

‘The New Internationalism’ and Ishiguro’s Time Perspective in *When We Were Orphans* (2000)

Olivera Petrović - Tomanić, PhD

University of East Sarajevo, Faculty of Education, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro shares with other writers who belong to ‘the new internationalism’ the same concerns regarding the rapid social changes and the instinct to survive in such a world. In all his novels the contrast between the older Japanese culture and the modern Western world with its individualism and self-centeredness has been clearly emphasized. While he is being critical of Japan's past, he is also fully aware of all its complexity and attractiveness. In the first of Ishiguro’s novels a character tells the storyteller: "it's good to take a glance back now and then, it helps keep things in perspective." We can propose that all his subsequent novels have had the focus on the truth of this sentence. Ishiguro has been trying to investigate to what extent it is desirable to return to the past; whether it is valuable for the future and for the possible catharsis, or if it confuses most of us and returns us to the world that we cannot modify anywhere except in our imagination. All Ishiguro’s heroes have been searching for the explanation of how and why they have become what they are, but only in his fifth novel, ‘When We Were Orphans’, he creates a professional detective as a narrator.

Keywords: The new internationalism, time perspective, national identity.

Introduction:

Kazuo Ishiguro and "the new internationalism"

The name of Kazuo Ishiguro is often mentioned in the same context of “the new internationalism” with Timothy Mo and other writers of their generation. He is probably best known for his third novel, *Remains of the Day* (1989). This work was awarded the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1989. However, his recent novel, *When we were orphans* (2000) is closer to the international writing. The novel deals with the psychological trauma of the main character who moved to England from war-affected Shanghai.

In the mid-eighties when Ishiguro’s career was on the rise, in the British Council’s pamphlets representing British writers it was written; "*I consider myself an international writer*" below his photograph. Since then,

many academic critics have been dealing with this issue and have been trying to define what exactly "*an international writer*" means. The term is generally used to indicate Ishiguro's Japanese origin, as well as a wide range of themes that have universal appeal that can be found in his novels. Salman Rushdie celebrates this feature of Ishiguro's creativity, explaining that he carried out; "*brilliant subversion of the fictional modes*" when dealing with broad issues such as "*death, change, pain, and evil*". (Wong, 2000: 7)

Kazuo Ishiguro shares with other writers who belong to "the new internationalism" the same concerns regarding the rapid social changes and the instinct to survive in such a world. In all his novels the contrast between the older Japanese culture and the modern Western world with its individualism and self-centeredness has been clearly emphasized. While he is being critical of Japan's past, he is also fully aware of all its complexity and attractiveness.

He insists that the concept of "an international writer" includes the literary aims, not only one's nationality. One of the most intriguing themes in the novel *When we were orphans* is the topic of national identity, primarily the English, and then the Japanese. This is one of the key issues in all Ishiguro's works. The writer wants to investigate the extent to which national characteristics are innate, whether they can be adopted and how much social circumstances matter. It seems that the concepts of homelessness, dislocation and everything that they may imply are a useful means of researching the complexity and richness of Ishiguro's writing.

I.:

When We Were Orphans and the question of national identity

In the context of post-colonial and multiethnic writing, one of the most important topics in this novel is the question of national identity, particularly English rather than Japanese. Christopher Banks, the main character and the narrator, grew up in Shanghai surrounded by people of different nationalities: the Chinese, the Japanese, the Germans and the Americans. One day Banks asks a family friend, uncle Philip, with a child-like naivety how to become more English.¹ (Ishiguro, 2000: 76) He is amazed by the Christopher's question, especially when the boy adds that his

1 ["*Uncle Philip, I was just wondering. How do you suppose one might become more English? 'More English?' He stopped whatever it was he was doing and looked at me. Then, with a thoughtful expression, he came nearer, pulled a chair up to the desk and sat down. 'Now why would you want to be more English than you are, Puffin?' 'I just thought... well, I just thought I might.' 'Who says you're not sufficiently English already?' 'No one really.' Then after a second I added: 'But I think perhaps my parents think so.' 'And what do you think, Puffin? Do you think you ought to be more English?' 'I can't tell really, sir.'*"] p. 76.

