

The Descent of the Japanese Patriarch: from History to Literary Representations

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Abstract

Following the Second World War, Japan plunged into a deep identity crisis. This was due partly to the shock of being defeated in the war, but mostly to the inability to cope with the downfall of the Emperor, the Father of the nation, the direct descendant of the Sun goddess, who had failed to protect them. Kazuo Ishiguro's first two novels, which are set in post-war Japan, bring forth this issue through the description of a belittled father figure, undergoing an identity crisis, trying to re-establish his authority, but confessing his faults and accepting his condition. The aim of this paper is to identify the similarities between the fall of the father figure and that of the leader of the Japanese nation in both Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, as well as the differences between the consequences this has had in life and in fiction.

Key words: father-figure, identity crisis, Japanese culture, Kazuo Ishiguro, fiction.

Motto:

"Who controls the past," ran the Party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. ...All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1992: 27)

1. Overview

This paper is an integral part of the attempt to explain how Kazuo Ishiguro's prose has been contaminated by both the Japanese style of writing derived from the traditional upbringing his parents gave him, and by the grid of Western thought acquired throughout his years within the British educational system.

It is therefore relevant to include details from all the layers of the intricate societies described in Kazuo Ishiguro's narratives. For this purpose, this paper will concentrate on illustrating the historical details

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which contributed to the creation of one of the most important social - shaping mechanisms throughout the history of Japan: the myth surrounding the Emperor-Father.

On more than one occasion, Ishiguro has made a point of vehemently denying his knowledge of the Japanese – language, culture, art or customs. However, for the reader familiar with this culture, it is absolutely transparent that his denial is futile. Not only does he possess a great ability to describe in minute detail the social dynamic within the Japanese family, or even certain cities, but his prose abounds in subtle references to aspects of the Japanese culture ranging from history, art, literature to traditional customs.

Ishiguro's first two novels *A Pale View of Hills* and, *An Artist of the Floating World* are set in Japan during a period of great distress for the Japanese, the period immediately following the end of the Second World War. Although he had never been to Japan as an adult before he wrote *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, Kazuo Ishiguro manages to capture the general confusion characterising the period following the end of The Second World War, condensing it to the level of the nucleus of the Japanese household. By focusing on the microscopic problems of the individual, the macroscopic ones of a disoriented society become apparent as well. This imaginary Japan that reveals the real problems that people had in those times can only lead to the conclusion that the narrative of the two novels is guided by an intimate knowledge of the culture described.

This paper will therefore focus on identifying the allusions made to what has been considered as one of the greatest problems for the Japanese during that period, namely the debunking of the myth of the Father of the nation, and on correlating them to what actually happened in Japan at that time, as part of the undertaking of proving Kazuo Ishiguro's familiarity with the Japanese culture.

To this ends, it seems important to depict the historical context portrayed in which the two novels is set, as well as the mental patterns centred on the emperor's persona which were about to be shattered in order to create a reference point for the allusions to the descent of the embedded father figures. Added will be references to how the Japanese society is constructed on the metaphor of the parent-child relationship.

2. The rise of the imperial court

The myth that surrounds the Mikado of Japan started in the 8th century after the capital moved to Nara.

With the establishment of the capital at Nara, the old system by which every Mikado built himself a new palace in a fresh locality was discontinued. This was not only in itself an important progressive measure, but it was an evidence of the advance in civilisation which had been made during the previous two centuries (Aston 1907: 17).

Following a Chinese political model, the power of the Mikado grew with every new measure or reform. Not only politics and economy flourished during those times but also religion or the arts.

Of even greater importance was the advance in the art of architecture. This was intimately associated with Buddhism, a cult which demanded stately temples and pagodas for its due exercise. The increased authority of the court also required edifices more befitting its dignity and more in consonance with its gorgeous costumes and ceremonial adopted from China than the old one-reign palaces (Aston 1907: 18).

The newly gained power, the fantastic elegance of the court and its awe-inspiring costumes which could layer up to 20 kimonos worn at a time, each one longer than the previous, together with the introduction of the new administrative edifices imposed throughout Japan, a measure never encountered before, brought about a need to justify all this extravagance to the lower classes and to the world. To this purpose, the Mikado commanded that a chronicle of the birth of Japan be written, which would explain his superiority. In this manner, "the first written book which has come down to us in Japanese, or indeed in any Turanian tongue" (Aston 1907: 18) was created.

Roughly translated as *Records of Ancient Matters*, the *Kojiki* begins with the creation of the world and, naturally, of the islands of Japan as well. It also includes details on how many of the Shinto deities, the gods of the official religion in Japan, were conceived, what part of nature they governed or how they died. Thus, everything in creation is explained, from the existence of their gods to the foundation of the Japanese nation. Last but not least it proves an interest even in how poetry was invented and why it should be as respected as always.

