

Internal World of Kazuo Ishiguro : Examining from Interviews and His Works

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— Examining from Interviews and His Works

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro was born as the first son of the Ishiguro's on November 8, 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan. When Ishiguro was five years old, the family moved to England due to his father's job as an oceanographer. Ishiguro was naturalized and became British in 1984 when he was 28 years old. Ishiguro has been frequently asked if he regards himself as a British writer or a Japanese writer by many people. In an interview soon after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017, Ishiguro replied to a reporter of *CNN English Express*, "I don't even know what it means to be a British writer or Japanese writer."⁽⁹⁸⁾ Ishiguro admits the motive of being a writer was an obsession with tracking down images of Japan he had speculated about over the years in Britain. However, there was a time he refused to be called as a Japanese writer and considered himself British in a concrete way. By examining the way he regarded his identity through interviews, and comparing them with his novels, this article cast light on Ishiguro's internal world to understand him better as the writer.

1. Identity

When Ishiguro moved to Britain there were only a few Japanese residing in Britain. Ishiguro reminisces about this time in an interview with Suzie Mackenzie, "This was long before you could buy sushi in the supermarket. It was a time when there were so few Japanese in Britain that on New Year's Day the ambassador would invite every Japanese present in the country to the embassy for a celebratory drink." He also revealed his first impression of Britain in the same interview, "I remember with some surprise how kind everyone was to us, even strangers, and I think that was partly the way we looked—very sweet, doll-like." When looking at it from a different perspective, Ishiguro certainly felt some awkwardness from being watched by people around him. However, when the questions turn to his identity, Ishiguro gave a hesitant reply. For example in an interview with Yasuo Aoki, he claimed he had never felt any

identity crisis and “had no interest in the subject.” (306; my trans.) In an interview with Don Swain, he talked about the region where he grew up, which was in the southern part of England and said, “that kind [multicultural] of tension between ethnic minority communities and the mainstream white communities—that hadn’t really come to a burning point” (93). However, the number of Japanese immigrants was so small at the time that Japanese were categorised in the group of “Others,” so it was beyond the controversy.

When Ishiguro visited Japan for the first time in thirty years, he was interviewed by Michie Yamakawa and asked what it was like to be the only Japanese boy at school back in 1960s. He answered, “I became famous after enrolling in school. All the students at school knew me and asked me lots of questions.”(6; my trans.) Around the same period of time, he had a talk with Kenzaburo Oe. Oe mentions that after Ishiguro released *An Artist of the Floating World*, Japanese widely accepted him as a “European writer.” Then Ishiguro replied, “About the European writer you mention, it has at least something to do with my lack of knowledge of Japan. I was forced to write in an international way.”(69; my trans.), and further stated, “I have been thinking myself as sort of homeless writer. I have no obvious social role. I’m not a very English Englishman, and I’m not a very Japanese Japanese either. And plus, I have no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody’s history seemed to be mine.”(70; my trans.) In his statements, there is a strong implication of “belonging” to the people or country psychologically and emotionally. It seems he was not certain about his identity and was hesitant to call himself Japanese or British at that time. Ishiguro felt proud of being Japanese but at the same time, the more he resided in Britain, the more he became confused about it. He said in an interview with David Sexton, “The Japanese are very racist. They’re very peculiar about foreigners. They’ll treat certain foreigners as guest, politely, at a distance, in a very hospitable way, and they’ll expect you to do everything wrong and behave in an improper manner.”(33-34) This interview was carried out in 1987, which was before he visited Japan as a writer. After visiting Japan, he might have felt how foreign he was. There is a scene in *When We Were Orphans* where Japanese boy Akira comes back from Nagasaki feeling differently about his hometown. Christopher suspects that Akira had been ostracised “for his ‘foreignness’;

his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different, and he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even—he hinted at this more than once—by the relatives in whose house he was staying.” (94) Ishiguro might have projected his own feelings on Akira. However, the identity issue was not a negative thing to tackle for Ishiguro; rather, it was more of a positive one. In an interview with Sybil Steinberg, he says,

I was brought up to look at British values and customs very respectfully. I was aware that a lot of my friends believed things were intrinsically right, but to me they were just British customs. Rules like children never being allowed in the drawing room. My friends accepted them as the rules of life, but I thought they were rather peculiar. (106)

He was observing British classmates as an observer. Furthermore, as he answered in an interview with Karen Grigsby Bates:

[P]erhaps most crucially—yes—in this home where my parents didn’t have the attitude of immigrants but of visitors—temporary visitors—the idea was that we’d always go back within the next two years. And so, I think perhaps I did grow up observing the English around me at a slight distance, [...] (200)

