

MIXED ALLEGIANCES IN THE WORK OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro has been characterized as a great spokesman for the unprivileged homeless and this happens mainly due to his particular mixed allegiances, to his being poised between cultures and nations, between two antithetical realms. The “in-betweenness” of Ishiguro’s work is most evident in The Remains of the Day, a novel which may be envisaged as a Japanese version of England or an English vision of Japan, or simply a vision of our condition, of our hybrid contemporary world. The present paper focuses on Ishiguro’s novel, a paradoxical encounter between allegiance and displacement in the “in-between spaces” through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. At the crossroads between English dignity and Japanese restraint, the author’s divided loyalties meet in the creation of a rewarding novel, emblematic for the postmodernist outlook on life and art.

Keywords: allegiance, displacement, colonizer, colonized, in-betweenness.

Kazuo Ishiguro has been characterized as a great spokesman for the unprivileged homeless and this happens mainly due to his mixed allegiances, to his being poised between cultures and nations. Born in Japan, but living in England, he has a particular status, that of permanently oscillating between two antithetical realms. Due to his in-betweenness, Ishiguro constantly resents not having been able to properly leave Japan, not having had the opportunity to make his farewell. As he himself confesses: “ I never said goodbye to Japan. For a long time, I simply assumed that I would return...It was just time, life, the world, that came along and rearranged things when I wasn’t looking. The next time I looked, Japan was gone.”(Mackenzie, 2000:10)

It seems that this double allegiance was to label forever the author’s life, since the very house he inhabits in England is the exact mirror image of that of his parents: “ What is odd is that the houses are exactly the same furnished, even the view out of the window is the same, and yet fundamentally different; they are a mirror image of each other. Which is very confusing when I visit my parents. Because, in my head, in the house I remember from my childhood, everything is the other way around.”(Mackenzie, 2000: 13)

It is a neat image, the two houses joined and yet facing away from each other, a kind of dual inheritance that almost replicates Ishiguro’s own experience: East and West, assimilated and displaced, reality and imagination, perception and projection. It is an image that explores the double positioning, the hybridic condition of the writer. Ishiguro equally benefits and suffers from this double perspective best illustrated in Bhabha’s words: “ What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began, is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality.”(Bhabha, 1994: 1)

The locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as other in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The problem of inside/outside always entails a process of hybridization, incorporating new people in relation

Section: LITERATURE

to the political and cultural entities. What emerges is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. In the introduction to his work, Edward Said argues: “ I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience to different extents.”(Said, 1994: XXII)

Bearing in mind the presence of history as a shaping factor, one could not help noticing that, at the beginning of the 20th century, in Europe there was scarcely a corner of life untouched by the facts of the Empire: the economies were hungry for overseas markets, raw materials, cheap labour force and hugely profitable land, and the foreign policy establishments were committed to the maintenance of vast tracts of distant territories and large numbers of subjugated peoples. Commenting upon the relation between imperialism and colonialism, Said concludes: “ Imperialism means the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; colonialism, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory; empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process of establishing or maintaining an empire.”(Said, 1994: 9)

Colonialism is not, therefore, best understood as a political or economic relationship that is legitimized through ideologies of racism or progress. Colonialism has always been a cultural process; its discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors and narratives; even what would seem its purest moments of profit and violence have been mediated and inflamed by structures of meaning. Colonial cultures are not simply ideologies that mask, mystify or rationalize forms of oppression that are external to them; they are also expressive and constitutive of colonial relationships in themselves. These traces of the past and present pave the way towards a study of the histories created by the empire, not just the story of the white man and the white woman, but also those of the non-whites, whose lands and very being were at issue, even as their claims were denied or ignored.

