

**Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*:
Mirroring the Cultural Change in Japan after World War II**

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Abstract

“Culture is a way of coping with the world by defining it in detail.” (Culture Quotes)

The above quote clearly describes the cultural importance of any province. It is said that any country or community is connected with a specific history including individual values and social norms. To understand the people of any country it is essential to be acquainted with their culture (their customs, ethnicity, and values). This culture is inherited by the next generation automatically. In short, culture is a universal pattern of behavior existing in any civilization or the social order that unanimously shared and conveyed from one generation to another and greatly influenced character of the people of that particular society. Quandaries emerge amongst that particular community when a different culture penetrates their ethnicity.

The same conflict of cultural change reflects in the novels *An Artist of the Floating World* as well as in *A Pale view of Hills* written by the Noble laureate Kazuo Ishiguro. This paper is an attempt to analyze the cultural change in Japanese society after World War II as presented in the novels.

Keywords: Culture; Japan; Values; War.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most famous writers of contemporary literature. He is an Anglo- Japanese writer born in Nagasaki, Japan, and brought up in England. The novels of this Booker Prize-winning author deal with different themes and most of them are set in the background of war. The two world wars had shaken the whole world abruptly but World War II had a great impact on most of the world. The post world war era is also recognized as the emergence of America as a new world power imparting its influence on the world. The American influence can be seen greatly on the Asian world including Japan, who was then struggling to revamp itself from repercussions of the war. Ishiguro's earliest narratives, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *A Pale View of Hills*, placed in post-war Japan mirroring the effects of WWII on the lives of people and changing social and political norms of Japan. The novels present the change in mindset and cultural values of the new generation of Japan after the war. For old generation, it is not easy to accept these changes as they were brought up with those traditional values. Characters like Masuji Ono, Ogata San, Mrs. Fujiwara, Mrs. Kawakami etc. who represent the previous generation in both the novels feel drifting apart in their own country due to the influence of another culture in Japan after World War II. After reading these novels we can observe that there are many changes in Japanese society causing restlessness for the past generation.

As Scanlan opines for Masuji Ono and Stevens, the protagonist of Ishiguro's two different novels:

“Ishiguro's narrators, both old men looking back from the postwar period of their involvement with fascism in the 1930s, in some ways resemble the unreliable narrators of older fiction. But Ishiguro uses them to explore the extent to which identity is socially constructed, and the consequent instability of selves formed in a traditional culture when that culture dies.” (qtd. in Webley)

An Artist of the Floating World: Reflecting the Change in Japanese Society

Published in 1986, *An Artist of the Floating World* showcases the situation of the era between 1948 to 1950, a crucial period for Japan who was enduring the repercussions of WWII. Moreover, the period also witnessed influence of American culture all over the world both with its pros n con. The book tells the story of Ono, a well known retired painter. Ono lost his wife and son during warfare and now left with his daughters named Setsuko, married to Kenji, and Noriko, whose marriage negotiation is the main concern of this novel. The old and new Japan is evaluated from Ono's perspective who believes that the process of Americanization is responsible for losing conventional ideals in Japan. The novel also highlights change in the monetary construction of Japanese culture in which honour and respect are replaced with money as the prevailing social value. The familial association is also altering and amid these far-reaching changes, the old painter is trying to negotiate with his family and the outer world.

“These days I see it all around me; something has changed in the character of the younger generation in a way I do not fully understand, and certain aspects of this change are undeniably disturbing.” (Ishiguro 59)

The significance of nobility and respect presented at the beginning of the novel when Ono remembers how he was able to buy one of the most reputed house of the city even though he was not very rich “It is of the first importance to us”, she went on, that the house our father built should pass to one he would have approved of and deemed worthy of it.....Our father was a cultured man, Mr. Ono. He had much respect for artists. Indeed, he knew of your work.” (Ishiguro 8-9)

Thus being an esteemed artist Ono could buy the house. But now, the economic structure of Japanese society has changed and being a rich man becomes something more reputable. Ono’s talk with Taro near the end provides an example of this kind of mindset of the present generation. They discuss how the business world of Japan is changing radically and new Japanese companies replacing their old staff with young, energetic, and dynamic workers.

“...is it in your opinion entirely for the good that so many sweeping changes were made at your firm after the war? I hear there is hardly any of the old management left.”

Taro replies: “We needed new leaders with a new approach appropriate to the world of today.” (Ishiguro 185)

Another example of this money-oriented mindset is Ichiro, Ono’s grandson for whom money is very important. Therefore, he wants to become “President of Nippon Electrics”. Ono, who bestows huge importance to societal ethics, can’t understand this money-oriented tendency of both Taro and Ichiro.

