

# A Long Anxiety Dream: The Absence and Subversion of Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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**Abstract.** The article will discuss Kazuo Ishiguro's possibilities as an atypical diasporic writer by focusing on his dual international background. Next, through analyzing his early novel "*An Artist of The Floating World*", the theme of the absence and subversion of identity can be revealed. By shaping an imagined post-war Japan and using unreliable narratives, Kazuo Ishiguro succeeds in conveying universal anxiety. Finally, we will explore the writer's own anxieties implied behind the context of his personal goal of so-called "universal values", where the United States plays a role of "the other" that cannot be ignored.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro; Identification; Universal values.

## 1. Diaspora Writers' Growing up after the Second World War

The diaspora writers' group is a particular literary phenomenon that has emerged in the context of globalization since the collapse of the old colonial system. Large-scale migration and the diaspora of writers have often attracted the attention of researchers because of the "national and cultural identity of the author"[1] behind it. He as a writer is often defined as a typical diaspora writer. As a Japanese-British writer born after the Second World War, Ishiguro's special upbringing and dual national identity background have undoubtedly had a significant impact on the issue of identity in his writing. However, we also believe that there is room for further discussion on the question of whether Ishiguro's writing is sufficiently 'typical'.

Kazuo Ishiguro himself was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954 and emigrated with his family to the UK in 1960. In the decades before he set foot in Japan again, British culture and education shaped him profoundly. What is more visually evident in him is an active Britishness, and the family's migration direction is not, in fact, the typical post-colonial pattern. Moreover, given the specificity of his home country of Japan in the nineteenth century, it could be argued that his "departure" was a proactive choice for a better life, rather than an exile.

Kazuo Ishiguro's early works, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, both focus on post-war Japan, exploring people's traumatic memories and the reversal and reconstruction of their identities. Instead of the nostalgic, exiled intellectual tone of typical "diasporic literature", the East world under his pen (Japan, Shanghai in *When We Were Orphans*) seems, as he puts it, to be a "universal theme" whose spot is not on national contexts but "the essence is mobility"[2].

His subconscious choice of post-war Japan as the starting point for his fiction is directly related to the fact that he grew up with the collective memory of the Japanese generation from which his parents came. And although he later deliberately avoided the Oriental setting, choosing an English manor in *The Remains Of the Day*, the kernel of his English butler reveals the individual spirit of the Yamato nation. In this dimension, Kazuo Ishiguro can be described as "consciously self-dispersed", a state of dispersal that gives him an "other" perspective, looking at the spirituality of the nation/state from the outside. While at the same time, as he is actually at the edge of the crossroads between the two cultures, the tension between the subversion and reshaping of identity in the collision of the two cultures has inspired him to create a "transcendent" literary path with an international perspective and global awareness. Of course, the construction of this path did not happen overnight, at least in his early work *The Artist of the Floating World*, which shows the protagonist's essentialist identity crisis starting from his national identity.

## 2. The Bridge of Hesitation: Post-war Japan in Imagination

Written in 1986, *An Artist of the Floating World*, the main narrative spans over a year and a half (October 1948-June 1950) and looks at the family's post-war life and psychological state from the perspective of Masuji Ono, the main narrator. In the post-war city, Ono is on the move to plan the marriage of his second daughter, Senko. However, Kazuo Ishiguro's work does not follow the traditional linear time pattern, and the constant interspersing of pre-war memories between the main timelines, coupled with Ono's own "unreliable narrative"[3] pattern, which he deliberately avoids, creates uncertainty about the meaning of the text and opens up a wealth of interpretative possibilities for the readers.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the bridge near Masuji Ono's house is called "The Bridge of Hesitation". It is said that "some people who lived here before the war still call it 'The Bridge of Hesitation' ..... because it wasn't so long ago that you crossed the bridge into our free land, and you would see the so-called conscience-stricken wandering there ....." (122) The Bridge of Hesitation is an important metaphor throughout the text for all those who, like Masuji Ono, struggle with the moral dilemma of a national identity crisis brought about by the reversal of the post-war value system.

