

## ***STEREOTYPES OF THE JAPANESE WOMAN IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S A PALE VIEW OF HILLS***

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*Abstract: In a world of "first impressions count", where social etiquette has become the determining factor of being accepted or not in society, but at the same time a world of unprecedented cultural diversity, the question of prejudice has become a central part of everybody's daily life. Stereotyping has become such an important part in our society that many even fail to recognize when they are using a biased opinion to label a person. Gender, colour, ethnicity, age, social status, sexual preferences are merely a few out of a sea of prejudiced opinions based on nothing more than personal view and appearances. The character-narrator in Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills faces stereotyping throughout her entire life and constantly struggles to escape from a stereotype, only to find that she is labelled with a new one. This paper aims at identifying the various prejudices the character is faced with and explain how they shape her from being the subject of stereotyping into an emitter.*

**Keywords: stereotyping, Japanese culture, Kazuo Ishiguro, identity, schemata.**

### **1. An overview**

Humankind has always been quick to pass judgement, jump to conclusions, or label other people based on hearsay and appearance. Such a statement should come as little surprise for anyone, young or old. From an early age one is taught to behave well in public so as not to create a negative image of oneself, or that first impressions count. This statement follows individuals all through their life: when they dress up for a date or for a job interview and, even when they dress down to integrate into one of the cliques during school years. High-school is associated with the core of stereotyping where everybody bears the label that they have been stamped with, be it nerd, bully, tramp, fat, jock, etc. Society relies so much on appearances, that there are people specialising in how to create a perfect image for public persons such as Hollywood stars, or even politicians. There are make-up artists to look after their hair and make-up, personal trainers who help them get in shape, nutritionists who watch their diet, personal stylists who make sure they are dressed properly every time they step outside their house, and when all these fail there are professional photographers who use special lighting and filters to capture their perfect look, and computer whizzes who use software to mould their bodies to absolute perfection. People are trying so hard to avoid criticism and bias that they voluntarily alter their bodies and personalities in order to fit in with the rest.

It is from this perspective that the reader is introduced into the world of Etsuko, a Japanese woman, who left her home country and is living in the British country side at the time of the narration. Overcome with melancholy after the suicide of her daughter, she remembers the time when she was still living in Japan with her first husband. The summer she describes from those times follows a friendship she had with a woman presumed to be her doppelganger, and onto whom she projects the negative aspects of her past life from Japan. The aim of this paper is to focus on the three stages of the narrator's life described within the text in order to identify the stereotypes used to label her during each one of these so as to follow the transformation undergone by the narrator to reach the standpoint of an emitter of prejudice from that of a receiver. This conversion also offers the reader a panoramic

perspective of the evolution of the stereotypes that have followed the Japanese and the Asian communities in general throughout the years.

## 2. Stereotyping. Some key aspects

It should come as no surprise that society began to recognise the threat of placing a label on persons even before knowing their name, just as it should be no coincidence that awareness came together with globalisation. It would be foolish to attempt to survive in a multicultural world trying to avoid contact with any of the people deemed socially unacceptable by biased standards. While it has always been a widespread practice throughout the ages, people have only rather recently begun to stand up against this world of “first impressions count”. The term used by and large to describe this phenomenon is known as stereotype, or stereotyping.

Social cognition defines stereotypes in terms of social representations. [1] A stereotype is more than a neutral mental picture that appears in the mind of the receptor, as it is likely to incorporate affective and behavioural information linked to that image. [2] That is, associating certain characteristics to a person simply due to their belonging to a certain ethnic group, or having a certain race.

According to Augoustinos and Walker [3] stereotypes are:

“conventional schematic representations of groups and group members. They act as schemas, directing mental resources, guiding the encoding and retrieval of information. As schemas, stereotypes serve to generate behavioural expectancies which often function as self-fulfilling prophecies, and to provide explanatory accounts of events in the social environment. Stereotypes are both a cause and a consequence of prejudice”.

