



ACADEMIA DE STUDII ECONOMICE BUCUREȘTI
Sesiunea Internațională de Comunicări Științifice
*Youth on the move. Teaching languages for
international study and career-building*

București, 13-14 mai 2011

***QUESTIONING NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S
NOVELS***

Diana IONCICĂ

The Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest

Abstract

*The paper attempts to analyse Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* in its relation to the problematic issue of national identity. The first question that presents itself is which national identity is actually discussed in the novel. The easiest answer to this question would point to a reading of the novel as an extended investigation of Englishness and its characteristics. After working all his life to become the typical English butler, the embodiment of the culture of the 'stiff upper lip', has Stevens (the main character) achieved his goal? Or is he, in the end, misplaced, dis-orient-ed, strange in familiar surroundings?*

Key-words: national identity, cultural hybridization, commonwealth literature, hybrid identity, *the other*, policultural writers

Introduction: English or Japanese?

The first clue pointing to the reading of the novel as an extended investigation of Englishness is the choice Ishiguro makes when beginning to tell the story of a butler – 'that most English of stock characters' (Lewis 74). As the story unfolds, however, we become increasingly suspicious of the authenticity of the butler in question. The impeccable Stevens is 'more English than English' – as Ishiguro joked in an interview (Vorda and Herzinger 20) and as critics later noticed:

For Ishiguro's butler is so English that he could be Japanese, in his finely calibrated sense of rank, his attention to minutiae, his perfectionism and his eagerness to please; his pride is his subservience, and his home is only in the past. (Iyer 586)

The association with Japanese national identity, and the subsequent reading of the book as an examination of Japaneseness, are discussed in some detail by Steven Connor, who asserts that:

In fact, most of the reviewers and commentators of the novel have assumed that the admittedly striking continuity of theme between this novel and Ishiguro's two earlier 'Japanese' novels, both of which deal, in the same meticulous, elegiac way, with the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of self-knowledge, means that all three must be concerned with fundamentally the same question of Japanese identity. (Connor 107)

There are numerous examples of critics who have taken this book to be about a 'Japanese in disguise'. For instance, Gabriele Annan identifies the message of *The Remains of the Day* as being the following: 'Be less Japanese, less bent on dignity, less false to yourself and others, less restrained and controlled'. (Annan 4)

Claude Habib believes that, in *The Remains of the Day*:

Ishiguro has managed to translate into purely British terms the crucial problem of Japanese identity: what happens to the values of perfectionism when confronted with the values of democracy? (Habib 117-118)

Pico Iyer's review of the novel is also sure of the novel's real intentions:

The Remains of the Day may seem just a small, private English novel done to – Japanese – perfection; a vale from a valet. To anyone familiar with Japan, however, the author's real intention slips out as surely as a business card from a Savile Row suit. (Iyer 586)

Steven Connor sees these readings as 'a form of cultural repatriation' (Connor 107), in the sense that Ishiguro is assumed to be writing about the Japanese as a consequence of his

own origin. It is a false assumption, based – at heart – upon a form of prejudice held about ‘commonwealth literature’: as Salman Rushdie has remarked, it is a condition of its entry into critical acknowledgement in the metropolitan centres of literary taste that it stick to its ‘own’ subjects, rendering for the benefit of English readerships ‘authentic’ experiences of other locations and cultures. (*Rushdie* 61-70)

In other words, commonwealth literature is seen as being limited to a circus performance meant to amuse intended English readers, which relies solely on the interest arising from a taste for the exotic attributed to the target ‘audience’.

Hybrid identities

Besides the obvious counter-argument that can be brought to the above-mentioned assumption – that this is a limited view that vastly underestimates the possibilities offered by this type of literature – Connor points out another (entirely justifiable) reason why this line of thinking is faulty: ‘When Ishiguro is read as a Japanese writer concerned wholly and necessarily with Japanese themes, he is ‘returned’ to an identity that was never his own’. (*Connor* 107)

Connor’s argument touches upon a crucial issue related to the writer’s identity: what we study is *not* the work of a Japanese writer who describes the English from the outside, by taking advantage of the fresh perspective a stranger would have on matters that remain hidden to the native eye. Ishiguro’s identity as a writer is – we should underline – a *hybrid identity* – neither English, nor Japanese. His position – on the border, in-between cultures – makes him a policultural writer – with all the advantages and disadvantages that follow. There is an element of risk in Ishiguro’s writing, to which such critics and reviewers are responding without necessarily having to recognize it.