parents are those who believe that he is not English enough. Philip was aware that in the multicultural environment in which Christopher grows up he may become “*a bit of a mongrel*”.² (Ishiguro, 2000: 76) Philip tries to comfort Christopher with the words that people need to belong somewhere, to a certain nation and a race, and that otherwise who knows what would happen - it is possible that our civilization would be completely ruined.

Peter Childs interprets Banks' question as the one that explicitly addresses an issue that runs under the surface of most of Ishiguro's work: the extent to which national characteristics are bred in the bone and/or can be acquired. More importantly perhaps, his question implicitly queries the signs and symbols of shared identity that are as much debated by Ishiguro's critics, often too keen to identify the Japanese qualities of a writer who concerns himself with universal themes, as they are explored in various ways by the novels themselves. (Childs, 2005: 135)

Therefore, the statement that Ishiguro's home is "*a halfway house, neither Japanese nor English, somewhere in-between departure and arrival, nostalgia and anticipation*" should not surprise us at all. (Lewis, 2000: 1) In short, he is one of the many repressed and exiled, in the time of alienation, in which this kind of homelessness has become so common. Modern societies have changed, increased the frequency the lives of individuals from day to day through social mobility and frequent changes of residence. In fact, since Ishiguro shows the spirit of homeless people it can be very useful to study his fiction in terms of resettlement and relocation, and determine what the effects they have on his themes, characters and style.

The temporal perspective: *Reconstructing one's past*

In the first Ishiguro's novel a character tells the storyteller: "*it's good to take a glance back now and then, it helps keep things in perspective.*" All his subsequent novels have had the focus on the truth of this sentence. Ishiguro has been trying to investigate to what extent it is desirable to return to the past, whether it is valuable for the future and for a possible catharsis, or it confuses most of us and returns us to the world that we cannot modify anywhere except in our imagination.

2 [*'Well, it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you. Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel.'... 'But that's no bad thing. You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you all grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy.*] pp. 76-77.

Ishiguro's position of someone who was born in Japan but raised and educated in Britain, gives him the possibility of having "intriguing impartial or double perspective." (Head, 2002: 156) Even in his early novels that have Japanese characters, he uses the material with the conventions of Japanese courtesy. This preoccupation is developed in the novel *Remains of the Day* through the style of his narrator and aging butler Stevens, and there we can make a comparison between the two types of restraint and diffidence. It is not irrelevant to note that the action of the novel takes place in July 1956, during the Suez crisis, a catastrophic episode of British history. Many historians have acknowledged that this episode marked the end of its military imperial power. Although there is no clear connection between these events and the story in the novel, the feeling of this important historical event hovers all the time.

We can formulate that in the novel *When We Were Orphans* Ishiguro deliberately creates the impression of 'temporary repression' for his readers. His aim is to evoke Christopher's dislocation and repression, concerning both culture and his family. The cultural exclusion prevents him from feeling at home in England. In an attempt to alleviate the feeling of not belonging, he suppresses unpleasant childhood memories, trying to convince himself that the past, if it is successfully restored, would help him finally feel at home somewhere. (Cappo, 2009)