Furthermore, stereotypes are seen as shared social representations:

“... objectified cognitive and affective structures about social groups within society which are extensively shared and which emerge and proliferate within the particular and political milieu of a given historical moment”[4]

In agreement with this, a stereotype can be defined as a cognitive structure that comprises a perceiver’s or a group of perceivers’ knowledge, beliefs and expectations with respect to a human group as it is stated in *Social Psychological Foundations of Stereotype Formation*. [5]

### 2.1 Mechanisms of stereotype formation

“Stereotypes are acquired ready-made and packaged” [6] therefore stereotypic perceptions of groups are inherited via social milieus. They are learned by way of observation and imitation of an in-group, as well as by parental imposition and assimilation of mediated stereotype-embedding representations that follow the contemporary person virtually everywhere e.g. blondes are sexy.

There are two types of mechanisms of stereotype formation i.e. cognitive and affective. The cognitive mechanisms of stereotype formation primarily revolve around categorisation [7]: stereotypes arise from a process of categorisation meant to simplify and order the complex diversity of a globalised world that is becoming more and more accessible to any culture to melt into. This categorisation, of in versus out though, favours the formation

of bias by the accentuation of similarities within a certain group and the differences between that particular group as opposed to others.

Of course there is also self-categorisation, which highlights the relationship between an individual's cognitive processes and the group adopted attitudes, beliefs, or norms. Multiple comparisons are possible, and without a doubt are also needed between the self and other members from within the same group, and between the self and members who are from other groups, or just not a part of that particular one. Such representations need to be employed to describe, interpret and predict the actions of individuals. [8]

In what is called "illusory correlation" [9] perceivers tend to establish certain relationships between sets of different variables that are not actually related and that would provide no reason for association. Due to a co-occurrence of distinct stimuli, the illusion that they are causally linked or that they can at least be correlated is produced— for example fatness which is usually associated with laziness without any proof that a state of being overweight will definitely lead to idleness.

The affective mechanisms of stereotype formation contest the traditional view on stereotypes as purely cognitive structures. Since the emotional impact is inherently present in the acquisition of stereotypes, attitudes are impossible to separate from the set of beliefs attached to a stereotyped group. [10] As such there are social identity mechanisms when individuals are motivated to obtain and preserve membership to preferred groups since such membership grants them self-esteem by contrasting the stereotype from within the group to the group stereotype which is not included here, for example the rich and famous.[11]

### 3. Theory in practice

No stranger to stereotyping, in the 1980s, Kazuo Ishiguro was labelled together with Timothy Mo and Salman Rushdie as promising writers that were to be watched. [12] The three were often grouped together despite the fact that their styles, approach or ethnic background could not be more different. In reality, the only common feature they shared, that led to their association, was their non-Englishness, which at the time served as a sufficient reason to do so, as part of a harmless attempt to cope with what was an increasingly more multicultural milieu. In light of the theoretical approach of the stereotype formation mechanisms this association of completely different writers based on nothing more than their age, the analogous time of their debuts, and their non-Englishness can be categorised as a social identity mechanism of stereotyping which was mentioned above.

Having been the target of such manifestations then, it comes as no surprise that in the narrative of his first novel *A Pale View of Hills*, instances of both cognitive and affective stereotypes are employed by various mechanisms of assignment.

#### 3.1 Illusory correlation

The novel opens rather abruptly in the middle of an emotionally challenging period of time in the life of the narrator, Etsuko, who receives a visit from her younger daughter after the funeral of the eldest sibling. From the get-go it is quite clear that Keiko, the late daughter of the protagonist, has committed suicide. There is no attempt to hide this fact from the reader. In fact, the deed is mentioned in a very outraged tone by the narrator who insists upon the belief that the press, as representatives of Britons in general, has adopted a biased view-

point in relation to the demise of her daughter by only stating that she had been Japanese and that she had killed herself.

