

## KAZUO ISHIGURO'S EARLY PROSE. PREORDAINED NAMES AND ECHOES OF JAPANESE IDENTITY

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*Abstract: Upon reading the first two novels written by the British writer of Japanese descent Kazuo Ishiguro, one who is familiar with the language and culture of his lineage, cannot help but notice the striking meaning attributed to some of the characters' names. Symbolism is a key component in Japanese literature, being employed in the writing of both poetry and prose. Names in Japanese are written in characters which represent every-day words, therefore they have special meaning.*

*At a closer look, the names employed in the texts under discussion gain historical and cultural connotations. Moreover, some of the names used, have a karma-induced sense, the character being guided by the resonance of his/her name throughout the development of the plot. This paper attempts an in-depth analysis of some of the names the characters in the first two novels by Kazuo Ishiguro have, their association with the personality and life of these respective characters, but also what their symbolism in the Japanese culture is.*

*Keywords: Japanese culture, analysis, Japanese writing, symbolism, Japanese identity*

### An Overview

"The purpose of analysis, according to William Empson, 'is to show the modes of action of a poetical effect'. And in the work of Empson (Seven Types of Ambiguity, 1930) and Richards (Practical Criticism, 1929) it is a conviction of criticism that these effects are accessible to reason, and not mysteries reserved for silent appreciation." (in Childs, Fowler 2006: 7)

It is in this spirit that the "mysteries" of the names employed in the first two novels of the prominent British writer of Japanese descent shall be submitted to analysis. For any speaker of Japanese, it is clear that all names have meaning. This paper embarks upon analysing the words within the names encountered in the first two novels Kazuo Ishiguro wrote in order to reveal what they signify and how this relates to the rest of the text.

Although Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan, his parents moved to the British Isle when he was six.

„Reflecting upon his upbringing from the perspective of adulthood, Ishiguro views himself as having received a <<typical English education>> and a <<typical middle-class Southern English upbringing. >> In the early years of school, however, he experienced what might be called culture shock, finding himself <<a curiosity in the playground>> and adjusting to a new reality in which he was not to see <<another non-English person>> for years. His <<distinct background>> of being brought up English <<by Japanese parents in a Japanese-speaking home>> probably accounts for the author's sense of not thinking <<entirely like>> an English-born writer, of having perspectives that are <<slightly different>>." (in Shaffer, 1998: 10)

It is generally assumed that the difference so felt by the author is attributed by and large to his origins. Despite his frequent denial the first two novels that he wrote contradict his general attitude when he is asked whether he identifies himself with the Japanese culture. Both „*A Pale View of the Hills*” and „*An Artist of the Floating World*” had been written before Ishiguro visited Japan as an adult, so the only image he had of his home land was one constructed from his parents' accounts, and other indirect ways of experiencing a foreign

culture. Regardless of this, the world and characters depicted in the two novels reflect a sorely vivid post-war Japan.

Moreover, the texts are filled with descriptions of daily Japanese customs presented in a very ritualistic manner, almost to the point of appearing ridiculous to the reader. This very exaggerate portrayal however, becomes the giveaway of an intimate knowledge of all things Japanese, in spite of any denial. Furthermore the use of Japanese names, which are embedded with a deeper meaning meant to be clear only to Japanese speakers, and the rare, but straightforward Japanese expressions employed in the texts leads to the conclusion that Kazuo Ishiguro has in fact an excellent command of his forefathers' language.

In fact, when he is asked whether he speaks Japanese in interviews, he answers in the only polite way available to a Japanese person: he says that his Japanese is terrible, because any other reply would only sound like self-praise, and that would be considered unmannerly. It is quite clear then, that Ishiguro identifies with the Japanese culture and perhaps this would also be a reason why he started his representations of otherness present in all his texts with the one he felt most comfortable talking about – the Japanese.

### **National Identity – An Outline**

According to Anthony Birch:

„Nationalism is the most successful political ideology in human history. In the two centuries since its first formulation in the writings of European philosophers, it has caused the political map of the world to be completely redrawn, with the entire land surface (apart from Antarctica) now divided between nation-states. Nevertheless, nearly all of these states contain ethnic or cultural minorities within their borders that are only imperfectly integrated into the national society. The process, problems and frequent failures of national integration are issues of central importance in the contemporary world.“ (in Birch, 1989: p.3)

As such, this failure to be integrated into the society that one lives in, often results in the appearance of ethnic stereotypes within the social group that fails to integrate the foreigners. As for the subjects of the discrimination, they attempt to return to their roots.