The novel also presents how thoughts of the present generation on such issues as patriotism and heroism are very much different from the old generation. The young generation believes taking part in World War II from the wrong side and attacking Pearl Harbour was a massive mistake of the Japanese government which resulted in that nuclear devastation leaving the coming generation to suffer physically, financially, and above all mentally. These contrasting ideas about war are clearly revealed in Ono’s conversation with Miyak, with whom Noriko’s first marriage negotiation was failed due to Ono’s active participation in the war by propagating the then government’s political ideas through his paintings. Miyake considers criminals to those who fought in the war. On the other hand, Ono states: “But those who fought and worked loyally for our country during the war cannot be called war criminals. I fear that’s an expression used too freely these days.” (Ishiguro 56)

We can see how two generations in form of Ono and Miyake differently believe regarding warfare. Ono considers combating in the war as expressing fidelity towards their motherland and praiseworthy but Miyake describes war as devastation.

Hirayama boy, a retarded child, who mimics patriotic speeches and military songs, is another example. The boy, before the war, praised by people is now facing public abuses for singing patriotic songs: “During the wartime, he was encouraged and rewarded for singing patriotic songs to people on the Kayabashi Bridge. However, after the war he is beaten up when he sings his songs.” (Ishiguro 61)

The influence can also be observed in Ono’s Grandson. Ichiro, a seven years old child, who is fond of watching movies and a big fan of Lone Ranger, an American cowboy. While playing

games Ichiro always pretends to be Lone Ranger, a hero which does not belong to his country. Ono, thinking that his grandson is acting like any Japanese hero asks him the name "...But tell me, who were you pretending to be?...Lord Yoshitsune perhaps? No? A samurai warrior, then? Hmm. Or a ninja perhaps? The ninja of the Wind." (Ishiguro 30)

Another aspect of Japanese culture is parental respect. Ono's daughters occasionally behave in a way that is considered discourteous in Japanese society. They openly express disapproval of their father's statements and even behave coarsely sometimes. His elder daughter Setsuko blames him for causing the failure of marriage talks of his younger daughter Noriko. Setsuko indirectly warns her father to take necessary steps or precautions to avoid any more disappointment: "...my daughter seated in front of the altar, advising me to take "precautionary steps." (Ishiguro 50)

Even Japanese art is not untouched by the Western influence: "We were also quite aware that the essential point about the sort of things we were commissioned to paint – geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temple – was that they look 'Japanese' to the foreigners to whom they were shipped to, and all finer points of style were quite likely to go unnoticed." (Ishiguro 69)

Presentation of Cultural Conflict in A Pale View of Hills

The same conflict of values is presented in *A Pale View of Hills*, a 1982 publication. The story of the novel is presented by Etsuko, a middle aged Japanese woman and the central character of this novel. Etsuko, with her daughter Keiko, moved to England after remarrying an English man. She has another daughter Nikki, from her second husband. Nikki is on a visit with Etsuko for three or four days after Keiko committed suicide. Keiko was a pure Japanese girl who struggled a lot to cope with her new life in England and to adopt the western culture but finally failed and realized that she is not meant to live in this foreign land and find it better to quit and hanged herself in her apartment. Etsuko now recalls her past life in Japan when she was living in Nagasaki after World War II, with her Japanese husband Jiro and Ogata San, her father in law. She also tells the story of Sachiko, her friend who lost her husband and family in the war and now left with her only daughter Mariko. She talks about the strange relationship between Sachiko and Mariko where Sachiko is presented as a careless mother who often left her daughter alone at home not bothering about her education, her food and even doesn't care about her sentiments. At the end of the novel we encountered the truth that through Sachiko and Mariko Etsuko was telling her own story to express her guilt (because she feels that somewhere she is responsible) for Keiko's suicidal death.

As reflected in *An Artist of the Floating World*, this novel also contains numerous scenes reflecting the cultural change in Japan. In old Japan, having connection with the foreigners was not accepted as goodwill. In Sachiko's dialogue:

"My father was a highly respected man, Etsuko, highly respected indeed. But his foreign connections almost resulted in my marriage proposal being withdrawn."

"How odd, Etsuko. That all seems like another age now."

"Yes," I said. "Things have changed so much." (Ishiguro 109)

Sachiko got married to a strict nationalistic man who protested Sachiko's learning English language and even threw all her books. Sachiko accepted all these quietly that time because "there seemed little point anyway." (Ishiguro 109)

The Japanese society is known as patriarchal where women were bound to obey the male members of their family. They even could not vote the party of their own choice and had to follow their husband's choice. The mindset can be seen in these dialogues:

"By the way, Hanada," my husband said to him, "I heard an interesting story the other day at the office. I was told during the last elections, you threatened to beat your wife with a golf club because she wouldn't vote the way you wanted."

Hanada replied "Well, it's her personal right to vote any way she pleases."

"Is that really true?" Ogata-San asked. "I meant your wife and yourself--you voted for separate parties?" (Ishiguro 47)

In Japan, like most of the eastern countries such as India and China, there was a thinking that women are mend only for taking household responsibilities, they are not able to take important decisions and don't even know much about politics. So it's better for them to follow the choice or wish of their husband or father without any obligation.

"A wife these days feels no sense of loyalty towards the household.... That's so typical of the way things have gone in Japan."