*Keiko, unlike Niki was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room. [13]*

This can easily be identified as an illusory correlation, one of the cognitive mechanisms of stereotyping a person which relies on attributing certain features to people based on nothing more than personal views. Here, it is speculated upon the generally accepted vision that the Japanese people are prone to commit suicide. The Japanese have, indeed, a completely different attitude from the Western world towards this, considering it a very elegant way of giving up life, especially when one has failed to fulfil their duty to family, or the nation, or their superior. In olden days samurai warriors would commit seppuku (ritual disembowelling) in order to uphold their honour rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. This practice is indeed very widespread in Japan today also with a high rate of 28.5 in every 100.000 people. One of the most famous places to kill oneself being the forest of Aokigahara where people frequently take their own lives as a way of owning up to ones mistakes. [14] Despite its rich cultural connection to suicide, being Japanese does not imply that one may be more prone to committing such an act from any other person regardless of their nationality.

### 3.2 Cognitive stereotyping

Another instance of employing stereotypes based on cognitive processes is by categorising people into in-groups and out-groups and based on this to expect from certain people to behave in a particular manner. A very eloquent example of this would be a short story Etsuko's first husband speaks about with one of his colleagues from work regarding how his wife had refused to vote the same as he had. For this reason he had threatened to hit her with a golf club. Present at this discussion was also Etsuko's father-in law who seemed amazed at what he had just heard. The young man, who had threatened his wife, then becomes ashamed of his deed and explains that he had not in fact hit his wife. Here, using another illusory correlation stereotype, he clarifies the situation by saying that:

*I was trying to make her see sense, of course. My wife votes for Yoshida just because he looks like her uncle. That's typical of women. They don't understand politics. They think they can choose the country's leaders the same way they choose dresses.[15]*

It is the reader's turn to become amazed in what follows because the old man explains his surprise to the story by asking:

*Is that really true?" Ogata-San asked. He had not spoken since I had come back in with the tea. The other three stopped laughing and the pale-faced man looked at Ogata-San with a surprised expression.*

*"Well, no." He became suddenly formal and gave a small bow. "I didn't actually hit her."*

*"No, no," said Ogata-San. "I meant your wife and yourself— you voted for separate parties?"*

*[16]*

It becomes transparent from this, that Ogata was not in fact shocked at the obvious threat of violence against a woman, or that a man might ever hit his own wife for such a thing as disagreeing with his political views, but rather that the woman had disobeyed her husband. It is traditionally the place of the woman to follow in her husband's footsteps wherever they may lead her. This could probably be labelled as a double use of stereotypes. On the one hand the clear distinction between the place women and men must have in society leads Ogata to assume that the woman should have undoubtedly voted the same as her husband, but on the other hand the only reasoning behind this logic is just that this had been the way in which he had been educated i.e. one of the major ways to dissimulate cognitive stereotypes – parental imposition.

### **3.3 Self-categorisation**

As a way of self-categorisation Etsuko is always comparing her present self to one of her past selves from different times. She first compares herself with the pregnant Etsuko from Japan during her pregnancy with her first daughter and does so in a rather objective way, like she was referring to a completely different person. More than this, she even stereotypes herself into the image of the simple, naïve Japanese housewife adopting a superior attitude in her discourse towards her, giving the impression that she has somehow transcended that stage and broken all ties with that woman. This transformation becomes even more evident when she describes her doppelgänger, Sachiko when only hints and similarities lead the reader to assume that she is not in fact a different person from the narrator. Sachiko is regarded with even more condescension as she probably represents the darkest moment in the life of the narrator, the stereotype attributed to her being a naïve easy Asian woman on whom the American men prey and take advantage of.