### **Kazuo Ishiguro's First Two Novels In a Nutshell**

In Kazuo Ishiguro's case this is reflected in his first two novels. In *A Pale View of the Hills* the setting is in a small village from Britain, home to a Japanese mother who is visited by her youngest daughter after the suicide of the eldest. This brings back memories to the grieving mother who recollects the time while she was pregnant with the late daughter living in post-war Japan. Her memories include an old friend who lived nearby with her own daughter and who is in fact presumed to be a doppelganger of the narrator.

*An Artist of the Floating World* introduces the reader to a painter who used to be famous but lent his talent to creating paintings of war propaganda during The Second World War, and at the time of the narrative he has to face his past mistakes in order to stop these from ruining the lives of his daughters. After an already ruined engagement, Masuji Ono, the narrator, leads the discussions with a new suitor for his daughter's hand under the close supervision of his eldest daughter. Following the engagement steps imposed by tradition, Masuji soon realises that his past has become an obstacle in the future happiness of his

daughter. After much delay he finally confesses and apologizes for his wrong-doings to his family, to his country, and his future son-in-law's family.

### Hidden Japanese Identity within The Narrative

In both texts the names of many of the characters contain veiled data available only to readers familiar with the Japanese culture and language. This in itself proves that the author is an excellent connoisseur of Japanese literature. The practice of enclosing meaning within certain words can be found in Japanese literature even in the oldest anthology of poems compiled in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the text which came to represent a landmark for understanding Japanese literature, W. G. Aston mentions this fact as a potential problem for the Western reader or even translator:

“Even when they have a competent knowledge of the language they cannot possibly reproduce all the metaphors, allusions, quotations, and illustrations which form the stock of the Japanese author, and which are in great part unintelligible without a profusion of explanatory notes” (in Aston, 1907: p. 4)

Early literary works were written at the emperor's court, and this was also the place of their dissemination, the palace being the only residence where there were literate persons. This, in turn meant that the readers and the authors probably knew each other to some extent. Reading and composing poetry were very much appreciated and for this reason poetry tournaments were held, and there was even a Ministry of Poetry. It was cause of great embarrassment for anyone if a new literary work had been written and it was learnt that one had not read it. Such an intimate readership also meant that one may use references and allusions to other texts and all the readers would very easily understand these.

In this manner, a series of metaphors, symbols, and even epithets started being used in relation to certain situations. For instance the mention of a wet sleeve was an indicator that one was feeling melancholic and shed a few tears perhaps remembering a lost lover or someone that had passed away. Evidently for any reader who is not familiar with this custom or, with the key to unlocking the meaning of the symbol, it will surely prove impossible to comprehend the subtle allusions of the texts. In a similar tactic Kazuo Ishiguro hemmed in the names of the characters from his first two novels content which can only be available to a select number of readers.

### What's In a Name?

First and foremost the names of the Japanese characters are all very traditional and proper to the characters they are attributed to. The names Tarō (太郎) and Jirō (次郎) are the traditional names used for the first and second-born sons: the former for the first son and the latter for the second one. The names are used both in *A Pale View of the Hills* and in *An Artist of the Floating World* and while they are not used in a traditional manner per se they still carry a deeper meaning to a speaker of Japanese.

In *A Pale View of the Hills* the first husband that the narrator had while she was still living in Japan was named Jirō (次郎) and while the second ideogram means strictly son, the first character 次(*tsugi*) literally means next, in what can be considered a warning to Etsuko from fate itself, informing her that she would have to try a next time to find her ideal husband. The same can be observed as a practice in *An Artist of the Floating World*. Noriko, the

youngest daughter of the narrator had first been engaged to a man named Jirō, while the second man in her life whom she eventually marries is very appropriately named Tarō, (太郎) which can be translated as the big son, or the important son, as in a preordained twist of fate.

### 5.1 Echoes of History

An instance of a name used to echo with the knowledge that readers familiar with the Japanese history have, is the name of the noodle shop owner from *A Pale View of the Hills*, Misses Fujiwara. To anyone even remotely acquainted to the history of Japan, this name should be well-known. The Fujiwara family remained famous in the history of Japan by marrying their daughters to emperors, a practice which gave them the power to control not only the present emperor of the age, but also the future one due to the transmission of the throne from father to son.

„In the Nara and early Heian periods, members of this family held high posts in the bureaucracy and were prominent advisers to the throne. After 850, as a result of close marriage ties with the imperial family and the low calibre of actual occupants of the throne, they acquired virtually dictatorial control over the court.” (Mason, Caiger 1997: p. 69)

This practice has kept the Fujiwara in power a longer time than one might expect:

„[...] there was a period of two centuries during which the Fujiwara family dominated the court and governed through puppet emperors. This meant that administration paid at least as much attention to narrow Fujiwara family concerns as to broad national interests.” (Mason, Caiger 1997: p. 51)

Due to the way in which this clan managed to control emperors in Japan for such a long time it cannot escape the notice of a reader familiar with its history especially since even after they were removed from the throne they remained one of the most influential families throughout the passing of time.

