Survival after Historical Catastrophe in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Abstract: ***An Artist of the Floating World*** *(1986) is a novel that Ishiguro sets in post-World War II Japan. It is narrated by Masuji Ono, an old painter, who broods over his past and how he has lived it. He realizes that his once great reputation as a pro-imperialist painter stands challenged and threatened now as the younger generations now view him as a war criminal. Kazuo Ishiguro's study of guilt, ageing and solitude in post-war, post-imperial Japan is a tour de force of unreliable narration set in post-second world war Japan, during the American occupation. Masuji Ono was a respected artist in the 1930s and during the war, but now retired keeps ruminating his past because he is well aware of the fact that his pro-imperialist agenda has now been the cause of his daughter's failed marriage negotiations. A kind of hesitation and uncertainty runs through everything that follows. Now, everything for Ono remains temporary, including his art and his previous thoughts and ideas. An Artist of the Floating World depicts how history has troubled and betrayed the painter during the transformation years of Japan.*

The outside of his home, especially the broken veranda reminds one of the destructions caused by the bomb. The American occupation is crushing Japan's national pride. Though the young generation tries to forget the gruesome past, Ono always had the leisure hours to remember his past deeds and analyze them. He is in a constant state of retrospection.

From the narratives of Ono, the reader gets a hint that he might be hiding, manipulating certain things that he does not want others to know. The paper would try to read the narrator as a survivor after a historical catastrophe that has impacted not only the country but also the mind of the narrator.

Keywords: imperialism, militancy, catastrophe, unreliable narrator, guilt

The nineteenth century German philosopher, Theodor Adorno, in his work Cultural Criticism, proclaims, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric". Adorno raises the "less cultural" question of "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living," especially when "mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz" after claiming that a traumatic might has every right to conceal things. His horror was Auschwitz along with the human

ability to disregard that horror, to put it to one side as humans continue living shamelessly. Adorno understood that the status of human existence in the wake of these catastrophes had been decisively altered. He claims that after Auschwitz, human feelings have undergone changes and lost hope in the existence.

“These thoughts can be related to the works of Ishiguro, whose novels even go further than Adorno’s thoughts and take history into account as well, viewing everything with the lens of trauma. In this way Ishiguro’s novels deal with history as advocated by Adorno’s Frankfurt school dialogist Walter Benjamin, who in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” exhorted historiographers to “brush history against the grain”, to “blast open the continuum of history,” and thereby to break apart the age old complicity between history and power.

The novel*, An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), advocates an aesthetic view in which history fails to impart a sound social standing to the protagonist. Although set in post-war Japan, it concerns historical consciousness in general, examining the ways in which history has been manipulated, hidden, repressed and distorted for the present to flourish. A reading of this novel highlights a broader concern with the “use and abuse” of history as it appears in all of Ishiguro’s writing. History is both absent as well as present in all his narratives, which are not “about” historical catastrophe so much as structured by historical catastrophe. While apparently concerned with human themes such as the well-being of society, the dignity of the individual, and the difficulty of family relations, his novels also deal with the nightmare that humans suffered after the Second World War.

An Artist of the Floating World is narrated by a disgraced war painter Masuji Ono. An advocate of pro-imperialist Japanese views, he tries to marry off his younger daughter, a process which needs him to symbolically “kill” his old self. Ono spends much of his narrative brooding over the past, particularly about his involvement with the anti-Western imperialist movement ,a thing now viewed as harmful for Japan: the atomic bombing and American occupation of Japan, the loss of Japanese sovereignty and the samurai past, and the collapse of its traditional symbol, the emperor, into a puppet figure. Ono is also seen to have lost his son to the very militarism that had championed. His reputation fumbles and he has been forced to retire from painting. These events are not mentioned directly, and Ishiguro’s novels thus avoid the potential danger of slipping into the gothic realm, and there is the fear of putting catastrophic events in the realm of the supernatural. Rather, the horrors of the novel are seen to be buried in the way Ono silences them in hid day-to-day ruminations and are unearthed only through the diggings of the reader. The reader is tempted to read Ono’s narratives meticulously because one is aware that he evades the truth or protect himself from it and thus refuses to take full responsibility for

his morally and politically unacceptable support of imperialism. Thus we can judge Ono and his character by detaching ourselves and remaining objective. Cynthia F. Wong comments “Ono . . . gains a reader’s sympathy: how could any one of us have performed or behaved differently from him? Towards the end, the reader is compelled to gain sensibility and it is realized that Ono has created a fake sense of himself that can be compared with a sense of self-inflicted wound; his warped views of the past ultimately cannot offer redemption when his life is woven from such a dense fabric of lies”. Wong aptly judges Ono’s character and the reliability of his narrative, which we cannot be taken at face value. These facts help the reader understand that the novel is more about history than Ono himself.

If we examine Ono’s guilt, we cannot afford to forget that guilt is also a social emotion, and that its emergence owes much to the society producing it rather than the individual experiencing it. The guilt is not purely Ono’s. Instead, Ishiguro uses Ono as a figure to examine what Milan Kundera has called “the tribunal of history”—the lightly forceful ways by which the past is condemned by the present in order to have its own value. In this reading, the guilt of Ono is not the main focus; rather it is the historical construction of morality that matters Ono does not experience guilt, but he experiences shame.

