

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Looking at the changing world through a displaced and estranged artist: Kazuo Ishiguro's, 'an artist of the floating world'

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Culture is a shared pattern of behaviour prevailing in a group or a society. It includes all the traditions, customs, beliefs and values that are transmitted from generation to generation and it can shape people. Thus it can be summarized that culture is something commonly shared, transmitted and it has a role in shaping people. When another culture tries to penetrate into the existing culture, some problems arise among people living in that society. Postcolonial literature deals with such problems as estrangement, displacement, identity crisis, etc. Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the examples of the writers of postcolonial literature and he studies on the aforementioned themes in his books. *An Artist of the Floating World* is one of them. The aim of this article is to analyse displacement and estrangement problems that the main character, Masuji Ono, faces because of the influence of another culture in Japan after World War II. There are many changes in society ranging from the traditional values to traditional art and they cause Ono to feel disturbed. Prior to discussion, an introduction and brief information about the historical background of the novel will be given.

**Key words:** Kazuo Ishiguro, postcolonial literature, culture, displacement, estrangement.

## INTRODUCTION

The term 'postcolonial' is used to talk about the cultures that are under the influence of the imperial process from the past which means the moment of colonization to the present (Ascroft et al., 2002, p. 2). In other words, it can be understood as "the multiple political, economic, cultural and philosophical response to colonialism from its inauguration to the present day" (Hiddleston, 2014, p.1). Postcolonialism involves the discussion of experiences such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race and gender. The term is also used for the new cross-cultural criticism which has recently emerged and the discourse through which this is constituted (Ascroft et al., 2002, p.2). This term first became popular

in North American university campuses literature departments, however, now it is also known as western academic institutions (Hiddleston, 2014, p.1). There are many kinds of literature that can be categorized under the title of postcolonial literature such as that from Australia, Bangladesh, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, Canada, USA, Sri Lanka and African countries. Although, these places are different from each other in terms of their regional characteristics, they have common features when their literature is concerned. "They emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding

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the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p.2)

Displacement and estrangement are among the popular post-colonial themes that are studied in many writers' works. Kazuo Ishiguro is one of them, who deal with these themes. Ishiguro is an Anglo-Japanese novelist who was born in Nagasaki, but then moved to England at the age of six (Shaffer, 2001, p.2). In an interview with Ishiguro, the conductor Gregory Mason ask about how moving from Japan to England affected Ishiguro's upbringing and education. Ishiguro says that his family has kept their Japanese way to go about things and "being brought up in a family you tend to operate the way that family operates." He adds although he has his five-year-old Japanese mixed with English vocabulary, he can speak Japanese with his family and he can switch back into Japanese when he wants. When Mason asks about the influences in his writing tradition, Ishiguro says: "I feel that I'm very much of the Western tradition. And I'm quite often amused when reviewers make a lot of my being Japanese and try to mention the two or three authors they've vaguely heard of, comparing me to Mishima or something. It seems highly inappropriate. I've grown up reading Western fiction: Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Charlotte Bronte, and Dickens (Mason, 1989, p.336).

As Ishiguro was raised in British Culture, he is used to Western tradition; however, the situation is different for the characters in his novels, who experience a new culture, especially at a late age. They feel totally estranged and displaced in the new culture. Masuji Ono, the main character of Ishiguro's novel '*An Artist of the Floating World*' is an exact example of this. In fact, the issue is much more complex for Ono as he has these problems in his own country. There is too much influence of a new power in Ono's country after World War II which Ono cannot adapt himself to live within. Thus, his reaction to new imperial power is inevitable.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to analyse the themes, displacement and estrangement, which are emerged with the influence of the cultural changes in society, the term postcolonialism is introduced through the books titled '*The Empire Writes Back* and *Understanding Postcolonialism*'. Then, the author Kazuo Ishiguro's own words are taken into consideration to get an idea what kind of tradition of writing is followed by an Anglo-Japanese author and how his characters differ from him as they cannot adapt themselves to the Western tradition or they have difficulties while adapting the new culture. This study is done to reveal how the Japanese society changed after World War II and how this affected the people shown in Ishiguro's novel, so the situation of the country before and after the War is given through historical and political information. *The Global Puzzle: Issues and Actors in World Politics* is the book that is used to get this information. In the discussion part, which the novel is analysed through the aforementioned themes, the interpretation of modern Japanese society and such terms like nationalism,

ideology, identity and culture are given by paraphrasing or taking direct quotation from books or article from the web.