The distance he referred to as an observer gradually turns to an “ironic distance.” He started using the phrase “ironic distance” frequently after releasing *The Remains of the Day* and visiting Japan. Spending his childhood days thinking that he might go back to Japan someday created in him a certain psychological distance between the two countries. Mason analyses Ishiguro’s ironic distance as follows:

Having experienced Japan at close quarters in early childhood, he has since grown to see it with the fresh gaze of a detached observer. Whereas the Japanese people in defeat largely wrote off their ill-fated past and energetically adopted the new values imposed by the American occupation, Ishiguro adopts a more reflective, problematic stance. [...]

From a rare Western perspective, familiar with but removed from traditional Japanese experience, he is able to explore the psychological and ethical dilemmas common to both cultures. (48)

As Mason states, Ishiguro was able to see Japan as a detached observer. Moreover, at an early age, Ishiguro might have observed Britain from a Japanese perspective in Britain, as might a tourist. As his stay extended, Ishiguro needed to distance himself from both countries in order to protect himself from identity confusion. In other words, he needed to protect his identity as Japanese so he masked himself as British to blend into the environment, especially at school. Gradually, as he grew up, the mask became a more natural fit and before he realised it, the mask became his face. This irony could be his uniqueness in creating a distance between characters when establishing relationships in his novels such as Stevens and Miss Kenton in *The Remains of the Day*. However, sixteen years later after releasing *Never Let Me Go*, in an interview with Bates he claimed, "I consider myself British I suppose, because, you know, I've grown up and I've been shaped by Britain. I've been educated entirely in Britain." (200) At this time, he clearly identifies himself as British. However, he still cannot abandon Japan completely. This ambiguous emotion consists of "nostalgia", which imbues in his novels.

Nostalgia is one of the key factors when discussing Ishiguro's literary world. Nostalgia is an emotion that occurs when a person realises that something one believed no longer exists. Ishiguro talks about the days in Nagasaki with Christopher Bigsby, "they are so vivid because there was such an enormous change in my life and if there is such a change you have something to anchor your memories to." (15) It is well known that Ishiguro spent most of his first five years at his grandparents' house in Nagasaki. When his father was out of town, his grandfather acted as his father. Grandfather and grandson relationships frequently appear in Ishiguro's novels such as, "The Summer After the War," *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Unconsoling*. In an interview with Bigsby Ishiguro said, "I am sure there were significant things that happened to me in the first five years of my life, but I just remember ordinary things like standing in a street with my grandfather looking at a film poster, or cutting my thumb with a pair of scissors." (15) Ishiguro admits that some of the scenes in *An*

Artist of an Floating World such as Ono teaching Ichiro, who is the grandson of Ono's, how to draw with crayons, or holding hands with Ichiro while watching a film poster, are from his own experience. In the short story "The Summer After The War" and in the novel *The Unconsoled*, the grandson fantasises fighting with thugs with his grandfather. In these stories, Ishiguro wrote about the grandfather suffering from illness and his grandson worries about him. This is probably Ishiguro's remorse that he could not actually attend his grandfather at his death bed. He did not have a chance to say "good bye" in an official way. He had been carrying the remorseful feeling since his childhood and until he wrote them in his novels. Children's lives depend on their parents. Children in Ishiguro's novels are drawn as "helpless" or "innocent" beings. Ishiguro also said in an interview with Swain that he "was taken away from Nagasaki and Japan at an early age." (95-96) The phrase, "taken away" shows his sorrow that he was not in a cheerful state when moving to a new country. This resonates with the scene in *When We Were Orphans* where Christopher Banks cries on the deck as he leaves Shanghai for England, or Mariko and Keiko who were taken away to England and America respectively in *A Pale View of Hills*. The family Ishiguro reminisces about no longer exists, and it will never return. He needed a place where he could keep his memories and that was in his novels.

2. Writer's Subconscious

After moving to Britain, the Japanese language started to fade away from Ishiguro's mind and English started to take over. He said one year after moving to Britain that he spoke better English than his parents. Ishiguro stated in an interview with Swain, "I don't recall a time when I couldn't speak English. I think when you're that age you're just picking up things so fast and obviously there must have been a kind of hiatus period when I couldn't handle the language, but I certainly don't remember ever struggling to make myself understood." (92-93) He further said, "I find it very difficult to utter a sentence in Japanese without mixing English words into it." (93) In an interview with Francois Gallix he stated, "I can't write in Japanese, I should make clear that I am illiterate in Japanese, so I am probably more at home in English than in anything else." (144) This type of language or cultural problem sometimes occurs in the immigrant

families. The children forget their parents' native language, and have difficulties understanding their culture and sometimes end up in an arena of misunderstanding. It is readily imaginable that losing his mother tongue led Ishiguro to create another "ironic distance" from parents at home. This psychological "distance" could be the measurement of foreignness.

