The Exile of the Japanese Adolescence

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Résumé : *Un exil auto-imposé des enfants et des adolescents japonais. En raison de la pression sociale à quoi ils sont soumis, dès leur plus jeune âge, d'être employé par une entreprise remarquable quand ils deviendront adultes, des nombreux jeunes du Japon ont des dépressions nerveuses ou développent des tendances sociopathes. Tout cela a conduit à une épidémie de la criminalité infantile au cours des dernières années. Il a également eu un impact négatif sur les mères, bien sûr, qui sont touchés tant par le rôle essentiel qu'ils ont dans le développement et l'éducation des enfants, qu'ils deviennent souvent suicidaires ou se tournent vers la violence aussi. L'auteur britannique célèbre Kazuo Ishiguro traduit tout cela en prose avec l'aide d'un personnage d'origine japonaise qui se comporte d'une manière très similaire aux jeunes mentionnés ci-dessus.*
Mots-clés : *exil auto-imposé, étude de cas, pression sociale, criminalité infantile.*

1. Social Pressure as Torture

Japan: the world's best oiled mechanism, the perfect example for common sense, exquisite, healthy cuisine, and astounding art all deeply flavoured with a spiritual sense of self-discipline. Indeed perhaps this is what most people would think of when Japan is mentioned; this is the general view that the country has outside its borders. But could all this be just an image? For the average European, or even American the image described above does seem a bit too perfect to be real. Could Japan be the ideal country, or does it have just a great marketing?

According to John Nathan [2004], a university professor at the University of California, the image that foreigners have of Japan is nowhere near the reality. He claims in his book *Japan Unbound, A Volatile's Nation Quest for Pride and Purpose* that due to the strict cultural environment, but also to the economic crisis which hit Japan in the late eighties and early nineties, the Japanese […] "are afflicted by a troubling if often vaguely perceived sense of being lost […] in a

context of existential uneasiness on one hand and longing to rediscover and reclaim in a certain tangible way the meaning of "Japaneseness" on the other" [Nathan, 2004: 25].

The first area in which this personality crisis has hit is in the core of the Japanese society – the family. He states that firstly because of an increase in the pressure put on children, even before kindergarten, to enter a high-qualified educational facility, but also because of the lack of communication with the parents who are most of the time away, Japan has been experiencing "an epidemic of juvenile violence and crime" [Nathan, 2004: 13].

According to Ruxandra Cesereanu in the twentieth century there has been an astounding increase in violence and torture. She states that:

The modern explosion of torture in the world depended on the political culture of the countries that practised it, being more spread in the countries with no sense of democracy. It must also be added that there is a cultural difference in mentality when practising torture in different geographic parts of the world. […] It cannot be denied that each state bears the imprint of its own history, and that a possible culture of violence has its own underground logic in the torture of the twentieth century. Torture depends therefore on the Weltanschaaung of the people that practices it [Cesereanu, 2001: 47].

Japan Unbound does not concentrate on torture per se. It relates a series of extremely violent and shocking events which were committed by children, and exposes the stress that a young person is subject to while growing up in Japan. It is argued that due to this extreme pressure the young individual can develop tendencies of the Antisocial Personality Disorder or even transform into a sociopath. As such, having to be responsible for your entire future from an age as early as 4 or 5, could also be quite easily qualified as torture.

2. Some Key Moments in Japanese History

From the above mentioned perspective of Cesereanu, that the torture and violence expressed in today's society is a remnant of the political and social environment of previous ages, the deeply violent context of modern Japanese society should come as little surprise for those more familiar to its austere past. For this reason, perhaps the most influential part in its development was the import of Zen Buddhism [Eliot, 2005: 98].

Zen Buddhism arrived in Japan as early as the 7th century, but did not develop significantly until the 12th century. It has since been an important force in Japan having had considerable influence on Japanese culture, reaching far beyond the temple and entering into cultural and social areas of all kinds, including gardening, ink painting, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, and military strategies. Zen priests played an important role in the political life of Japan, both serving as diplomats and administrators and preserving Japanese cultural life throughout the eras.

Zen flourished in the period of the bakufu medieval state of the shoguns [Sansom, 1958-1961], as it was extremely fitted for such a period of time, as this was, when the *de facto* power belonged to the military caste. It is during these times that Japanese arts as the ones mentioned above have developed or even peaked. It was also then that the highly sophisticated Japanese etiquette was developed.