It is seen that the Japanese regime is more motivated by shame than fear. Yet the essential dynamic remains the same: a new Japan must make it strong and validate itself by implanting new forms of disciplinary behaviour, especially by way of a psychological agenda. Ono’s previous ideas are now viewed as sinful for which he must atone so that the society accepts him again. Yet it is a fact that Ono regards himself harmless, as exemplified in the portrait that he makes of himself. There are instances of slips in the narrative that unintentionally comes out of his mouth. Rebelling against his authoritarian father who wanted him to become a bureaucrat he becomes an artist. He works at first for a commercial firm drawing Japanese prints for foreign collectors. Bored and tired of the same kind of regular and banal work, Ono joins the studio of Sensei Seiji Moriyama (Mori-san), where he works as an apprentice with a dedicated group of young artists. Mori-san works within the tradition of ukiyo-e, or art of the “floating world,” whose subject matter is the ephemeral beauty of Tokyo nightlife. There is something classically tragic about Ono’s story as there are similarities to the story of Oedipus in the sense that the hero’s best intentions lead to catastrophe. The novel does not directly advocate the thoughts and events of the Second World War; rather it allows the reader to grasp on their own.

The narrative takes place between October 1948 and June 1950; a period that marks a hazy moment in the history of modern Japan. In the beginning, the demoralized country is under the military rule of General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, who, while envisaging himself as the creator of a new, democratic Japan, ran the country more like a shogun. Furthermore,

the economy had fallen into a catastrophic slump, with even food supplies running scarce. Ishiguro chooses this period for very specific reasons: at this moment it is not yet clear what the nature of the new Japan will be. In the section of his narrative marked April 1949, Ono looks out over the city and sees part of MacArthur's rebuilding scheme, the new apartment blocks under construction for future employees, commenting that "one might even mistake them for the bombed ruins still to be found in certain parts of the city" (99). Ono is still able to compare the new Japan with American destruction and the collapsed old world in which he had flourished. In its reconstruction of these ruins, which "become more and more scarce each week," the new Japan is able to establish and redefine itself. (99). The narrative ends suddenly with the beginning of the economic revival in the 1950s, when Japan first began as the economic powerhouse of Asia that it would be holding this position during the Cold War. The novel is thus situated at the climax of the historical moments.

In this novel, history betrays the characters. It is seen from the Adornian perspective of the empirical ego, as "the slaughter bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized" (Aesthetic Theory 9)

Ono is not a world-historical figure, but in his attempt to transcend his private desires and enter into a larger collective project, he is still one of the unhappy actors who have been ejected from history's stage. Nevertheless, Ono valorizes his great failure where his actions stand in contrast to the mediocrity of those, like his colleague the Tortoise, in whom "one despises their unwillingness to take chances in the name of ambition or for the sake of a principle they claim to believe in" (159). Ono experiences a growing sense that a new and definitively final regime of this type is emerging in Japan. It is perhaps a sign of both the startling degree to which post-war Japan had recovered and reconsolidated itself, historical framework, the young Japanese businessmen have no reason to be suspicious of their world. Ono is unable to evaluate this new Japan convincingly as superior to the world because he lacks in a sound grounding. Ishiguro sets up enough structural parallels between the new and the old Japan that one is led to question whether this new and improved "final" stage of history is at bottom any different from its predecessor. Many things in the country have progressed notably, like the position of women (as seen in the daughters of Ono who are independent and confident young ladies). Yet Ono's confidence that the new Japan has the weight of history behind it, and that it has entered into a period of historical clarity, is belied by our knowledge of the occluded Korean War. Ono's narrative thus reveals, through its silences, a structural blindness within the triumphal discourse on the end of history, in particular that discourse's silences regarding the material grounds by means of which its post-historical utopia props itself up. The novel in this way hints at an underlying historical circularity,

metaphorized in its narrator's name—Ono—in which each successive historical regime finds and masks its own particular monstrosity. The Workings of Silence Ishiguro offers a parable about the role that silence plays in the maintenance of social norms in a scene at Mori-san's villa, as Morisan invites his acolytes into his studio tolook at his new works. "The convention of these occasions," says Ono, was that "we behave as though our teacher were not present", and indeed, expressions of admiration give way to impassioned debate as to the Sensei's intentions in his new work, while the Sensei stands to one side, apparently oblivious and slightly bemused. The idea behind this convention is that an expression of admiration directed explicitly to the Sensei would be taken as insincere; the fiction must be that all these utterances are natural.

Throughout the novel, Ono plays the dual role of both the rejecter as well as the rejected. Reading Ono's narrative, one has the sense of losing one's bearings, of struggling to find the real story, By abandoning the reader to comprehend Ono's evasions, compromises, and disavowals, the novel depicts the mechanisms of historical consciousness "from below." The world that emerges through Ono's narrative, in which the boundaries between individual and collective, between past and present are blurred and rendered hazy, fails to have a linear sequential narrative.

Yet we also need to avoid a third historical trap in Ishiguro's novel—the temptation to take the ethos of the floating world, with its seductive privileging of the ephemeral, as the moral center of the novel. The "floating world" of the title refers not only to the historical floating world, destroyed during the war, but also to the shifting and deceptive nature of historical consciousness itself parable justifying the defeat of Japan as a warning against nuclear weaponry.

Ishiguro's decision to narrate from the perspective of a "bad" character—a right-wing Japanese nationalist—refocuses our attention onto the ruins upon which "post-historical" society is erected. Ishiguro's novels become a kind of waiting room for the political, a space in which the desire for a better world is held in stasis rather than foreclosed outright.

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