The wrong Chinaman

As Connor puts it, ‘*The Remains of the Day* is a kind of performance, maintained with an impassive levelness that is a strange mixture of the understated and the demonstrative’ (*Connor* 109). A dialogue between Stevens and Miss Kenton (the housekeeper of Darlington Hall and – more importantly – the butler’s love interest) proves this point (they are talking about the position of an ornament):

‘Mr Stevens, that is the incorrect Chinaman, would you not agree?’

‘Miss Kenton, I am very busy. I am surprised you have nothing better to do than stand in corridors all day.’

‘Mr Stevens, is that the correct Chinaman or is it not?’

‘Miss Kenton, I would ask you to keep your voice down.’

‘And I would ask you, Mr Stevens, to turn around and look at that Chinaman.’

‘Miss Kenton, please keep your voice down. What would employees below think to hear us shouting at the top of our voices about what is and what is not the correct Chinaman?’

‘The fact is, Mr Stevens, all the Chinamen in this house have been dirty for some time! And now, they are in incorrect positions!’

‘Miss Kenton, you are being quite ridiculous. Now if you will be so good as to let me pass.’

‘Mr Stevens, will you kindly look at the Chinaman behind you?’

‘If it is so important to you, Miss Kenton, I will allow that the Chinaman behind me may well be incorrectly situated. But I must say I am at some loss as to why you should be so concerned with these most trivial of errors.’

‘These errors may be trivial in themselves, Mr Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance’. (*Ishiguro*, 61-62)

As Miss Kenton notices – though to a far greater extent than she suspects – the ‘error’ in the positioning of the Chinaman has important consequences on a larger scale. We do not deem it an overstatement to see in this rather ludicrous scene, (as it is presented in the book) a comic mirroring of a more serious situation:

The fact that the contrast between orderliness and disorderliness is posed in terms of the contrast between the English and the Oriental gently registers the link between domestic space and the global space of Empire. (*Connor* 110)

We should examine this statement in more detail: there are several sets of oppositions here that would point to a post-colonial reading of the novel. There is, on the one hand, the contrast *English* (white, in a position of power, ‘civilized’ and civilizing) – *Oriental* (non-white, subjected, ‘exotic’, strange). Another opposition is *order-chaos*. We do not think that it is an accident that the symbol for the Oriental (the wrongly situated Chinaman) is the element that brings chaos to Stevens’s perfectly organized universe. In Connor’s words, ‘it is

as though the entrance of the Chinaman brings with it a risk of spontaneous pollution and the disruption of space'. (Connor 110) The Chinaman, then, would play here the role of *the Other*, the stranger, dangerous for the constructed national identity, but, at the same time, extremely necessary for its creation. An explanation for this kind of construct is given by Andrew Samuels in *The Political Psyche*:

From a psychological perspective, the creation of an identity other to the nation facilitates the expression of national aggression, because the national Other serves as the object of aggression (what philosophers call an 'intentional object'). The role of plain projection is also important; the Volk-identified nation evacuates what is sensed unconsciously to be its undesirable features into designated enemies. (Samuels 333)

At this point there arises a question that deserves an immediate answer: why should one refer to Orientals in an analysis of a seemingly all-English, lily-white book? We think another question would suggest a possible answer: should one completely discard the invisible part of the iceberg (the novel)? Are the omissions, the absences in a book not as important as what has been (more or less plainly) said? Connor makes this very point in saying that:

In both domestic and global space, power and identity are dependent upon the maintaining of distance. The 'larger significance' of the shifting Chinaman appears to be larger even than Miss Kenton divines, since it reflects the fundamental shifts in international dispositions of power both before the Second World War and after it (*The Remains of the Day* is set judiciously in 1956, the year of the Suez Crisis which saw the emphatic beginnings of Britain's decline as a world influence). (Connor 110)

The novel would, therefore, record the beginning of the end of an era – 'interesting times' – to put it in the Chinaman's words. (I am referring here to a Chinese curse: 'May you live in interesting times.')

