

## **THE NOSTALGIA OF FICTIONAL RETURNS IN THE WORK OF KAZUO ISHIGURO**

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*Abstract: Ishiguro's work could be considered illustrative of what was called, in the related area of postcolonial writing, "the literature of fictional returns". The exilic dimension underwrites a narrative sensibility where spatial dislocation is transposed to the temporal realm, so that all his protagonists are situationally exiled or out of sync with the worlds they find themselves in. This overwhelming sensation of "being out of place" justifies the protagonists' concern with events from the past, the abundance of flash-back sequences in Ishiguro's work, the recurrent pronouncements in the novels about the uncertainty and malleability of memory, and also the melancholy tone suffusing them.*

*His novels use memory as a mediator between the psychological and the political, to express the defamiliarising experience undertaken by its main hero. If in his first novels individual displacement can be associated with a type of retrospective utopia that one's childhood provides, in his latest novels he also seeks "to give nostalgia a better name". The only difference is that, this time, nostalgia is aligned with the possibilities of the science fiction genre and displacement acquires really terrifying accenStarting from the common assumption according to which Ishiguro is seen as a spokesman of the literature of displacement and de-territorialization, the present paper focuses on samples of that type of human exile materialized in the person of the child bereaved of childhood, in the person at odds with a world breeding conflict, aggression and alienation. The nostalgic mood of his previous novels is still preserved, even if interspersed with dark, dystopian images that transform the author into a scandalous, catastrophic commentator of the present. In his latest novels, Ishiguro proves to depart from the label ofspokesperson of a spatial and temporal dislocation into an exponent of contemporary feelings of displacement and alienation transcending cultural and national borders. From a cosmopolitan writer, he definitely evolves into being the expression of the contemporary human condition, displaced as it may be, but still apt for redemption through art, communication and memory.*

**Keywords: exile, nostalgia, postcolonialism, displacement, dislocation**

Starting from the common assumption according to which Ishiguro is seen as a spokesman of the literature of displacement and de-territorialization, the present paper focuses on samples of that type of human exile materialized in the person of the child bereaved of childhood, in the person at odds with a world breeding conflict, aggression and alienation. The nostalgic mood of his previous novels is still preserved, even if interspersed with dark, dystopian images that transform the author into a scandalous, catastrophic commentator of the present. In his latest novels, Ishiguro proves to depart from the label of spokesperson of a spatial and temporal dislocation into an exponent of contemporary feelings of displacement and alienation transcending cultural and national borders. From a cosmopolitan writer, he definitely evolves into being the expression of the contemporary human condition, displaced as it may be, but still apt for redemption through art, communication and memory.

Ishiguro's early work, particularly his first two novels set wholly in Japan, could be considered illustrative of what was called, in the related area of postcolonial writing, "the literature of fictional returns". The exilic dimension underwrites a narrative sensibility where spatial dislocation is transposed to the temporal realm, so that all his protagonists are situationally exiled or out of sync with the worlds they find themselves in. This overwhelming sensation of "being out of place" justifies the protagonists' concern with events from the past,

the abundance of flash-back sequences in Ishiguro's work, the recurrent pronouncements in the novels about the uncertainty and malleability of memory, and also the melancholy tone suffusing them.

Ishiguro's fiction seems thus attuned to some of the contemporary catchwords, namely globalization, transnationalism and even postnationalism. In the contemporary views, the enhanced visibility of works by cosmopolitan authors in metropolitan social space has been accompanied by increased attention to the implications of migrant encounters and experiences. More recently, we are hearing claims for the epistemic centrality of the diasporic, diaspora being proposed as "universal ontological condition" (Rainbow, 1986: 234). In much the vein, Homi Bhabha argues that "the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision". (Bhabha, 1994: 145) For him, all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a contradictory and ambiguous place called the third space of enunciation. It is this "in-betweenness" that lies at the core of Ishiguro's work, utterly supported by the author's own confessions: "That is how I branded myself from the start: as somebody who didn't know Japan deeply, writing in English whole books with only Japanese characters in. Trying to be part of the English literary scene like that." (Richards, 2009: 3). Whereas this whole discussion of England's necessity to go over its centrality holds true in the case of Ishiguro's early fiction, his latest novels, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* tell proof of another type of exile, that of the orphan bereaved of identity or that of a deformed society where cloning becomes the norm. These novels appear illustrative of the conviction supported by Andrew Smith in a recent essay: "We live in a world without set centers, definite horizons, or clear limits on things; migrancy becomes the name for the condition of the human being as such, a name for how we exist and understand ourselves in the twenty-first century". (Smith, 2009: 241)