The feeling of repression and dislocation in readers is created by Christopher's narrative that begins at one time, and then moves to the other in such a way that it creates in us imbalanced feelings that are the characteristics of repression. The novel begins with the heading 'Part One: *London, 24th July 1930*', and then on the first page we read first Christopher's words: '*It was the summer of 1923, the summer I came down from Cambridge, when...*' (Ishiguro, 2000: 3) Thus the reader finds himself in the story seven years earlier than he thought when starting a novel. It is on page 37 that Christopher describes the events of the previous evening (23rd of July), and soon after the end of this anecdote he begins 'Part Two: *London, 15th May 1931*' (Ishiguro, 2000: 49) where he describes himself as a six year-old in Shanghai in 1910. Christopher is yet to look back at the event which is, in fact, being actualized presently, in the title of the chapter. Only on rare occasions he presents himself as someone who reflects on the past, using the words 'looking back now' or 'looking back today', and thus allows the reader to go back to a time and place that is promised in the title of the chapter. Only in the sixth part, the story finally corresponds to the title, but until then, Christopher's narration is relocated in the sense that the referred events are being shifted from their place in the past and presented in rather lengthy flashbacks that are easy to mix up with current events. Christopher's

past often acts as removed present, and his present seems as relocated as his past.

Therefore, a reader feels no less than Christopher - lost in time, and often wrongly interpreting the time periods in his narrative. It seems that Christopher himself writes these titles that are misleading us. Memories written in the first seventy pages of the novel are the result of Christopher's "*sitting down ... to gather in some sort of order these things he still remembers*". (Ishiguro, 2000: 70) Yet, he never openly says that he is the writer of his story. In fact, if he kept a diary his entries would be very long³, and in the novel there is no confirmation that he does that. After the first seventy pages, even a hint of keeping diary is being lost, and the titles as a part of Christopher's story represent only harmless indications when describing the valuable memories of a few years. Ishiguro's intention concerning these titles is now becoming clear - they are a clever way to put the reader in a mental situation that will later turn out to be Christopher's own: one always thinks he can measure and assess a certain situation, but is never quite right.

Conclusion

All Ishiguro's heroes have been searching for the explanation of how and why they have become what they are, but only in his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, he then creates a professional detective as a narrator. There is no doubt that the reconstruction of one's own history, origin and identity are the central themes in the novel. Because of the alienation and repression that torment him in the present, the protagonist gives his best to reconstruct his past.

Diana Postlethwaite also falls into Ishiguro's trap when he says that "*One day (24 July 1930, we're quite precisely informed), Christopher Banks runs into a casual acquaintance from his university days.*" (Postlethwaite, 2001: 164) By contrast, we are totally misinformed. The meeting did not take place on July 24, 1930, as it says in the title, but in the summer of 1923, as his first words vaguely alluded. Ishiguro blurs the boundaries between the past and the present, to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish what belongs to one and what to the other.

We may conclude that Ishiguro uses the narrative structure to uncover the structure of the narrator's unconscious. (Finney, 2006: 148) It is apparent that as the story progresses, Christopher is increasingly attempting to revive his childhood memories confusing the meaning and the differences between his past and his present. This ambiguity between yesterday and today in the novel has a dual role: to reflect the psychological turmoil within

3 The extract with the title "*London, 15th May 1931*" is 80 pages long.

the hero on the one hand and to point to the Ishiguro's intention to put readers in Christopher's situation on the other. Mainly thanks to the titles that are misleading us and the irregular chronological order of the events, readers of Christopher's story witness undergoing the temptation to which he eventually succumbs - to call what happens now the past, and what has already happened the present.

References:

- Cappo, E. (2009). *Repression and Displacement in Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans and Never Let Me Go*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Childs, P. (2005). *Contemporary Novelists, British Fiction since 1970*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Finney, B. (2006). *Kazuo Ishiguro: When We Were Orphans in English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Head, D. (2002). *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ishiguro, K. (2000). *When We Were Orphans*, London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Lewis, B. (2000). *Kazuo Ishiguro, Contemporary World Writers*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Postlethwaite, D. (2001). *Fiction in Review*, *The Yale Review* 89, no. 2.
- Shaffer, B. (2006). *Reading the Novel in English 1950-2000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wong, C. F. (2000). *Kazuo Ishiguro*, Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers.
- www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/ishiguro Linda Richards, 'January Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro'.