The remains of the day...

It is not a surprise to see *The Remains of the Day* as referring to the end of an empire – the atmosphere is set from the beginning, especially if we realize how equivocal the title of the novel is.

Usually, the title is taken as pointing to ‘what is left’ of Stevens’s life – his unpromising old age, or to his evenings – all that he had in the day ‘for himself’, his private sphere being restricted to the fifteen minutes spent each night drinking cocoa in Miss Kenton’s room.

There is, however, another – even bleaker – interpretation for the *remains of the day* – if we interpret *remains* as meaning ‘a person’s body after death’.¹ We would then see the novel as no longer referring to what is still to come, but to a static point. If the day is ‘dead’, if we have come to the end of things, to the fall of the empire, and hence to the downfall of all the people whose lives were connected to the fate of the empire – Stevens’s case, as we shall prove – then there is no more room for hope and no possible redemption for the character. Is there anything to add after all has been said and done? As we shall see, there is.

Masters and servants

In the Chinaman episode, after recounting the exchange between Miss Kenton and himself, particularly her remark concerning seemingly trivial errors (‘These errors may be trivial in themselves, Mr Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance.’), Stevens adds:

In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall. (*Ishiguro* 63)

In making this utterance, Stevens establishes (probably involuntarily) the connection between his mistakes and his master’s mistakes. The fact that this is not a conscious choice makes it all the more significant – we are not surprised to see that it is hard for the butler to admit how important Lord Darlington’s mistakes are to him.

One might wonder why Stevens would find another man’s errors so crucial for his own existence. We have to wait for the end of the book to find the answer to this question. In

¹ According to the Oxford Dictionary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), the word *remains* has three meanings: 1. things remaining, 2. historical or archeological relics, and 3. a person’s body after death.

giving this final answer, the butler is – for once – painfully sincere: ‘The fact is, of course, [...], I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now – well – I find I do not have a great deal more to give’².

He then refers to his new employer, Mr Farraday, the American who bought Darlington Hall and – as part of the ‘package’, as he admits (and we can only guess how much this hurts), bought him, Stevens the butler. He says:

Since my new employer Mr Farraday arrived, I’ve tried very hard, very hard indeed, to provide the sort of service I would like him to have. I’ve tried and tried, but whatever I do I find I am far from reaching the standards I once set myself. More and more errors are appearing in my work. Quite trivial in themselves – at least so far. But they’re of the sort I would never have made before, and I know what they signify. Goodness knows, I’ve tried and tried, but it’s no use. I’ve given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington. (*Ishiguro* 255)

Trivial errors

Stevens’s final admission of ‘guilt by association’ brings forth once more – two hundred pages later – the issue of ‘trivial errors’. We realize, at this moment, how important this is, and we see another element added to the puzzle: the fact that the ‘signifying errors’ are the connecting link between the most important characters in the book (and in Stevens’s life).

The first time the term is used, it is in connection with Stevens’s father, and – significantly – his role-model: Miss Kenton and Stevens discuss his father’s mistakes, and his inability to successfully perform his duties – in ‘translation’, his inability to further function as a role-model for the main character.

The second time, ‘the errors’ make the transition to Lord Darlington. As we find (in the fourth chapter only, ‘Day Three – Morning’), Stevens’s master was accused of sympathizing with the Nazis and of anti-Semitism. The last time, the errors are finally connected with the main character, Stevens himself.

The domino-game

If we analyse this progression, which brings us closer and closer to the centre of the novel, we understand that the construction of the book mirrors the process going on beneath

² Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005) 255

the surface – in Stevens’s conscience. We are, in fact, watching a domino-game – after the first piece has fallen, all the others (which depend on each other for stability) will fall in their turn.

The first piece in the game is Stevens’s father. His metaphorical fall is doubled by the real one in the book – he actually falls carrying a heavy tray on the lawn. It is the episode that marks the beginning of the end in his long career as a butler – he was, at the time, we learn, in his fifty-fourth year of serving.