Unlike the Western countries, Japan adopted a vertical social system, the tateshakai [Nakane, 1972: 56-72], which has a clear-cut class system with the emperor, the father of the nation and direct descendant of the Sun Goddess in its topmost position. Until the late eighteenth century Japan was an officially segregated society with 5 classes of people. At the top were the samurai, then the farmers, the artisans, the merchants, and finally the outcasts (the grave diggers, leather tanners, etc.). The system collapsed because, by the end of the Shogunate rule, the merchants had all the money. Yet even today a shadow of this system is still around; while a democracy on paper, the notion of Jeffersonian egalitarianism is still alien to most of the people.

Everyone belongs to some group, and every group has people of superior rank and status. The notion of boss and worker being perfectly equal after work without a thought of the company relationship is impossible for the Japanese. The language itself is organized in three different layers of speech: familiar, neutral and honorary. As such, depending on the person one has to address, he/she will use one of the forms of speech mentioned above. More often than not, the three contain entirely different words for each layer. Moreover it is also quite common for women to use certain words which sound more feminine and for men others that sound more masculine. A good example here is the personal pronoun “I”, which is different for men and women.

This system is passed on to children at quite an early age and they are expected to abide by it in time just like their parents had to before

them. This pressure goes further when the child is introduced into the educational system. They are expected to get high qualifications even when they are in kindergarten because, without these, they will only be accepted in a mediocre school, which will only lead to a mediocre high school and eventually to an underpaid job. So basically they have to prepare for life as they enter the kindergarten: "by the early 1980s, as the post-college job market constricted, students began to show signs of stress. Educators were shaken by a wave of violence in middle schools, and there was a rash of suicides by elementary and middle school children who failed entrance exams" [Nathan, 2004: 54].

3. The Social Response

Still, the system functioned for a while, but when the Japanese economic crisis struck in the nineties, the situation got out of hand. That is the children became aware of the futility of their efforts and soon they became discouraged by the lack of motivation.

The way they tried to cope with this was split in two: part of them became furious with society in general and expressed a psychotic behaviour often accompanied by killing sprees, while the others chose to ignore society in its entirety by locking themselves away in their rooms and refusing to leave it under any circumstances.

3.1. The Violent

One of the first and probably most shocking acts of violence happened on the morning of May 27th 1997, when the janitor at Tomogaoka Middle School in Kobe arriving at school discovered a severed head of a sixth-grade schoolboy who had been missing for three days. The head was propped in front of the main gate; between his teeth in a plastic bag there was a challenge:

> The game begins.
> To all you moronic policemen: let's see you stop me
> Murder is my greatest pleasure
> I love seeing people die
> To the dirty vegetables: the punishment is death!
> For the years of anger, the verdict is running blood! [Nathan, 2004: 78-82].

The note was signed "SCHOOL KILLER". The police had reason to believe that this murder was connected to two prior ones. On February 10th, two elementary school girls had been assaulted with a carpenter's mallet by a boy in a middle school uniform. On March 16th, a ten-year-old girl playing in the park near her apartment was beaten to death with a hammer; a few minutes later a nine-year-old girl was stabbed repeatedly in the stomach and survived. Investigation led the police to a fourteen-year-old boy which had dropped out of school after he had beaten his friend unconscious in a nearby park. After his arrest, he confessed to having committed the crimes, his sole explanation being that he wanted to experience the feeling of taking a human life.

This led to an outburst of imitators. In October 1997, a fifteen-year-old bludgeoned a sixty-four-year-old woman to death with a hammer, explaining that he wanted to know how much force it would take to kill someone. In 1998, a seventeen-year-old hijacked a city bus and took it on a fifteen hour trip during which he stabbed a woman to death and injured many others. The following year, a string of attacks on teachers in the middle schools appeared, including the fatal stabbing of a teacher in front of her class by a thirteen-year-old because she had disciplined him. On June 2000, a high school baseball player attacked four teammates with a metal bat because they had made fun of his hair cut. He then took the bat with which he beat his mother to death in an attempt, he later explained, to save her the unpleasant consequences of what had happened at school. Another case of matricide is that of an eleven-year-old boy who stabbed his mother to death in 2001 because she had reprimanded him for cutting his own wrist in what she had thought to be an attempt to suicide.

As the national police pile up statistics which state that over half of the total major felony crimes are done by children in the age category of 11 to 15 years old all the teachers, parents and educational agencies in Japan can but shrug their shoulders and keep looking for both a plausible explanation and reasonable measures that would put a stop to this. In truth, nobody can really provide either a reason for this change in character of the youth of a nation which was once proud to declare that the family was its most important asset, and on which the whole of the country's progress depended on, neither come up with a solution. Of course the problem once appeared and admitted there have been a multitude of opinions that offered solutions.