The former of the two novels marks a significant transition from Ishiguro's early type of displacement and exile to his more recent apprehension of the phenomenon *When We Were Orphans* tells the story of a celebrated detective, Christopher Banks, and of his efforts to unravel the mystery of his parents' disappearance in old Shanghai. It begins in London, in the 1930s but soon circles back to Banks' expatriate childhood in Shanghai's International Settlement in the early years of the century. Here the narrative takes an increasingly surrealistic turn, involving the glitter of Shanghai clubs, the slums of the Chinese quarter and the gloomy opium trade, seemingly the hidden source of his family's prosperity. The book has witnessed many postmodernist readings, from a rewriting of *Great Expectations* to an indictment of the opium trade and of the expatriate and local traders involved in it. But besides all these and maybe responsive to the core message of the book lies the reading involving alienation, cultural and personal displacement and orphanage. The overall metaphor of the book is expressed by Banks who comforts himself with the thought that, like Sarah, their fate was "always to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents." (Ishiguro, 2000: 335)

In the novel, the author calls attention to the multifarious interpenetration of the metropole and the periphery, which makes it a kind of equivalent in anglophone fiction, to Forster's *A Passage to India*. Both novels expose the same discrepancy between imperial rhetoric and reality regarding British colonial presence in China and in India, respectively. In the denouement, for instance, Philip tells Banks that many European companies, including his father's, were making vast profits importing Indian opium into China and turning millions of Chinese into helpless addicts. Elsewhere, the social cost of the addiction epidemic is underscored by allusions to untold misery and degradation brought to a whole nation, to entire villages found enslaved to the pipe and to enervated men found lounging in the doorways of

opium dens. Banks adds to this critical dimension soon after his return to Shanghai when he expresses revulsion at a decadent expatriate community clutching cocktails at parties even as Japanese bombs rain down on the slum quarters of the city.

However, as Ishiguro explains it, the title “refers to that moment in our lives when we come out of the sheltered bubble of childhood and discover that the world is not the cosy place that we had previously been taught to believe...Even when we become adults, something of this disappointment still remains...” (Ishiguro, 2000: 336) Banks represents, as such, a naive and innocent part of us that wants, accordingly, “to go back and fix things.” The assertion in the title that we are all orphans is therefore linked to that socio-political imperative “to fix things”, as Ishiguro adds:

“There is nothing wrong with nostalgia. It is a much maligned emotion. The English don’t like it, under-rate it because it harks back to empire days and to guilt about the empire. But nostalgia is the emotional equivalent of idealism. You use memory to go back to a place better than the one you find yourself in. I am trying to give nostalgia a better name.” (Vorda, 1999: 154)

Indeed, the novel uses memory as a mediator between the psychological and the political, to express the defamiliarising experience undertaken by its main hero. If in this novel individual displacement can be associated with a type of retrospective utopia that one’s childhood provides, in his latest novel he also seeks “to give nostalgia a better name”. The only difference is that, this time, nostalgia is aligned with the possibilities of the science fiction genre and displacement acquires really terrifying accents.