The work's title, *An Artist of The Floating World*, is doubly suggestive. Ukiyo-e, as traditional Japanese art, and at the same time is a "pride" that was imported to the West after the 19th century, which symbolised Japan's historical position after the Meiji Restoration, which was the benchmark of East Asia's pride in the sight of the Western world. Ono Masuji's personal experience as a painter who began his career in ukiyo-e is a testament to this duality. As a young man, Ono Masuji went against his father's wishes and made a name for himself in the art of ukiyo-e, the first time he took the initiative to reorient his identity. It was the success of this reorientation that convinced him of the need to "rebel" against the times and of his ability to grasp them. During the war, he was inspired by radical militarist ideas to create propaganda for ultra-nationalism (or "patriotism" as Ono himself saw it). "This led to his reputation falling into disrepute after the war, and his daughter Senko repudiating her marriage because of the history of her father's identity. Thus, in addition to the art form of ukiyo-e, "Floating World" can also be understood as a condition of wandering, and feeling confused or lost about surroundings, suggesting that Masuji Ono, as an individual, often lacks a clear understanding of the times and can only move with the changing tendency without serious seeking, though in which he is trying to find his own identity. He tries to find his own identity in the floating world, but in the end, he is lost in the anxiety of the lack of identity.

The "unreliable narrative" constructed through memory is a good representation of deep-seated identity anxiety. Human memory is an immensely subjective embodiment, and memory is the most unreliable of all, cause memory can be deliberately avoided and selectively presented, so the cracks between these memories and memories become crucial. The truth is often obscured by the narrator's self-deception and self-justification, guilt and evasion underpin the entire logic of the narrative, and the novel is used to guide the reader to discover the bloodied wounds hidden beneath the calm. Where mistakes were made in the past, Ono generally takes a deliberately downplayed and obscure approach, for example, after the Miyake family repudiates their marriage, he refuses to acknowledge that the repudiation had anything to do with his reputation turning sour but only emphasises that it was itself a marriage that was not a good match. But he is not shy about portraying his past glories. Without constant reminders of the existence of the "unreliable narrative", the reader is at risk of trusting the image of a respected and declining gentleman, while ignoring the destruction of his family as a result of an unjust war (the death of his wife Michiko in an air raid, the death of his only son Kenji in battle). The two narrative forces struggle against each other and achieve a certain self-consistency, and the conflicting wording is a reflection of the cracks in the truth.

As Akiko Hashimoto, a sociologist points out that it is the revision of memory in defeated Japan, and also a project, intended to repair the moral backbone of a broken society[4]. By reinforcing a social image of virtue and prestige through reinvention, the "Onos" persistently deny their responsibility for glorifying the acts of war and barely maintain a fragile balance between their

individual desires and external reality, which is their self-defence mechanism to cope with their identity crisis.

It is also worth noting that, based on the discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro's "transcendental otherness" in the first section, his post-war Japan is, strictly speaking, a reconstructed imaginary post-war Japan. Like the symbolically charged "The Bridge of Hesitation", post-war Japan in *An Artist of the Floating World* is constructed through a series of vague geographical terms, which are linked to the reader's imagination through a few typical Japanese products and names. The blurring and distortion of geographical locations suggest that the writer is conveying his subject matter based on imagination and fiction rather than historical reality.

Landscape in the modern sense is seen as a process of forming social and subjective identities[5]. The social construction and maintenance of a sense of place, the selective use of collective memory, and the elevation of particular parts in a wholly functional way ensure the "necessary usefulness" of memory and obscure its authenticity --- is used brilliantly in *An Artist of the Floating World*. All the imagery of "Japaneseness" in the novel evokes "useful" associations that resonate with concealed memories. This imagined post-war Japan always gives the impression of being a product of the 19th century British "Oriental fever", like Chinatown in a foreign street, a landscape artificially shaped to satisfy the imagination of exotic colours. Therefore, when genuine natives face these landscapes, they do not feel the impact of so-called nostalgia, but only the anxiety of alienation and lack of self-identity.

