era been chosen.

In all three of the selected works that have been chosen, *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *When We Were Orphans*, it is important to remember the luxury of the dialogue which Ishiguro uses to decide the meanings of the characters actions and charts their courses of action in a way that arouses the attention and interest of the reader. We are not given facts which might deflect from the characters' vision but are given a glimpse of their private worlds. We are given contradictions through the prose which in themselves are piercing insights of revelation. His novels are constructed along the lines of layered tension but remain within the realms of everyday experience. As Ishiguro has stated: *there's a surface quietness to my books [...] and Salman Rushdie (1989:53) has noted: Just below the understatement of the novel's surface is a turbulence immense as it is slow.*

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