Such a discussion of postcolonial issues would perfectly fit a writer such as Salman Rushdie, but it paradoxically functions in Ishiguro’s case too. Although it did have colonizing ambitions, Japan was never a colony. However, Ishiguro constantly believes himself to be stuck at the margins, thereby placing himself within the postcolonial emphasis on the marginal, the liminal, the excluded. Although frequently associated with the Anglo Indian Rushdie and the Hong Kong born Timothy Mo as mapping the postcolonial world by being part of more than one culture, Ishiguro is rightly suspicious of this association. Instead, he considers that being placed between cultures and identities makes him a representative of the age of the refugee, characterized by great writers of the modern era, such as Kafka or Beckett.

The in-betweenness of Ishiguro’s work is most evident in *The Remains of the Day*, a novel often seen as a stroke of the decolonizing pen for attacking the imperial pretensions of a fading British Empire. Delighted in the ambivalence of its cultural critique, one wonders how a Japanese-born writer living in England could write a novel about the butler of a great English house. One wonders whether it results in a Japanese vision of England or an English version of Japan, whether it is both or neither, or simply a vision of our condition, our world. It might be relevant to embrace the opinion according to which : “ *The Remains of the Day* epitomizes two related sides of Ishiguro as a novelist, the modest chronicler of psychological confinement, intrigued by the sympathetic portrayal of perseverance and duty along with the

Section: LITERATURE

emotional underdevelopment and supplication these values perpetuate; and the inconspicuous stylist who confines himself to the first person mode, only to alert us to the imaginative possibilities of notating human perception at work.”(Matthews, 2009:60) Another valid interpretation would be that one should consider the possibility of reading the book as depicting England as a mirror image of Japan. Both countries share the fate of insularity and are keen on preserving their longstanding traditions when faced with the menacing contemporary globalization.

One of Ishiguro’s motivations for writing *The Remains of the Day* was to produce a book which was not only about Englishness but also about a paradoxical encounter between allegiance and displacement. He deliberately chooses a butler, the epitome of Englishness, who is more English than the English. By masterly counterpointing the English stiff upper lip with the Japanese propensity towards dignity and restraint, Ishiguro could be labeled as the Japanese writer more English than the English. The novel proves to be the questioning of the entire nature of Englishness and its values, but this questioning occurs within a frame of similarity with the Japanese one, which entitles the reader to place Ishiguro under the sign of divided loyalties and mixed allegiances. Both the English and the Japanese are thought to be undemonstrative in the expression of their emotions, their respective cultures being obsessed with politeness and etiquette. But this is only the surface structure of the novel, which goes far beyond these similarities.

Like most of Ishiguro’s characters, Stevens, the butler, is no longer at home with himself as he struggles to regain the dignity he has lost after being displaced from his natural surroundings (min this case the mythical English countryside.) In the novel nothing much happens apart from Stevens’ trip, a conference and his father’s death, but underneath the surface there lies an understated turbulence as immense as it is slow. As Lidia Vianu remarked : “ The whole novel is built upon the rock of a huge understatement. Stevens seems arrested in the hieratic posture of Japanese art. Movement of any kind is banned from the surface, although we ultimately become very much aware that a stream of incandescent lava flows passionately underground, like a river of the sun, which rages till it is exhausted into a mere sunset- and then we can at last catch a glimpse of what it might have been.”(Vianu, 1999:236)

Indeed, the might have been seems to best characterize the mood of this novel situated in between two worlds and two different ways of apprehending the truth. The real story, therefore, is that of a man destroyed by the ideas and the ideals on which he has built his life. Flawless service and unblinking devotion have been Stevens’ guiding principles throughout a long professional career rounded off by dignity, a concept related to greatness, which in its turns applies to Englishness. Thus the concept of greatness epitomizes not only England’s landscape but also the English people, its life, political power and culture. Through the beauty of England’s natural landscape there are made hints to the superiority of the English people and its colonies, an irony towards England always having considered itself the superior power in the world. As the French advocate of colonialism, Jules Harmand declared: “ It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic and military superiority, but our mora superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality and it underlines our right to direct the rest of humanity.” (cited in Said, 1994:17)

This idea can be applied to Stevens' way of regarding his profession: in his opinion, true butlers exist only in England, because they are the only ones in the world capable of restraint, of controlling themselves in highly emotional moments and thus, being able to maintain professional quality. Stevens states that : “ We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when we think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be English.”(Ishiguro, 1990:43). Following his father's example, Stevens is actually grappling with ways to justify his life ,for once you take his professionalism, his dignity out of the picture, not much is left. In describing his position, he implicitly contradicts the statement that no man is a hero to his valet; on the contrary, he asserts: A great butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman and, through the latter, to serving humanity.”(Ishiguro, 1990: 117) It is only through his master that Stevens manages to establish his own worth.