## RESULTS

As for the results, it could be said that through the literature review, culture based materials are taken into consideration to analyse the themes of displacement and estrangement. The main character Ono's problems which appeared with the change in society are discussed in the discussion part and in the conclusion it is explained what happened to him briefly.

### Historical background of the novel

Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* which was published in 1986 is a realistic novel and it reflects the life as it is with its good and bad sides. The novel is contained within the years 1948 and 1950 which was the time when Japan was still suffering from the aftermath of the Second World War. The period was also the beginning of the increasing influence of American culture worldwide.

In the years between 1853 and 1895, Japan became the Asia's first industrialized nation. Japan gained Taiwan as a result of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895, then like the imperial rivals in Europe, Japan made territorial inroads in China. In 1902, Japan became the first Asian state that ended an alliance with a European power and this treaty gave Japan a claim on German colonies in Asia after World War I. After the defeat of a European power in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Japan's influence in Asia grew. In the following years, Japan continued to expand its influence in Asia. In spite of the opposition of US, with militarists controlling the cabinet, Japan invaded China in 1937. In 1940, Japanese leaders began to plan to extend Tokyo's influence in Asia; however, Japan was alarmed by US economic sanctions so they called for a "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere." In 1941, Japan attacked the US Pacific fleet and sent its armies into Southeast Asia. Because of the defeat on the attack of Pearl Harbour, Japan's plans to expand its influence in Asia stopped. The country remained under US occupation until 1952. As a result of defeat and occupation, Japanese society was restructured. The first influence was seen in politics. Military influence on political life was eliminated. Another influence was that a new generation was thrust into leadership and the old pre-war conservative elements lost power. Finally, to increase workers' power, a revitalized trade-union movement started. After 1945, the reconstruction period was very fast, so economic power was regained with economic and political reform (Mansbach, 2000, pp. 415-417)

After the war, Japanese culture was affected by

American influence. In the article entitled "What does 'American' Mean in Post war Japan?", Yoshimi Shunya talks about the post war Japanese consumer culture as a result of American influence in the late 1940s. American films and TV dramas were popular. An ideal post war Japanese home life was the exact model of American way of life. American products such as TV, refrigerator, washing machine were seen in many houses which was the effect of imperialism (Shunya, 2008, p.83). In addition to this physical change in the way of life and interests of people, Shunya adds: "This is not simply a matter of cultural contact, but part of a complex process of identity formation mediated by a sense of desire and prohibition related to the representation and appropriation of the 'other' (Shunya, 2008, p.83). America represented itself as a great source of authority. America was not only an image of new lifestyles and culture but also a force intervening in people's daily lives. Shunya describes American occupation by dividing it into two categories: "effects consciously pursued as a part of occupation policy and effects that arose unconsciously through the interaction of occupier and occupied" (Shunya, 2008, p.84).

## DISCUSSION

### The effects of the new culture on characters in the novel

In Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, the influence of American culture which penetrates the lives of Japanese is obvious. That is the reason why the protagonist Ono feels estranged and displaced. Ono is a retired artist whose son has died in the war and who has two daughters, one of whom, Setsuko, is married, while, Noriko, is still single. Ono looks back, remembers his past and tries to build a picture of Japan before and after the war by comparing and contrasting the way of life. In her article titled "Ishiguro's Floating Worlds" Rebecca Walkowitz says: "*An Artist of the Floating World* complicates the structure of displaced narrative by recounting and juxtaposing, in a palimpsest of memories, several stories at once" (Walkowitz, 2001, p.1069). In the interview that was conducted by Mason, Ishiguro answers the question why he chose the subject or theme of an older artist in the post-war period of Japan for his novel: "I am interested in that particular form of wasting one's talents, not because you spent your whole life lying on your back, not doing anything. I'm interested in people who, in all sincerity, work very hard and perhaps courageously in their lifetimes toward something, fully believing that they're contributing to something good...The very things they thought they could be proud of have now become things they have to be ashamed of" (Mason, 1989, p.339).