When We Were Orphans is the novel that puts most emphasis on identity and "ironic distance" compared to his other novels. The protagonist, Christopher Banks, was born in Shanghai but grew up in Britain, which resembles Ishiguro's ethnic background. Ishiguro may have sublimated his "Japan" into the novel. There are two possible reasons why Ishiguro selected Shanghai as the stage setting of *When We Were Orphans*. One is reflecting his grandfather's experience in the novel. His grandfather, Masaki Ishiguro was a person in charge of establishing the Toyota Boshoku Corporation in Shanghai. According to Nori Hirai, Ishiguro's own father was born in Shanghai, and it was where he spent his childhood days.(28) He saw pictures of his father in Shanghai and might have been inspired by them. As Ishiguro said in an interview with Lewis Burke Frumkes, "There were a lot of photos that he [his father] had in an album. I couldn't believe that people I actually knew, who I always thought of as leading a very sedentary kind of life in England, had lived there." (190) Second is that the theme of unstable political situation and the time of 1930's might have matched with his plot. The setting of International Settlement in Shanghai and the boys, Akira and Christopher, might have been very useful for him. Ishiguro said in an interview with Cynthia F. Wong, "I want people to read my books not because they might learn something about the period in which these things happened, but because I might be able to share some more abstract vision of life and the world with them." (310) When reading it from a child's point of view, there is a certain warmth of nostalgia, as Ishiguro puts it in the interview with Wong, "some sort of sweet or cozy past when we lived in a more innocent preindustrial time or something."(320) Christopher is searching for the family he had lost in his childhood days. At the end of the novel, Christopher finally meets with his mother, but he decides to leave her at Rosedale Manor. Maybe he realised that the family he had longed for was long gone. This is an important scene, which describes how Christopher, who persistently

clung onto his past (Shanghai), accepts the fact and decides to live his present life in Britain. This equates with Ishiguro's feeling when he said, "I realised that my hometown is in the past and my life is going to be in Britain." (146; my trans.) He said this in the discussion with Sawako Agawa.

When examining the novel more carefully, it is likely the novel uses a Japanese proverb "Ko Ha Kasugai" as a metaphor. Akira is a Japanese boy, who is about the same age as Christopher, residing in the International Settlement. They always play together. Christopher finds that Akira mentions how Japan has become a great country. Christopher watches Akira play and says to himself, "[E]very minutes, his claim that Japan had become a 'great, great country just like England.'" (78) It tells how much Akira is proud of his country. However, after coming back from a short visit to Nagasaki, Akira's attitude toward Japan seems to have changed. Christopher thinks Akira was feeling "miserable" (94) and he adds, "[H]e had been mercilessly ostracized for his 'foreignness'; his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different, and he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even [...] by the relatives in whose house he was staying." (89) The word "miserable" evokes the phrase "miserable loner", which Christopher will be called later by his classmates. Therefore, the reader links the story with Christopher's thinking that this was what happened to him and how he felt later in Britain. There is another scene where Akira mentions to Christopher that his parents stopped conversing with each other. Akira says, "Mother and Father, they stop talk. Because I not enough Japanese." (73) Then Christopher remembers Akira pointing to the slatted sun-blinds hanging down over a window and says:

We children, [...] were like the twine that kept the slats held together. A Japanese monk had once told him this. We often failed to realise it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor. (73)

The Japanese monk perhaps told Akira about "Ko Ha Kasugai", which means children are the form who keep parents together. It is a proverb