His importance in the game is carefully documented in Stevens’s reminiscences. Stevens makes it clear that his father was his model. He explains why he thinks that he was ‘distinguished’ by saying:

If I try to describe to you what I believe made my father thus distinguished, I may in this way convey my idea of what ‘dignity’ is. There was a certain story my father was fond of repeating over the years. I recall listening to him tell his visitors when I was a child, and then later, when I was starting out as a footman under his supervision. I remember him relating it again the first time I returned to see him after gaining my first post as butler. (*Ishiguro* 36)

The story is about a butler who follows his master to India and succeeds in maintaining in his new environment the high professional standard he had attained in England. When he enters the dining room, while preparing for dinner, the butler sees a tiger under the table. He quietly asks permission to shoot the tiger and, after doing so, even manages to serve dinner ‘at the usual time’.

Commenting on the story, Stevens says:

Clearly the story meant much to him. My father’s generation was not one accustomed to discussing and analysing in the way ours is and I believe the telling and retelling of this story was as close as my father ever came to reflecting critically on the profession he practised. (*Ishiguro* 36)

An important distinction between Stevens and his father becomes apparent here: while Stevens is a less credible type of butler (he is able to make extremely fine analyses, he theorizes, he seems closer to an intellectual’s way of thinking than to an actual butler’s),

Stevens Sr is the more realistic version, closer to the 'traditional' image. This is how Stevens sees him:

When I look back over his career, I can see with hindsight that he must have striven throughout his years somehow to become that butler of his story. And in my view, at the peak of his career, my father achieved his ambition. For although I am sure he never had the chance to encounter a tiger beneath the dining table, when I think over all that I know or have heard concerning him, I can think of at least several instances of his displaying in abundance that very quality he so admired in the butler of the story. (*Ishiguro* 37-38)

In his attempt to become the prototype, the truly dignified butler he so admires, Stevens has to answer a delicate question: is serving to the best of your abilities enough? Does it matter *whom* you serve, where your loyalty lies?

This is where his judgment of Lord Darlington comes in:

Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?. (*Ishiguro* 255-256)

Stevens's last question closes the circle, by referring the question of dignity back to himself. It is his conscience, we realize, that is under the microscope – has been, throughout the novel. After working all his life to become the typical English butler, the embodiment of the culture of the 'stiff upper lip', has Stevens achieved his goal? Is there 'dignity' to be found in his story? Or has he managed, in the end, to be no different from the 'wrong Chinaman', misplaced, dis-orient-ed, strange in familiar surroundings?

Ishiguro's greatest achievement is, in our opinion, a shift in focus: he has shown us that, sometimes, the answer is not essential – what is important is asking the question.

Bibliography

1. Annan, Gabriele. 'On the high wire: review of Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*', *New York Review of Books* 36 (19) (1989)
2. Connor, Steven. *English Novel in History, 1950 to the Present*. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1995
3. Habib, Claude. 'Nagasaki et après: sur les romans de Kazuo Ishiguro', *Esprit* 2 (1991)
4. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005
5. Iyer, Pico. 'Waiting Upon History'. *Partisan Review*. 58:3 (1991) 586
6. Lewis, Barry, *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000
7. Rushdie, Salman. "'Commonwealth literature" does not exist', in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981- 1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991
8. Samuels, Andrew. *The Political Psyche – Depth Psychology, Difference and Nationalism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993
9. Vorda, Allan and Herzinger, Kim. 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro'. *Mississippi Review*, (1991). Reprinted as 'Stuck on the Margins: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro' in Allan Vorda (ed.), *Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists* (Houston, TX, Rice University Press, 1993) 14

Diana Ionică is a Senior Lecturer in Business English and Professional Communication at ASE, Bucharest. She holds a Master's degree in English Language Literatures, Bucharest University, and a Ph.D. in Contemporary Literature obtained in the *Literary and Cultural Studies* doctoral programme of the same university (2009). She has been involved in designing and writing several academic textbooks – *Mastering English for Economics* (Ed. Uranus, 2005), *First Steps in Business* (Ed. Universitară, 2005), and has recently published her thesis – *Cultural Hybridization in the Contemporary Novel* (Ed. Uranus, 2009).