In the novel past and present Japan is compared through the eyes of Ono. The loss of traditional values is connected with the Americanization process. The change in the economic structure of Japanese society is also emphasized. Money takes the place of honour and respect as the dominant social value. Parallel to this the family institution is also changing and in the middle of these radical changes, there is the development of an artist trying to compromise with his family and society. The changes that are the result of American influence make Ono feel estranged and displaced. "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, 1986, p.59). There is a change and it is mostly observed through the younger generation and this change makes Ono feel disturbed. As Zuzana Fonioková points out Ono "is forced to modify his understanding of the events he remembers, which transforms his attitude not only to the past but also to the present: he shifts from feeling conflict with the younger generation that has abandoned traditional Japanese ideals in favour of American values" (Fonioková, 2015, p.90). That is the reason why a questioning process starts by comparing the pre and post-war Japan.

At the very beginning of the novel, the importance of honour and respect is emphasized through Ono's experience in buying his house. The house that Ono wants to buy is Akira Sugimura's house but as he is not alive, his daughters take the responsibility for selling it. Sugimura's daughters assess all the clients and they choose Ono although he is not a wealthy man. They say: "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. Of course, circumstances oblige us to consider the financial aspect, but this is strictly secondary" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.8).

Ono could buy the house as he is a respected artist. However, because of the change in economic structure, a materialistic society comes to the fore and their concept of money becomes something more honourable. Near the end of the book, the dialogue between Ono and his son-in-law, Taro, is another example of this. They are talking about the radical changes in the business world of Japan. The new Japan companies sweep away the old staff. Ono asks Taro: "...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" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.185). Taro's reply is ready: "We needed new leaders with a new approach appropriate to the world of today" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.185). In order to be economically powerful, they need new leaders with new approaches. Finally, Ono's grandson is another example of the next generation who gives importance to money. Although, he is still a child, when he is asked about his future occupation, he says:

“President of Nippon Electrics!” (Ishiguro, 1986, p.186). However, as a person who gives very much importance to societal values, Ono has difficulties to understand both his son-in-law and grandson. After World War II, with the flourishing of the new world order in which capitalism gained momentum, globalization had a world-wide effect. It also touched Japan and thus, the young generation’s concept of money changed. According to Kathryn Woodward, the globalization process has an effect on identity crisis. “Globalization involves an interaction between economic and cultural factors whereby changes in production and consumption patterns can be seen as producing new shared identities” (Woodward, 1997, p.16). However, globalization produces different outcomes for identity as well as it is seen in the case of Ono. “The cultural homogeneity promoted by global marketing could lead to the detachment of identity from community and place” (Woodward, 1997, p.16).

With its interest in materialism, traditional values of the Japanese society change. Patriotism and heroism have lost their importance. These are the important concepts that make a country nationally united. Thus, nationalism loses its importance with the loss of such concepts. In his book “*Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*”, Antony Smith defines nationalism as: “An ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’” (Smith, 2013, p.9). In the novel, Ono and the young generation have conflicts as they look at the issues like patriotism, heroism and nationalism from different perspectives. First of all, the young generation questions and blames the former generation for joining World War II. They believe that it was a mistake by Japanese politicians to attack Pearl Harbour. For instance, in the novel, the dialogue between Ono and Miyake who was his “prospective son-in-law”, reveals the clashing ideas about war. For Miyake the ones who fought in the war are criminals. However, Ono lost his son Kenji during the war and says: “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, 1986, p.56). Ono and Miyake think in an entirely different way about war. For Ono, fighting in the war shows significant loyalty to the country and it is something honourable. In contrast, Miyake thinks it is a complete waste. Another example is Hirayama boy who is an idiot. During the war time 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, 1986, p.60).

The change in the society also affects the traditional Japanese art. At the beginning of his artistic career, Ono draws his pictures in the traditional Japanese style. There are generally compositions which reflect either beautiful scenes from nature or a beautiful woman or a temple in

the middle of nature (Ishiguro, 1986, p.69). However, during the war, Ono’s paintings serve to evoke patriotic and heroic feelings in the country. He used his art as a medium of propaganda. Ono’s painting style is criticized by his friend Matsudo, who is a Marxist. Matsudo takes Ono to a place which turns into a ‘shanty district’ because of the effect of industrialism. Matsudo comments on the place that they visit at that moment.