3.2. The Exiled

While it lacks the sense of shock and sensationalist news story, the proportion of teenagers that choose to reject society by locking themselves in their rooms is even greater and probably for this reason, even grimmer. Throughout the country, but especially in big city areas, there have been reported cases of young adolescents refusing to leave their bedrooms after having had some sort of disappointment in their school-life. Parents have tried anything from brute force to medical help, but nothing seems to encourage them to give up their self-imposed exile [Nathan, 2004: 87-95].

The extent to which they are affected varies from the severe cases in which they decline to leave their chamber to the less extreme when they accept to be helped. The most serious are the situations in which the young people enter a form of shock to the point of being nearly catatonic when they decline any way of communication with other people. They lock the doors to their room and never leave again not even to satisfy their bodily functions. In cases like this, it is the family who is advised to embrace the terms that have been set by their children and not try to force them to do anything that they would not be comfortable to. In many situations this involves for example keeping the door locked at all times and only serving them food on a tray through the space under the door of the room.

The teenagers that do accept to leave the room now-and-again, as an evolution from a more severe stage or for other reasons, may choose to interact with other people. Relevant examples come from the support groups that have been set up especially for them. In the group, there are people who come just to sit and never utter a word, people who shout or express anger or suicidal tendencies.

Apart from the support groups, the decision-making layers of the population have opinions which are divided into the two usual points of view, namely the conservatives and the modernists. While the conservatives opt for a more disciplined environment, the evolutionists insist that it was too much discipline that brought the problem up in the first place and that they should give the adolescents more freedom.

4. A Search for Causes

Sociologists insist that the events above mentioned descend from a national personality crisis [Nathan, 2004: 97]. It is suggested that because of the rapid development of the country the nucleus once cherished, the family, has virtually disappeared. The classical Japanese family is a complex organism very different from the Western one. Traditionally an agrarian society, Japan's family extended from the small village head of the family to the emperor himself who proclaimed himself as not the ruler of Japan, but as the father of the nation. Whenever a marriage was set up not only did the newly formed couple become a family, but the two families were thought of as becoming one big family. More often than not, marriages were performed between families that helped each other become more powerful and more stable.

Beneath the structure of the family lies the concept of *ie,* which literally means home but extends far beyond this term. It represents a kinship that extends beyond the present members of the family to the ancestral past into the future and ties together all of these into an unbreakable unit. For centuries, the title of master of the *ie*, that is the head of the family, as well as all the material goods that the family in question owned, was transferred from father to son.

All this changed in the last century or so, due to the rapid modernization process that Japan had to undergo. Instead of continuing the unbroken before chain of passing the family fortune from father to son, the youth started leaving home for primarily educational purposes and ended up not coming back at all. They would move into a city and form their own family there.

Of course, neither of the two parts of the family would be satisfied. The parents living in the rural environment soon came to realise that they have been left without an heir, and have to face the futility of their entire lives, and the off-springs find themselves in a new environment extremely different from what they had experienced until that time, and become consumed with never being able to actually settle down. They cannot go back because they will not feel like they belong there anymore, but neither will they embrace the city as their new home. This, of course, happened mainly in the beginning of the movement towards modernity, which nowadays is more or less over, but these lost families which could not find a purpose for their being became the essence on which nowadays Japan was founded. By the

second generation the frustrations started getting deeper and deeper in the parents until they finally reached their children.

Another major influence in the loss of identity of the Japanese was the economic development in itself. The Japanese are famous for their ability to work hard and long hours, and for their devotion to the company for which they work. The men working in huge companies have in time come to be called "sarariman" [Nathan, 2004: 103-107], a term which comes from the English salary man and is used to name the men who work in big companies, and are usually dressed in a suit. But what is a great asset for the national growth became a time bomb for families. In most Japanese families the father is the only one who works due to the fact that he is expected to provide, as he is the head of the family.

Most sarariman work overtime until late at night in order to be able to support their families. However that also means that they are usually away from home which first of all means that they miss the development of their own children, but also that in time they become estranged to their own wives and children, and perhaps even to themselves. This leads to great frustration for all three of the parts in the family: for the men who feel left out and estranged, for the wife who feels left behind and in charge of all the daily activities, but also for the child. It is these children, John Nathan pinpoints as being the generation which terrorize an entire nation. They end up confused, misunderstood, lonely and depressed.