The novel raises an issue of great topical interest, namely whether we should allow scientists and parents to redesign future generations of human beings. The issue is associated with the threatening possibility that our technical abilities may outstrip our ethical ones, and advances in medical science menace the Kantian maxim that “individuals should not be a means to the end of others.” In this regard, the mention in the novel to the work of a scientist named James Morningdale reinforces the idea that shifts in socio-ethical norms can have damaging or even ruinous consequences. Quite significant is the song that gives its title to the novel, song that Kathy imagined engendered Madame’s crying since she shared her feelings at hearing it. For her the song evokes the image of a woman hugging closely an infant child and crooning the refrain “Never Let Me Go”. But Madame explains her crying for totally different reasons: “When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cure for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world.” (Ishiguro, 2005: 248) At this point, it would seem that the novel is explicit in its allusion to the Huxley intertext, its title and climatic revelation working together hand in hand to highlight the dangers of scientism.

Apart from the open indictment of the insidious scientism of modern civilization, the novel uses the cloning topos to press wider concerns, such as the probing questions about our faithfulness to who we really are inside. When the Hailsham students go on their trip to meet their “models” their poignant and touching curiosity helps to raise such existential purpose and authenticity questions. In Kathy’s words, they believe that if they find the person from whom they were copied, they would get some insight into “who they really are deep down.” They believe that, through such an encounter, they will see “something of what life held in store.” Like the incidents of adopted children who wish to contact their birth parents, this episode comes across as a poignant search for meaning and legitimacy. Their need for direction and purpose had been underscored earlier by their propensity to copy the mannerisms of the actors they see on television, and thus this episode highlights all the more existential concerns that are often denied or repressed.

One of the puzzles of the novel is that its climatic revelations come too soon. The truth that the students were created so that they can donate their vital organs is revealed less than one-third through the novel, presumably depriving its denouement of affective impact. However, such a configuration becomes understandable, since the clones' failure to perceive and confront their system mirrors our own. This is where we can begin to appreciate the contemporaneous relevance of the Orwellian vocabulary that surrounds the clones, the way their society dissembles the real meaning of "carers", "donors", guardians, "completion" and even "students." Through such use of language, Ishiguro demonstrates how hegemony is maintained and consent managed, all of which dovetails with the temporal configuration of the novel. What should be by generic convention a futurist tale is actually tagged as a story set in the recent past, in a laconic "England, late 1990s" and this heightens all the more the novel's present parabolic potential.

The difference between the sales and the students' "token exchanges" offers an alternative construction of value to the dehumanizing core of the book. In one of the key statements of the novel, Kathy reflects on the meaningful aspect of their relations: "I can see now how the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all. They were all part of what made Hailsham so special...the way we were encouraged to value each other's work." (Ishiguro, 2005: 15) Consequently, the clones' dreams of personhood are projected onto their art and it is art which, together with the reciprocity built into their relations can offer possible salvation from the feelings of displacement they experience.

In this novel the issue of center versus periphery is approached from a different perspective, as Kathy and her friends are at the margin of society and ostracized from civilization, yet utterly audible through the voices of the donors and clones that describe the conditions they live in. The novel, as a postmodernist artifact, proves significant when addressing the questions of being and morality from a reader-response perspective. Ishiguro creates and maintains a tension between the clones' resignation to the established course of their lives- becoming carers and donors till they die- and their violent desire to live and love. Without any strict control over the lives of the clones it becomes increasingly puzzling that they do not rebel against the system. They never once think about the possibility of running away; in the universe of Ishiguro's novels total liberation is not just impossible, it just never functions as much as an idea of it. In this sheltered world, suspended between faux realism and surrealism, most people want to preserve an illusion of freedom by opposing the idea of being determined by the human genome and, by extension, cloning.