Engulfed by the system of hierarchy, Stevens believed that his sole responsibility was to inhabit the role of a butler, whose service he considered proper and, above all, dignified. The concept of dignity ruled his life to such an extent that Stevens repressed all his emotions and he considered any display of feeling a sign of political disempowerment and weakness. Paradoxically, the system of hierarchy itself, while giving him a sense of worth, also dehumanizes him. He has paid a huge price to hegemony; he has denied his family, his sexuality, his self.

In *The Remains of the Day* Stevens the butler is portrayed as having a sense of self that is completely defined by his ideal of service, that is, his entire identity is bound up with serving his master. Stevens has lived a repressed and stilted life in pursuit of an illusory goal and is left to reconcile himself to the truth that the man he served was hardly as honourable as he believed. As memories reverberate in Stevens' solitude, he is forced to look back on the implications of his obedience, to face the truth about his employer and to realize that, along with perfection, he has sold his soul.

Ishiguro shows us the political implications and human sacrifice in what, at first sight, seems to be a harmless account of a butler's life. The lack of consistence of Stevens' theories about dignity, loyalty and servitude reveal the emptiness of hierarchy and, as a consequence, the emptiness of his life. Accordingly, only when Stevens starts to deconstruct and question the ideals which previously formed the basis of his life, does the symbol of the Victorian era collapse. The awakening to the meaning of his life allows Stevens to receive some retribution for his suffering, although the traces of colonialism and imperialism cannot be fully erased for him.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said gives one acute indication of how crucially the tensions, inequalities and injustice of the metropolitan society were refracted and elaborated in the imperial culture: “The basis of imperial authority was the mental attitude of the colonist. His acceptance of subordination made the empire durable. The durability of the empire was sustained on both sides, that of the rulers and that of the distant ruled, and, in turn, each had a set of interpretations of their common history with his own perspective, historical sense, emotions and traditions.”(Said, 1994: 11)

Stevens' relation to his lord mimics that of a colonizing power to its colonized subjects and his sense of duty turns him into an ideal colonized subject. In fact, *The remains of the Day* represents both a homage to traditional British forms and a dramatic critique of them. It implies that the British Empire was rooted in its subjects' minds, manners and morals and argues, tacitly, that its self-destructive flaws were embodied in the defensive snobbery, willful blindness and role-playing of its domestic servants. Stevens becomes emptied of

Section: LITERATURE

history, he denies himself and he perfectly embodies the code of service and servitude between the colonizer and the colonized. Stevens' private tragedy precipitates the cruel hoax by which the master colonizer ensures that the servant exists as a function of the colonizer's needs alone.

At the end of the novel, Stevens has finally come to realize that he has spent his entire life admiring a man who made regrettable political mistakes and was actually a shameful person. Stevens asserts that he has given what he had to give, he gave it all to lord Darlington. When he finds himself in Weymouth, he is in a state of what may be called a post-colonial persona. His life and status can be compared to the state in which a previous colony finds itself.

Like many other male protagonists in postcolonial literature, Stevens has become a prisoner of the past, unable to apply the lessons of history to the modern world. He spends his life in pursuit of greatness, which he defines as "dignity in keeping with his position." (Ishiguro, 1990:33) At the crossroads between English dignity and Japanese one, Stevens finally realizes that, in pursuing greatness, he has closed himself off from all human worth, falling an easy prey to the shivering sands of history. Nevertheless, the author's mixed allegiances meet in the creation of a rewarding novel, emblematic for the postmodernist outlook on life and art.

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