### **3.4 Affective stereotyping**

As part of the affective stereotyping, the social identity mechanism is represented in the text mainly as an opposition between English-ness and Japanese-ness. Due to the fact that this form of stereotyping aims at a positive discrimination, that is the image attributed to a specific group of people the speaker wished he/she was a part of as well. Etsuko looks down on her past selves as she remembers her time in Japan and realizes that she has reached her goal of becoming English. She is now part of that Englishness she craved so much to be integrated into. She lives a quiet life in the British countryside in a small house with a garden; she enjoys gardening and taking long walks; she is bothered by the fact that she should entertain friendly chats with her neighbours and is uncomfortable talking about her private life to them considering that they pry too much into other people's business; she takes tea in the afternoon, and consistently describes the state of the weather in her English village throughout the entire narrative.

## **4. Evolution within stereotypes**

As it has been shown above, the frequency with which stereotypes occur in the narrative is quite high and at a close look one might identify all the instances whence stereotypes arise and which were described above. However, the aim of this paper is to focus on the protagonist and the stereotypes that are used to describe her. Throughout the text there is a shift between

different stereotypes which are used to categorise the character-narrator. Due to the anachronies [17] present in the narrative the shift is not particularly transparent as a transformation process which the protagonist undergoes, but rather distinct, unrelated stereotypes from which she struggles to escape. If one considers the temporal unfolding of events however, it becomes quite clear that the three instances in which Etsuko is portrayed are distinct stages in her life, each labelled differently, but also bringing her towards her goal – that of escaping being stereotyped.

#### 4.1 Japanese housewife

Her journey begins in Japan when she was still married to her Japanese husband, during her pregnancy with her eldest daughter. The first stage of her life is represented in the mind of the reader as the stereotype associated to Japanese housewives. The stereotype is not bluntly expressed into words, but rather it is hinted at time and again in the description of various seemingly unimportant events in Etsuko's life from that period. Firstly, in what concerns her lifestyle, she represents everything any Japanese young woman would wish. She has a husband with a good job who provides for her a comfortable lifestyle. The apartment building where she was living is pictured as occupied by:

*...young married couples, the husbands having found good employment with expanding firms. [...] Each apartment was identical; the floors were tatami, the bathrooms and kitchens of a Western design. They were small and rather difficult to keep cool during the warmer months, but on the whole the feeling amongst the occupants seemed one of satisfaction.” [18]*

She is a housewife and will surely become a stay-at-home mother after the birth of their daughter. Towards her father-in law she is patient and attentive, but more than anything, extremely grateful and polite. In her relationship with her husband she is described as obedient and willing to please him, exactly what anyone would expect from a married young Japanese woman.

*'Etsuko, get some tea for the gentlemen.' My husband had said this despite the fact that I was already on my way to the kitchen. But then the tubby man started to wave his hand frantically*  
*'Madam, madam, sit down. Please. We'll be going in just a moment. Please be seated.'*  
*'It's no trouble,' I said, smiling.*  
*'No, madam, I implore you' — he had started to shout quite loudly — 'Were just rabble, like your husband says. Please don't make a fuss, please sit down.'*  
*I was about to obey him, but then I saw Jiro give me an angry look.*  
*'At least have some tea with us,' I said. 'It's no trouble at all.' [...] I bowed and made my way into the kitchen unnoticed. I prepared the tea and put onto a plate some cakes I had been making earlier that day. I could hear laughter coming from the living room, my husband's voice amongst them. [19]*

However, despite all her struggle to be an exemplary wife, there was something within Etsuko that was preparing her for her future. Even in this first stage of her development, when she had virtually everything that a young Japanese woman in her position would have wanted, she had a feeling that she needed to be someone else. Through the use of prolepses [20] the text warns the reader of Etsuko's transient state and of her future transformation:

*"And yet I remember an unmistakable air of transience there, as if we were all of us waiting for the day we could move to something better." [21]*

#### **4.2 The sweet china-doll or geisha-girl**

The next step in the evolution of the stereotypes used to label the main character is represented by an illusory correlation. Upon arriving in Japan, American soldiers formed a distorted opinion of the Japanese women attributing to them the term of china-doll which was meant to describe the appearance of the Japanese women. A possible explanation for this label might be that among the first social contacts that Americans had with the female population of Japan they were mostly comprised of meetings with courtesans from the pleasure districts who traditionally paint their faces white – ergo the resemblance to china. Also Japanese women were considered obedient creatures with no mind of their own, just like a doll. Furthermore, traits particular to the courtesans were transmitted to the rest of the female population as well, and they were seen as rather easy women with a relatively low self-esteem and liberal attitude.