There are more and more places in our city like this. Only two or three years ago, this was not such a bad place. But now, it is growing into a shanty district. More and more people become poor, Ono, and they are obliged to leave their houses in the countryside to join their fellow sufferers in places like this (Ishiguro, 1986, p.166).

In the book entitled *Imagining Japan: the Japanese Tradition and its Modern Interpretation*, Robert Bellah mentions the effects of Marxism in 1920s, 1930s and during the early part of World War II in Japan. Students and intellectuals were the ones who were actively involved with Marxism. Bellah says: “Amid the tensions and anxieties of Japan’s uneven development, Marxism offered an explanation that was comprehensive, theoretically sophisticated, and offered a clear alternative to the reigning emperor-system nationalism” (Bellah, 2003, p.47). In the novel, Matsudo wants Ono to see the poverty which is brought about by industrialism. For Matsudo politicians and businessmen are not aware of these places but as artists, they have to take part in the action. Matsudo believes that they are “in the hands of greedy businessmen and weak politicians” (Ishiguro, 1986, p.172). He warns Ono to be aware of the situation and he suggests that they should get rid of inactivity because he says: “Such people will see to it that poverty grows every day. Unless, that is, we, the emerging generation, take action” (Ishiguro, 1986, p.172). Therefore, Matsudo wants Ono to paint for a social purpose instead of painting for mere beauty. In other words, Matsudo thinks that artists should start painting for people which is the Marxist idea of socialist art: an artist should paint not for the sake of art but for the sake of the people.

As Yoshimi Shunya mentions in his article, the effect of American culture is obvious in the life style of the Japanese (Shunya, 2008, p.83). In the novel Ono’s grandson, Ichiro can be given as an example who is very much interested in going to the cinema and who acts like an American cowboy. Ono sees his grandson, Ichiro, while playing a game and Ichiro is pretending to be a hero which is totally different from his own culture. Ono asks his grandson: “...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, 1986, p.30). All the heroes that Ono listed are peculiar to characters from Japanese culture but Ichiro’s reply is ‘Lone Ranger’, an American

cowboy. Another emphasis is given to the language that Ichiro uses when he plays cowboys. "My daughter raised a hand to cover her laugh. 'He must have been playing cowboys. When he plays cowboys, he tries to speak English'" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.35). With its language, heroes and the way of entertainment, American culture prevails in Japanese culture and the novel displays the gap between the two generations under the influence of this culture.

In the novel culture change in society is not the only reason why Ono feels estranged. His two daughters Setsuko and Noriko are also the ones who make Ono feel deeply estranged. Negotiations for Noriko's marriage are places at the centre of the novel. The first negotiation fails and results in the withdrawal of the suitor's family, the Miyakes. Ono is blamed by Setsuko for causing the breakdown of the negotiations, so she warns her father in order not to cause any further disappointments: "...my daughter seated in front of the altar, advising me to take 'precautionary steps'" (Ishiguro, 1986, p.50). Japanese culture is known for its values including close family relations, parental respect and arrangements for marriages. However, here Ono's daughter can criticize their father frankly and sometimes they are impolite. On another occasion, Noriko makes Ono feel embarrassed because she talks about her marriage negotiation in the presence of a stranger. This is again the result of change in culture in that women feel free to become outspoken.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that in *An Artist of a Floating World* there is a feeling of estrangement and displacement against the new culture which penetrates the existing culture in Japan. Money-oriented new generation forget their traditional values. They are about to lose their sense of national responsibility and thus terms like patriotism and heroism do not make any sense this generation. The Japanese art is also under the influence of the new culture and it is reshaped. America, which is represented in the novel as the symbol of imperialist power, reveals its effect in almost every part of the social life in Japan. However, the ending of the novel is not pessimistic. It shows that there is still hope with Ono's own words: "I feel certain nostalgia for the past 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, 1986, p.206).

Ono overcomes his hesitations and conflicts concerning his past, stops questioning and blame himself

for his past deeds and adapts himself to the new circumstances with a fresh vision. In his conversation with Shaffer, Ishiguro explains that there is a mixed hope at the end of the book. "With a new generation, Japan can try again" (Shaffer, 2001, p.11). Ono never leaves his country but he experiences the feelings of estrangement and displacement in his own country because of the influence of a powerful country, which is America.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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