### 5.2 Echoes of Literature

Another name of interest from the same novel mentioned above is the name with which the narration sets off: Niki. The name of the protagonist's second daughter represents a compromise between the Japanese mother and the English father who insists that his daughter's name be a reminder of her origins. The reader is then suggested that the name is not in fact so ordinary in Japan, but she had agreed to it to comfort her husband. The name is indeed far from being a traditional Japanese name, however it sounds very similar to the word describing a literary genre which was very popular in Japan's classical arts period: the *nikki* (日記).

This genre can be roughly translated as a poetic diary and it usually combines segments of prose with poetry in the form of a travel journal in order to describe the trip which the narrator is taking while she/he is writing this account. The name Niki used in *A Pale View of the Hills* is a hint to Japanese literature, in the established way of the olden poets, but it also indicates to the reader the general layout of the following narration which is about to unfold. As it would only be reasonable for a diary, the main timeframe for the plot is clearly divided into the days during which Niki stayed at home. Each is carefully described from the morning until the evening with a rather keen sense for detail, except for the parts

which represent the trip down the memory path of the narrator. Moreover, the character who bears the name of Niki, acts as a trigger for the narrator, always asking about past events from her mother's homeland, or just reminding her of home only with her presence.

### 5.2.1 Further Examples of Japanese Literature

In *An Artist of the Floating World* the allusions to classical Japanese literature continue with the name that belonged to the deceased son of the protagonist. The son who had been unfortunately killed during the war is often mentioned in the text with a sense of deep regret and awe, giving the reader the impression that there was a halo around his very being. There is no mention of character flaws or any other negative traits. To a reader who is not familiar with Japanese culture this might be the indication of the voice of a grieving father who had lost his very young and only son. However, combined with the name Kenji, which the departed young man had, it offers a whole new perspective for anyone well-informed of Japanese literature.

*Genji Monogatari*, or *The Tale of Genji* is to this day one of the most acclaimed and respected texts in the history of Japanese literature, and regarded as the first novel in Japan, dating from around the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The author's precise name is not certain, yet it is quite clear that she was part of the infamous Fujiwara family which has been mentioned above. The plot follows the life of a young man called Genji, son of the emperor with his favourite concubine, throughout his entire life from before he was conceived to his death bed. He is a very distinguished, beautiful man of many talents, and after many love affairs he finally marries a woman worthy of himself. The main character is often attributed the appellation *Hikaru* literally translated into English as to shine, to be bright. Although the character in *The Tale of Genji* is not presented as perfect or lacking in flaws, when one reads about Masuji Ono's son, Kenji, one could not escape the feeling of how much they resemble in spirit.

### Further Explanations on Japanese Calligraphy

Except for the obvious references to Japanese literature and history from Kazuo Ishiguro's two novels under discussion, there are also names which have meaning according to the way they are written. The Japanese language uses three alphabets: one was imported from China, the kanji, and the other two were developed from this one due to the polysyllabic character of the Japanese language as opposed to the monosyllabic one of the Chinese. Any student of Japanese has to first study the two simplified alphabets and then begin to learn the Chinese characters. Kanji can be used phonetically in compound nouns or on their own as separate words.

As such, almost all words in Japanese have at least two ways of taking them down: one in Chinese characters, and another one in the simplified alphabets. Names for instance are always written in kanji, and this is exactly why there are dictionaries of names and places in Japan due to the multiple ways that you could pronounce one single ideogram. In this manner, all names in Japanese have meaning because they are written using multiple characters for phonetic purposes, but in the same time these can be matched to their meaning also. Ishiguro's own name for instance can be roughly translated into Blackstone because of the two ideograms used to write his name in Japanese: *ishi* (石) stone, and *kuro* (黒) black.

## The Meaning Within The Names

It is this fact that becomes of interest as to what regards the names of the characters employed in Kazuo Ishiguro's first two novels. Although the names in the book are written in the Latin alphabet, as they are pronounced in Japanese, one could venture to guess the kanji they would be written in and thus the meaning attributed to them.

### 7.1 *A Pale View of the Hills*

In *A Pale View of the Hills* the characters whose names are interpretable are all part of the life recollected by the protagonist from her hometown, Nagasaki, which is also Ishiguro's hometown. The names given to these characters are all connected in meaning to their destiny depicted in the narration. Ogata-san the protagonist's first father-in-law is described in the text as an outdated old man who cannot in all honesty find his place in the life that his son has created in this new town. Moreover his own son does not pay too much attention to him giving the impression that for him, his father is obsolete, at times even to the point of becoming rude. In a very appropriate way *ogata* (小賀) is the name for a fossil plant, a type of Magnolia of an ancient family which have become extinct.