*Conquering Asia meant conquering its women. This occurred in two ways: the widespread sexual violence displayed towards women, which was typically involved in colonialism, and the validation of the "superior traits" assumed of Asian women through literature and art. Colonialism relegated Asian women to property which colonizers desired. This created the image of desire for the sexual conquest and exotification of these women which lingers in the perceptions of Asian women today. Indeed, the Asian fetish we know today can be traced back to this desirability of these women as prizes of conquest. The rest exists in the early works of media which portrayed Asian women. Travel journals, plays, and novels praised the desirable qualities that their various writers, who were usually white men, perceived to exist in Asian women. Amongst these traits, the most prevalent were those which mentioned submissiveness and sexual abilities, especially in comparison to Western women. These stereotypes pressed on over the years and continue to exist today. [22]*

Of course there is no connection between Japanese women and low morals, but in this manner the choices Etsuko's doppelganger, Sachiko, makes create this stereotype of the china-doll in the mind of the reader. She is described as quite negligent towards her daughter, but very attentive when it comes to her American lover, Frank. She disappears with no legitimate reason and leaves her daughter unattended for hours, but she does everything in her power to help and satisfy Frank. Furthermore, she states that she had left the comfort of a respectable home, the house of her late husband's uncle, in order to make a better life for her daughter, but the reader understands that her daughter's well-being was far from her mind at the time. Even with all of Sachiko's sacrifices she is betrayed time and again by the untrustworthy American, but still she cannot part with the hope that this man will bring her the change she needs.

*The last time, in Tokyo it was much the same, he disappeared and spent all our money, drank it all in three days. A lot of it was my money too. Do you know, Etsuko, I actually worked as a maid in a hotel? Yes, as a maid. But I didn't complain, and we almost had enough, a few more weeks and we could have got a ship to America. But then he drank it all. All those weeks I spent scrubbing floors on my knees and he drank it all up in three days. And now there he is again in a bar with his worthless saloon girl. [23]*

This description of the American man supports the formation of the stereotype of the geisha-girl, or china-doll in the mind of the reader about Sachiko, but at the same time enables a more heartfelt understanding of the difficulties Etsuko must have faced as a single young mother during a time of turmoil and renovation in post-war Japan.

#### 4.4 The British widow housewife

The final stage of Etsuko's development out of the Asian stereotypes includes being labelled with the image of a British housewife. The unexceptional backdrop of her present quiet life in the British countryside in her comfortable house does not necessarily place Japanese attributes on her face. She no longer remembers Japan, other than a distant land where she once used to live. She is completely different from Etsuko, the submissive pregnant wife of a Japanese company worker, and she definitely is in opposition to Sachiko, the naïve geisha-girl who accepted being treated in a deplorable way only at the hope of immigration; she is Mrs. Sheringham. In fact she is so distant from this particular representation of her past self that she insists she is a completely different person whom she only met for a short period of time during a summer.

The allusions made to Etsuko's Englishness are images so typical of the British that there could be no doubt in anyone's mind that they might represent any other stereotype. The most subtle of these hints to her Englishness might be the constant description of the weather throughout the entire text, but especially when the narration returns to the present, in England. Be it heavy drizzle, rain, mist, or the sky seeming to become clearer, the weather is visibly an important part of Etsuko's life worth mentioning on a continuous basis.