### **3. American Cowboys and Miyamoto Musashi: Confusion under the Impact of the American Dream**

Ono Masuji's hesitation is a dream of national anxiety triggered by the whole of Japan in the face of a series of post-war upheavals. Amidst the anxiety of the Japanese public in the face of the collapse of the old value system and the absence of the old national identity, a new force began to dominate the direction of this dream - the United States.

As mentioned above, for Kazuo Ishiguro, the "alienated other" is his usual way of trying to break out of the confines of nationalism, and the country is just a geographical location full of multiple narrative possibilities. This "other" perspective is materialised by Ishiguro's perceptive choice of the United States as the "neo-colonialist" that emerged after the Second World War. For Britain and Japan, this is a sharing "other" that cannot be ignored. Interestingly, both Japan and Britain, the "rivals" of the Second World War, faced a sharp erosion of traditional values and a challenge from the rising hegemony of the United States in the post-war period.

The impact of the American dream was often reflected in the changes of the younger generation, as in *An Artist of The Floating World*, Ono is dismayed that his grandson Ichiro worships an American western cowboy instead of a ninja samurai as his hero. However his son-in-law Ikeda argues that "instead of worshipping someone like Miyamoto Musashi, he would prefer a cowboy ..... Nowadays, American heroes are better role models for children." (40) The American cowboy replaces the representation of the Japanese samurai, symbolising the subversion and takeover of traditional Japanese bushido by individual American heroism.

Kazuo Ishiguro was keenly aware of the shift in cultural identity, but he may not have been aware that his own values were similarly impacted by American cultural colonisation. In the 1960s, the younger generation in Britain embraced the so-called "New Liberal Age": "the narrative subject of liberal fiction was the lonely man in modern society"[6], messages conveyed by Bob Dylan and a host of other mid-1960s American rockers, which all conveyed the theme of "I am a stranger in this world", are all the reflection of the American hippie movement. Kazuo Ishiguro, like his mentor in creative writing at the University of East Anglia, Angela Carter was part of the hippie movement in his youth, and Ishiguro himself has referred to this experience, his love of rock and roll, including his love of Bob Dylan, in numerous interviews. The rebellion against tradition and the extreme importance of individual survival in hippie culture are reflected in the consistent shift in focus from history to the fate of the individual abandoned by history in Kazuo Ishiguro's work, including an

exploration of how to deal with the trauma and anxiety of that fate, and he also chooses a mechanism of “unreliable narrative memory” from the individual to the national group, where the individual's coincidental choices influence the policies of the state, rather than the acceptance of top-down state domination.

Kazuo Ishiguro believes that he needs to transcend the anxieties of marginalised ethnic identity, as he said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, he wants “to find a universalist novel with a universal human identity”. In an interview, he also said he “hopes that drawing attention to goodwill and peace will create a force for good in an unstable global situation.”[7] This is also a path of solution that the writer tries to reconcile with himself under the gaze of the “other”.

After the Second World War, the powerful “otherness” of the United States deprived the writer of absolute freedom and independence, so the author sets up the “homelessness” of the novel's characters, which means the rupture between the minor character and the rationality of the times, the absence and subversion of the identity of the minor character under the gaze of the rationality of the times, to reflect the individual experience. The idea of “universality” is an attempt to transcend and refine contradictions and conflicts. However, since its inception, this American-style “universal” has been subject to a series of contradictions and setbacks in practice, and in today's complex international situation, the universality of this “universal” practice itself has been challenged. The tools used to explain the anxiety have brought about new anxieties, and in this long dream of anxiety, it is not only the characters that are anxious but also Kazuo Ishiguro himself as a confused individual who is also affected by the American value system.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the above discussion, it is clear from Kazuo Ishiguro's early works that the anxiety of identity loss and subversion is a running thread in his writing. Whether this dream of anxiety can be alleviated in the context of the writer's creative life and the writer's own complex identity remains to be seen.

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- [3] Wayne Booth's famous observation in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “When the narrator defends or acts close to the ideological norm of the work (that is, the implicit ideological norm of the author), I call such a narrator credible; conversely, I call him or her incredible.”
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