Nevertheless, the cultural background of these children cannot be left out of the equation that turned them into cold-blooded murderers. In fact, the cultural legacy they inherited is perhaps the main reason for their deviation. The restrictions, expectations and rigour having increased with every generation until they have reached a limit; once that limit has been touched an almost chaotic society was set loose.

5. Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of the Hills. A Case Study

The problems of the troubled Japanese adolescence have been transferred into writing as well. Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the most celebrated English authors of late, who is of Japanese descent and who has been raised in the Japanese tradition by his parents, has shaped

such a character in his first novel, A *Pale View of the Hills* [1990]. As in most of his novels, the plot is rather slow and light, the stress falling on the personal dramas of the characters despite the fact that the times of the narrative are usually during some of the most troubled in the history of mankind.

The narrator-character, Etsuko, is shown in a period of mourning in her life during a visit of her youngest daughter following the suicide of her eldest. The narrative is a frame for a collection of memories from another difficult time in the narrator's life just after the end of the Second World War, in her hometown of Nagasaki. The many recollections that she has are of a friendship born during the summer, while she was carrying her first daughter, with another female character, also a mother. The two women presented as opposites in the text, as Etsuko is not shy of portraying Sachiko as a careless and misguided mother to her 10 year-old daughter. Regardless of this, the feeling that the reader may receive from the account is that the two women are somehow connected and even give the impression that Sachiko is a doppelganger of the raconteur.

The main focus of the case study will be the eldest daughter of the narrator, Keiko, who, as it has already been mentioned, has already committed suicide at the time of the narration and who is described as having an "aggressive regard for privacy" [Ishiguro, 1990: 53]. From the very beginning, one cannot be confused about Keiko's character in any way. While the novel debuts with the compromise that had to be made to name the second daughter, Niki, which personifies the very essence of social acceptance of the concept of "other" in a multicultural milieu, there is no middle ground in what Keiko is concerned for she, "unlike Niki, was pure Japanese"[Ishiguro, 1990: 13].

Even from this simple explanation the reader is directed to assume a biased position in regard to this character, first off by the use of the negative adjective *unlike* which compares her to her English-born sister, but also by the clarification which follows, as though being Japanese is supposed to be understood as a mark and an excuse for behaving in an*other* way. The path set for the reader to understand that Keiko will be a peculiar character, the focus shifts to a very familiar villain of the present times – the media – just as if *it* was to blame for all the prejudice surrounding racial hatred by controlling the whole of public opinion, arguing that "more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact (i.e. that Keiko was Japanese). 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 [Ishiguro, 1990: 5].

Although it is yet unclear why she has committed suicide, the simple fact that she has should be enough to make one wonder what her reasons might have been, especially because one can get the idea from the very beginning of the account that she could not have been very old, or in a desperate situation, cases that would explain her deed. As the plot unfolds, the details of the personality that Keiko had are revealed. It is quite clear that she had been a challenging child and even more so in her adolescence. The reader receives an image of a lonely person who had done away with the world, given up on her family and became a sort of a recluse, sealing herself in her room: "Keiko had retreated into her bedroom, shutting us out of her life. She rarely came out" [Ishiguro, 1990: 34].

It is so much emphasised that Keiko had isolated herself from the rest of the family that one may get the sense that she is spoken of as if she were a ghost: "I would sometimes hear her moving around the house after we had all gone to bed [Ishiguro, 1990: 34]. This gloomy description could also be some kind of an omen of things to come, as Keiko's doppelganger, Machiko, is also described on more than one occasion as having a rope entangled around some part of her body. Moreover, the room that Keiko was occupying is described to have given off a *stale odour*, which enhances the morbid premonition string when the details of the discovery of her body become known when her mother "wonders how long she had been there like that before they had found her" [Ishiguro, 1990: 62] and concludes "that the coroner said she had been there "for several days" [Ishiguro, 1990: 62].

Despite her separation from her family, it is understood that she did not retire from the whole of society as her mother surmises "that she spent her time reading magazines and listening to her radio […] and that on the occasions I had glimpsed inside, I had seen countless glossy magazines lying on the floor [Ishiguro, 1990: 34]. There is also a sense of abandonment from the part of the other members of the family, which led to frustrations and lack of communication even when Keiko tried to share a part in the family: "In the end, the rest of us grew used to her ways, and when by some impulse Keiko ventured down into our living room, we would all feel a great tension. Invariably, these excursions would end with her fighting, with Niki or with my husband, and then she would be back in her room". This is

also quite clear in the way the personal pronouns are used; Keiko is most of the time referred to by her mother in the third person, as if she were a completely separate part from the family which is always mentioned in the first person plural, as it can easily be seen from the fragment above – e.g. the rest of us, our living room. Regardless of her attempts to reconnect with her family "she had no friends, and the rest of us were forbidden entry into her room. At mealtimes I would leave her plate in the kitchen and she would come down to get it, then shut herself in again" [Ishiguro, 1990: 34].