Along with drinking tea and the pleasure she takes from going for long walks, as well as her uneasiness in talking to neighbours whom she considers insistent and prying, her British image is also constructed by her constant tending to her plants from the garden:

*I had been pruning the pot plants along the window ledge for some time when I realized how quiet Niki had become. [...] I turned back to the window, trying to follow her gaze; despite the mist on the pane, the garden was still clearly discernible. Niki, it seemed, was gazing over to a spot near the hedge, where the rain and wind had put into disarray the canes which supported the young tomato plants.*

*"I think the tomatoes are mined for this year," I said. "I've really rather neglected them. [24]"*

This could probably not be further away from the other two stages of her life described in the text. But this is indeed the only moment during which the reader senses that she feels truly contented with. It is also at this stage that she becomes an emitter of stereotypes. She not only stereotypes her previous selves as if they were two completely different persons, but in an attempt to protect her suicidal daughter's dignity she stereotypes the British press. They are described as vultures feeding on any kind of information they could possibly profit from in their articles only to create the illusion of scandal. This transpires from her outrage when she mentions that the press only stated that Keiko was Japanese and that she had hung herself, as if no other explanations were necessary to elucidate the reasoning behind her act other than the fact that she was Japanese.

She even stereotypes one of her neighbours as the prying neighbour next door by referring to her with a condescending attitude when describing her lack of skill and talent as a piano

player and teacher, and her limited views of music. But probably the most elucidating evidence of her biased views of her neighbour is the moment when she describes her resilience to answer any questions regarding her private life, especially in what Keiko was concerned.

*My lack of enthusiasm seemed finally to penetrate, and she dropped the subject with an awkward laugh. Such persistence on her part has characterized our encounters over the years since Keiko's leaving home. Neither my evident reluctance to discuss Keiko nor the fact that until that afternoon I had been unable to tell her so much as my daughter's whereabouts had succeeded in making any lasting impression upon her. In all probability, Mrs. Waters will continue to ask cheerfully after my daughter whenever we happen to meet." [25]*

#### **4.5 The alien other**

Despite her state of relaxation in her acquired status of a British housewife she never really manages to escape her Japanese-ness. Although very far away in time and space from her former Japanese selves, these are highly accessible to her from her sitting room just by looking out the window. Indeed she has seized to refer to herself as Japanese, but her understanding attitude towards her eldest daughter whom she insists was "pure Japanese" denotes that although she claims she no longer has connections with that part of her life, she still embraces her otherness. This is probably most apparent in her attitude towards Mr. Sheringham. The reader gets the distinct impression that Mr. Sheringham never understood Keiko precisely because she was Japanese despite the fact that it is presumed that he was more than familiar to the Japanese culture and that he insisted Niki, the youngest daughter, embraced her cultural heritage.

*"For, in truth, despite all the impressive articles he wrote about Japan, my husband never understood the ways of our culture, even less a man like Jiro." [26]*

Time and again the narrator claims that her British husband could not possibly understand any aspect that is related to Japanese-ness, be it Keiko, her former husband Jiro, or even her while she was still living in Japan. She distances herself from the Japanese inheritance, but at the same time she always assimilates herself into the category of the Japanese other by using pronouns in the first person plural, as it was shown above.

#### **5. Closing remarks**

The fact that stereotypes are used in the text of this novel should not come as a surprise to anyone. Be it the mocking of the endless social etiquette required by polite behaviour of the Japanese or the subtle use of irony when constantly referring to weather conditions as part of the protagonist's status as a Briton, what reaches the reader is the perfect description of a situation in which one may be inclined to use stereotypes. The genius behind this lies in the fact that at no given moment is any stereotype overtly mentioned in the text, but rather the reader is put in the position of having created a projection in their mind and leads them towards a biased view. It is the reader who has to live with the guilt of being biased and prejudiced. All the narrator does is to describe some aspects of her life, past and present, but it depends on each and every reader whether they choose to adopt the stereotype

or read through in an objective manner without extracting meaning from the appearances described to him/her.

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