often used to settle a dispute between a husband and wife. Akira used the twine and slatted sun-blinds as a metaphor saying if he (twine) failed to keep mother and father (slatted sun-blinds) together, his family would fall apart, or get divorced. The centre of this issue is identity. This metaphor plays a large role in *When We Were Orphans*. Christopher uses this metaphor twice. Once is when he is talking to Uncle Philip. Uncle Philip is an ideal English gentleman for Christopher. Christopher asks Uncle Philip, "I was just wondering. How do you suppose one might become more English?"(76) From this line, it is clear that Christopher is anxious about his identity, just like Akira. Uncle Philip replies, "People need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race. Otherwise, who knows what might happen? This civilization of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse. And everything scatter as you put it."(76-77) Christopher is not certain whether it is Britain or Shanghai he belongs to, so he thinks if he becomes a mongrel, "Like that blind [...] Everything might scatter."(76) The metaphor is transformed to the recognition of the same race and the people in this scene. The other scene is when Christopher visits a village where small children were murdered. He mentions the detectives and inspectors are obliged to combat the evil. He says to the inspector, "We're like the twine that holds together the slats of a wooden blind. Should we fail to hold strong, then everything will scatter. It's very important, Inspector, that you carry on."(135) The Japanese proverb "Ko Ha Kasugai" changed its form to "justice will keep the world safe" in this scene. Christopher is repetitively using the twine and sun-blinds as a metaphor but at the same time expressing his anxiety that these might fall apart and scatter. It could be the embodiment of his unstable psychological state.

Accepting the feeling of something that was always there, but it is now gone, encouraged Ishiguro to write stories about it. His "Japan" could be similar to "Something that will just be there, always, like tomorrow's sky"(227) as Sarah states in *When We Were Orphans*. It could be his way of filling the distance he created between himself and his parents. To prove, all of his novels contain stories of having distance between a parent and a child and/or the conflict they have leads to misunderstanding. In his short story, "A Family Supper", the son and father have a long dispute resulting in them not speaking to each other after losing his mother. In *An Pale View of Hills*, Ogata and Jiro argue about the gap of their way of thinking. In *An*

Artist of the Floating World, the father is against Ono's idea of becoming a painter and burns all of his paintings forcibly. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens is obsessed about chasing his father's shadows trying to become a better butler than was his father. He cannot deliver his feelings to his father even as he lay dying in bed. In *The Unconsoled*, Sophie and her father or Stephan and his parents do not converse well enough to construct an understanding. Instead, they become estranged. In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks searches for his missing parents. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ruth searches for her "possible" parent figure. In *Buried Giant*, an old couple departs to seek for their son, but at the end, the reader finds out that the son left the house because the quarrels between mother and father were harsh. It does not mean that Ishiguro's relationship with his parents was not sound. The repetitiveness could be the evidence of his consciousness or inner world seeping through the sentences. It could be the embodiment of Ishiguro's oppressed desire. He once admitted that the emotionally-controlled narrative voice was praised so many times by different people and confessed in an interview with Gallix that, "I started to get slightly concerned because this was just a natural voice. [...] So I came to the painful conclusion that perhaps this was something to do with me."(136) He also mentioned in the interview with Vorda and Herzinger, "The language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning rather than chase after something just beyond the reach of words. I'm interested in the way words hide meaning."(70-71) From these interviews, it could be seen as Christopher overlapping Ishiguro. He longs to connect with others; such as his family, country, or world, once he believed these to be a warm and better place; however, deep inside he knew it was quite impossible. All of which he longed to connect with existed only in the past.

3. Conclusion

Many years ago, there was a foreigner named Lafcadio Hearn in Japan. He was a writer and scholar who wrote things about Japan. His most famous book is *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, in short, a collection of ghost stories. In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro inserted a performance called *Lafcadio* implying that he might have read one of his books. Lafcadio loved traditional Japan. However, in his later years, he

deplored the westernising of Japan. Probably Ishiguro is the same. He said in an interview in a magazine, *Elle Japon*, “For a long time, I considered myself Japanese, but when I visited Japan for the first time in 30 years at the age of 35, I learned how wrong I was.” (69; my trans.) Lafcadio was born in Greece, moved to America, and finally found a permanent place in Japan. He called it, “Land of the Gods,” made it his homeland and died there. Japan was his safe haven. However, Lafcadio wrote a passage in *KOKORO*, “[T]here never has been, and never can be, perfect mutual comprehension.” (197) The mutual comprehension he is referring to is the mutual understanding between the East and the West, including the people and country. Even though Lafcadio studied and wrote many books about Japan, he never felt he had a perfect mutual understanding. For Ishiguro, he thought he would come back to Japan one day, but after many decades, his feelings toward Japan faded away. He chose to be British; he found his safe haven in Britain just like Christopher Banks.

This article reveals that Ishiguro has been repetitively writing stories to fulfil his own quest of belonging and searching for mutual understanding and the things lost, perhaps without knowing it. As long as his memories of his father¹ and his younger days with his family, or childhood days stay safely in his head just like Kathy H. and Hailsham in *Never Let Me Go*, he will continue to write stories about them.

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¹ Ishiguro's father passed away in 2007.