Such a reading allows the reader to appreciate the full significance of the solidarity motif that runs like Ariadne's thread through Kathy's narrative. It explains the plangency of her comment when she admits that, even though Hailsham no longer exists, she still keeps a lookout for it as she drives around the country. "At some level" she watches out for people she knew from there, or for some physical features-"a sports pavilion seen in the distance", or "a row of poplars...next to a big woolly oak," - that will transport her back to the place. (Ishiguro, 2005: 262) And actually, right at the end, she does catch a glimpse of a former schoolmate while driving. The need to recall, register, and affirm all expressions of solidarity explains the strength of Kathy's conviction that she was right to use her carer privileges to choose Ruth and Tommy as patients, because it allowed her to get close again to them. It explains her dismay when Ruth decides at the cottages to discontinue the practice of keeping a "collection" (Ishiguro, 2005: 119). It also explains why she insists, as mentioned earlier, that she forgives Ruth for keeping her and Tommy apart, and also why she did not do more initially to stop Ruth from taking him.

Such a reading also epitomizes the cohesion expressed right at the end when Kathy recalls a conversation she had with Tommy about Ruth. Kathy had asked Tommy whether he was glad that Ruth “completed” before finding out the truth about his gallery theory. Given his intimate knowledge of Ruth and her need to “believe in things”, Tommy replies that it was probably best that she did not find out. Recalling the conversation later, Kathy insists that, although she knows Ruth would have been hurt by the disclosure, she would have wanted her to “know the whole score” about Hailsham. She felt sad at the idea of Ruth “finishing up different” from Tommy and herself. Tommy mirrors Kathy’s concern about Ruth “knowing the whole score” about Hailsham. The repetition of the word “score” helps to enhance the similarity, the importance of mutual knowledge and experience. The outside world rejects the notion that the main characters are fully human, but Tommy’s use of the word implicitly rejects that assessment and validates their status as individuals. Kathy’s decision to stop being a carer and to start on her slate of donations can be described as a kindred emotion, and thus the novel’s closure helps to emphasize the solidarity motif as well.

As opposed to Kathy, the character of Ruth has a tendency to let go of her past. Ruth was Kathy’s best friend and Tommy’s girlfriend at Hailsham, but on a very basic level she is totally different from them. At the end, Ruth appears as a weak character compared to Kathy and Tommy, both mentally and physically weak. This frailty may be regarded as the result of her letting go of her past life. In a sense, Ruth is the character in *Never Let Me Go* that most closely resembles Christopher Banks, in that she maintains a faulty self-identity, which is shattered only relatively late in her life. Kathy performs the transition from a regular teenager to a thoughtful adult and conscientious carer. The two latter identities exist side by side in her perception of herself. She seems to fade in the transition from innocence to experience, as she is losing the prominent identity that she possesses as a teenager at Hailsham. She is slowly letting go of her will to define herself, as she realizes that her life does not belong to her. Kathy’s incapacity to grasp her beginnings is intensified by subjecting her to ever more radical forms of displacement.

Starting from the common assumption according to which Ishiguro is seen as a spokesman of the literature of displacement and de-territorialization, this novel offers a sample of that type of human exile materialized in the person of the child bereaved of childhood, in the person at odds with a world breeding conflict, aggression and alienation. The nostalgic mood of his previous novels is still preserved, even if interspersed with dark, dystopian images that transform the author into a scandalous, catastrophic commentator of the present. This is the deformed ethos of a society that institutes cloning for the sole purpose of harvesting organs, while narrating the emotions and desires of the parentless victims. The complexity of Ishiguro’s literature of exile appears therefore to shift from migrants and expatriates to a decentered and borderless post-imperial global order.

If the novel *When We Were Orphans* opens with a mystery surrounding the notion of “connectedness” and unfolds elaborating upon its significance, *Never Let Me Go* tackles the related notion of solidarity as a response to alienation and displacement. Dickensian allusions can be evinced here, too. If we allow that, clad in her disintegrating marriage gown and consumed by hatred, Miss Havisham symbolizes a distorted notion of community, then Hailsham offers an alternative vision, one whose importance is implicitly underscored by Madame when she states that she had wanted the place to be “a shining beacon, an example of how we might move to a more humane and better way of doing things.”(Ishiguro, 2005: 236)

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