The manner in which Keiko's description is similar to what the Japanese youths are going through could not be clearer. Her custom of *fanatically guarding* her domain and the impossibility to relate to other people, be them within or without the family circle, but also her refusal to leave her room, which all end in her decision to take her own life fit perfectly in the picture previously described of the trouble the Japanese young people have due to the social pressure that they are subjected to. This is the point where there is a discrepancy between the character in the novel and the adolescents in Japan. The latter suffer because of the great pressure placed on them to mature from a very early age and the too high expectations that are presumed of them. This could not be the case for Keiko due to the fact that despite the reader does not have a clear view of the life she had in Japan and at what age she had left there, it is quite easily understood that she grew up and consequently also lived the longest part of her life in Britain. Be it so, the reader is nonetheless offered a perspective of the way in which the Japanese are regarded by the British even from the first lines of the novel.

The narrative is satiated with stereotypical clichés of the Asian, but foremost the Japanese. Starting with the more out-dated stereotypes that surround Etsuko while she was still living in Japan like that of the submissive wife or the China-doll, there is also a step into the present times where other clichés are revealed, some typical of the Japanese others of women in general. The pressure that Keiko is exposed to is that of being a part of a society that never makes her feel welcome, which follows after what can easily be viewed as an unhappy early childhood. There are no details as to how Keiko loses her father, maybe from the separation of the parents or by the decease of the father, but any of the two situations could prove highly traumatic for any child, let alone a child born in a post-atomic broken society which

promulgates advancement at any cost, the survival of the fittest and a witch-hunt for the supporters of the former regime.

Following this there is a string of upsetting events which could have put Keiko under a great deal of strain starting with the relationship that her mother has with another man, which led to the marriage and thus the gain of a new father, the move to a foreign country, and even the baby that the newly-formed couple has. Even though the reader does not get insight in the social life that Keiko has outside the family one can only guess that she was an introvert who did not communicate well with other people, a guess which is also sustained by Etsuko who claims that she did not have any friends and does not entertain even the thought that she might have had any even in Manchester, in a completely new environment.

Above all there is the difference that is made in the family between herself and Niki. Even in families where the siblings share the same parents and race anxiety can appear, let alone in a family so diverse. Although Sheringham, Etsuko's second husband, is an expert in Japanese culture, having published papers about this, having spent a lot of time in Japan and in general being quite passionate about this culture, he proves to be biased and unfair towards Keiko. He claims to understand the ways of the Japanese and even advocates to name his daughter with Etsuko with a Japanese name, but the fact remains that his feelings toward Keiko express a great deal of racism and prejudice based solely on her ethnic background: "it became his view that Keiko was a difficult person by nature and there was little we could do for her. In fact, although he never claimed it outright, he would imply that Keiko had inherited her personality from her father [Ishiguro, 1990: 43]. Additionally, his wife implies or states as such the fact that he has never been able to accept Keiko on account of his not being able to comprehend people such as herself i.e. Japanese people.

Following all these details about the life of the character as it has been described in the narrative, one can easily come to the conclusion that Keiko had indeed suffered from a depression as profound as her fellow nationals have in Japan. The stress which brought them to this dire state is different but the ends are the same. In the end the reader, whether or not familiar with the present-day Japanese social problems, is confronted by a regretful conclusion – one cannot escape the stereotyping and prejudice that follows from ethnic difference. A reader unfamiliar to the community problems in Japan may end in the conclusion that Keiko was an unhappy young woman with a painful

childhood who chose to commit suicide, but the sensation that her being Japanese may have played a part in this decision cannot be escaped. The reader who is familiar with all of the above might conclude that even away from the social environment which determines young people to develop this kind of behaviour, the Japanese adolescent has behaved in a very similar manner, as though she was following a pattern – a conclusion which again feels very prejudiced. The bitter deduction reached for either one of the two sides described above comes from the insight that one gains into the life of a cultural *other* from the text that one cannot escape the prejudice which springs from the incapability to understand and the refusal to accept any other way of behaving which differs from the conventional standard.

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