"These things we've learnt so eagerly from the Americans, they aren't always to the good." (Ishiguro 49)

But now there was a great change in the position of women in Japan after the war. They can express their views openly. We can observe that female characters of the novel have an optimistic outlook for the western countries. In an interview with Susannah Hunnewell, when asked about his mother, Ishiguro replied-

"My mother's very much a Japanese lady of her generation. She has a certain kind of manners—pre-feminist Japanese by today's standards. When I see old Japanese movies, I recognize a lot of the women behaving and speaking exactly like my mother does. Japanese women traditionally used a slightly different formal language from men, and these days that's gotten much more mixed up. When my mother visited Japan in the eighties, she said she was stunned that young girls were using male language." (Ishiguro)

In pre-war Japan where people didn't want to have any foreign connections, women can now openly appreciate the life in western countries. In this way Sachiko wants to be moved away from Japan in order to provide a better life to her daughter.

"Japan is no place for a girl, "What can she look forward to here."

Sachiko has an extreme positive outlook towards America and believes it a place, where one can fulfill one's dreams. She wants to move to America with her American boyfriend and for this reason she learnt to speak English in a way they speak.

“Foreigners have so much trouble with our language, Frank’s Japanese is quite terrible. So we converse in English. (Ishiguro 72)

Through his characters, Ishiguro exhibits the inner conflict that one experience which intensify when one find that the support system of one’s society is tumbledown. Losing respect towards the elders is one of the results of this extrication felt by Ogata when Matsuda, one of his former students, regards his hard work as ‘old teachings’ that was unfit for new Japan.

“Yes, this is what happens. It is shame teachers aren’t ask more often to these occasions. I was asked along from time to time. And when I was younger, we always made a point of inviting our teachers. I think it’s only proper. It’s an opportunity for a teacher to see the fujits of his work, and for the pupils to express their gratitude to him.” (Ishiguro 20)

The description of new blocks of apartments indicates the changing political and economical state of mind of a new generation who is adopting the western attitude, for them old principles and ethics are not much important. Jiro and his colleagues represent this kind of mindset standing against the principles of Ogata and his teaching. “I devoted my life to the teaching of the young. And then I watched the Americans tear it all down...

They decide our schools would be like American schools, the children should learn what American children learn. And the Japanese welcomed it all. Many fine things were destroyed in our schools.”(Ishiguro 64)

Ogata is disappointed with this kind of approach the new generation is possessing where national togetherness is less important than individuals:

“Discipline, loyalty, such things held Japan together once. There was a spirit in Japan ones, it bound us all together. Just imagine what it must be like being a young boy today. He’s taught no values at school except perhaps that he should selfishly demand whatever he wants out of life.” (Ishiguro 66)

The novel holds many descriptions of the blending of both Japanese and Western cultures. The younger generation is eager to adopt new technologies to make their lives comfortable and easy. They also adopted western styles of dressing as they are living in the globalized world but the old generation perceives these changes from different viewpoint and don’t want to acknowledge it overtly. Ogata comments:

“Young women these days are all so headstrong and forever talking about washing-machines and American dresses. Etsuko here’s no different.” (Ishiguro 151-52)

Parental respect was the supreme and living with parents was common in Japanese society but now the scenario has changed. The young couples don’t live with their parents to stay away from the interference of elders. Jiro too live in a separate apartment instead of living with his old and alone father. Even the older generation like Ogata accepted this change passively and understood the mindset of younger people who don’t want to be dominated and ruled by their elders.

Mrs. Fujiwara, one of Etsuko’s friends, runs a noodles shop for her livelihood. She is also a victim of the war who has lost her husband and two children during bombarding and now left

with her only son. Mrs. Fujiwara, who is at the similar age of Ogata San, remembers the things in Japan before the war comparing them with the current situation when loyalty towards nation and importance of culture was the utmost for the people of her country. Mrs. Fujiwara resembles Mrs. Kawakami, a character in *An Artist of the Floating World*, who owns a wine shop where Masuji Ono, has a daily visit.

Both the novels present conflict between old and new generations, between their values and morals. On one hand Ogata-San, Masuji Ono, Mrs. Fujiwara and Mrs. Kawakami represent the older generation who are struggling to cope with the new standards of living which are spreading all over the world including their motherland, keeping their valuable past in mind while on the other hand there is a new generation in the form of Etsuko, Jiro, Sachiko, Ichiro, Miyake, Setsuko and others who are willing to adopt the changing culture, penetrated from western countries, in a fast pace with the new set of values and norms.

Conclusion

Written in a prolonged humanistic tradition, the stories of Ishiguro's novels are mainly deal with human relationship communicating the consciousness and austerity of human mind.

The novels present collapse of Imperial Japan. World War II brought many changes to the Japanese culture and influence of western culture. On one hand, the younger generation is more adaptive towards change while on the other hand, it is quite difficult for the old. This created a rift between both the generations.

America which is presented like an icon of imperialistic supremacy in the novels has a massive impact on nearly each aspect of the societal life in Japan. Nevertheless, the climax shows that there is still some hope of reshaping the values and Ono finishes his narrative with the lines: "I feel certain nostalgia 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." (Ishiguro 206)

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