Etsuko, the narrator, recalls a certain summer during her pregnancy with her first daughter, who committed suicide. At that time she had a strange friendship with a woman living in the vicinity of her house who also had a daughter. It has been said that these are doppelgangers of the protagonist and her daughter. (Sim, Routledge, 2010: p. 23) The name of Etsuko's friend was Sachiko (小賀) whose name can be written in Japanese using the same ideogram as for Genji (源氏), the character mentioned above to be central to the most iconic piece of literary work in Japan.

In itself the ideogram means origin, or source, which could also hint at the fact that Sachiko is in fact a younger version of the protagonist. The name that Sachiko's daughter has, Mariko, means purity or beauty a fact which only supports what has been mentioned above due to the fact that the protagonist expresses deep regret, and guilt towards her daughter's demise giving her the allure of an angelic being.

Although not Japanese, there is an English name that could draw attention to the fact that it might be of interest to take a closer look at how the characters are called and that is Frank. This is the man that Sachiko has a relationship with. Despite her confidence in him, and in spite of his name which reminds of honesty, he makes promises he never keeps and lies to Sachiko.

### 7.2 *An Artist of the Floating World*

In *An Artist of the Floating World* there are also examples of how the name of the character is related to his/ her destiny or personality. The protagonist, Masuji (増司), is a retired painter who reached fame for a short while by creating works of art for the war propaganda. The ideogram used to write his name in Japanese means to increase alluding to his rise to fame by means of aiding in a fight which proved less than praiseworthy.

The names used for his daughters also match their characters and roles in the narration. His first daughter is named Setsuko (説子) which can be translated as instruction,



which is precisely what she does all through the narrative in order to help hasten the proceedings leading to her sister's engagement. It is also her who helps her father by giving him subtle instructions so as to become aware of his past wrong doings. Noriko's (令子) name, the younger of the sisters, can be translated as dictation, order, which she truly does on a regular basis to her father. The narrator is constantly being told what or how to do some thing or another by his youngest thus being in absolute agreement with the name she bears.

By far the most interesting twist encountered in the choosing of names is that of an old associate of the protagonist's, Chishu Matsuda. This character is presented from the start in a veil of mystery, being contoured as a man of hidden intentions, and a secret agenda to disseminate, always appearing to play mind tricks with the narrator. The reader is introduced to him when the protagonist pays him a visit to ensure his best recommendations, if they might be necessary, for Noriko. Unfortunately Matsuda is very ill and the reader understands that it would not be long before he would die. It becomes also clear that Matsuda was not only a former associate, as he had been described by the narrator, but also a former colleague from the house of the master painter where they had been apprentices. It was him that had influenced Masuji to leave the house of his master and start creating works of art for the war propaganda. Matsuda's (謀) name translates into to plot, or to deceive, which is once again exactly what he continues to do throughout the entire narrative seemingly pushing Masuji into taking the wrong decisions and making the mistakes that he would come to regret later.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, as it has been shown above, despite his denial, Kazuo Ishiguro is in fact not only familiar, but a master of the Japanese language and culture. Time and time again clues are being given to the readers to contradict what he insists on in his interviews by hinting at such aspects of his home culture which would only be known to someone who had studied closely these values. It might be that he is trying to induce the idea that national identity is inescapable and will show even when one is not aware of it. Or perhaps maybe the opposite, mocking at such social stereotypes as pointing out that an individual is not in control of her/ his decisions but rather is governed all her/ his life by an inexplicable force like national identity. Either way, it can be stated beyond doubt that Kazuo Ishiguro keeps denying any link to his Japanese identity when all he is hinting at is in fact the very opposite.

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## APPENDIX 1

大郎 – Male given name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
次郎 – Male given name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
次 – next; following; subsequent, General Dictionary (Edict)  
日記 – diary; journal, General Dictionary (Edict)  
石 – stone , General Dictionary (Edict)  
黒 – black, dark, General Dictionary (Edict)  
小賀 – *Michelia compressa*, General Dictionary (Edict)  
源氏 – Genji (the character in the *Genji Monogatari*), General Dictionary (Edict)  
増司 – Name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
増 – increase, growth, General Dictionary (Edict)  
説子 – Name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
説 – instruction, theory, General Dictionary (Edict)  
令子 – Name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
令 – dictation, order, General Dictionary (Edict)  
謀 – Unclassified name or forename, JMnedict Dictionary of Names and Places  
謀 – to plot, to deceive, General Dictionary (Edict)