The chronicle is a mixture of legend and fact, beginning with myth and then turning to real history. Despite starting with a series of legends which follow the adventures of the most important Shinto gods, there is a transition to reality at a certain moment, when after a long period of reigning in the skies, the Sun-Goddess, Amaterasu, sends one

of her grandsons to earth. He decides that he should remain here and becomes the first emperor of Japan, the great-grandfather of the ruling emperor at the time the *Kojiki* was written. From this tale, it becomes clear why the Mikado should be held in such esteem, why he should be entitled to command any way he might choose, and why every wish he might have has to be respected: he is the direct descendant of Amaterasu, the Sun goddess. As a leading figure among the Shinto gods, Amaterasu, who is the sun itself, is the very essence of the Japanese people. She is the reason why there is an image of the sun on the national banner, and why Japan is the country of the rising sun. It would only be fair therefore that the Mikado, as the grandson of the sun, be allowed any desired amount of power (see Nakane 1973).

The divine status of the emperor became more and more credible throughout the ages. For a commoner, it would have been absolutely impossible to actually see the ruler. In the Heian period (794-1192) the military officials became more and more influential, until, finally, in 1192 Minamoto Yoritomo convinced the emperor to appoint him as *shogun*, the leader of the military cast, thus seizing power from the emperor and beginning a period of roughly 700 years of *samurai* reign. The sovereignty of the shoguns, however, only increased the image of the emperor as being a supreme, celestial being, barely even human; throughout this period the emperor was kept only as a symbol, locked away in the imperial court within the Kyoto palace (see Mason, Caiger 1997).

At the beginning of the 20th century, after the last *shogun* returned the power to the emperor of the time, a modernization swept Japan and brought about a rise in the standard of living. This 'revolution' was led by the emperor himself, who caused a roar by dressing in western-style military attire and taking pictures of himself and his family. Despite this, the twelve centuries during which all the leaders of Japan had been associated with gods, had taken their toll, and people could not be easily convinced of the human nature of their leader.

Soon though, Japan's wars with China, Burma, The Solomon Islands, New Guinea and Sumatra, along with the entry in The Second World War, brought about the need for propaganda. The divine aspect of the emperor's persona fit perfectly the task and, as such, the imperial institution became a central part of the war campaign. The emperor became the Father of the nation, and the Japanese people were his children (see Nozaki 2008).

3. The Fall of the Father

By the end of The Second World War though, it became quite clear that Japan was not on the winning side and, after the bombing that killed more than 70,000 people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was a radio broadcast of a recording of the emperor's voice, in which capitulation was announced.

Despite the best that has been done by everyone – the gallant fighting of the military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State, and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people – the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is, indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives. Should We continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case, how are We to save the millions of Our subjects, or to atone Ourselves before the hallowed spirits of Our Imperial Ancestors? This is the reason why We have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the Joint Declaration of the Powers. [...] The hardships and sufferings to which Our nation is to be subjected hereafter will be certainly great. We are keenly aware of the inmost feelings of all of you, Our subjects. However, it is according to the dictates of time and fate that We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.

(Emperor Hirohito's Jewel Voice Broadcast, August 15th, 1945)

Following this announcement, the entire nation went in shock. Reports of the time relate that the majority of people silently retreated into their homes and businesses to absorb the news and to decide what was to be done from that moment onward.

The confusion of the people was owed partly to the fact that the emperor had been heard by everybody, which was certainly inappropriate, but also to the ambiguity of the speech, that left the people disoriented because they did not understand what had happened. As resulting from the emperor's discourse above, there is no mention of Japan's capitulation, so the first question raised would be whether they had actually lost the war. Other questions on everyone's lips were: If Japan had, indeed, come out on the losing side, how was

that possible? Were they not the people of the sun? What would happen to the new world order in which the descendants of the sun were promised they would take their rightful place, one they had all been sacrificing themselves for? Why did their Father not protect them and their land, which was invaded by alien nations – a reality unheard of in the entire history of Japan? The answers to these questions were nowhere to be found. The emperor did not hear his children; he had been kneeled by the American forces and had adopted a treatment of silence. This absence of a strong father-figure is extensively felt in Kazuo Ishiguro's first two Japanese novels which are set in Japan.

4. *A Pale View of Hills*

In *A Pale View of Hills* the protagonist remembers a time when she was living in Nagasaki, after the end of The Second World War, during her pregnancy with her first daughter. While the main focus of the analepsis falls on the friendship that the narrator develops that summer with another woman, who is presumed to be a doppelganger of the main character, other social interactions are also interwoven.

Over the same period of time, the protagonist's father-in-law, Ogata, was visiting her and her husband in their home. The elderly man is described as someone who had once been an important and respected teacher and who was now retired. He is traditional, very polite and understanding, but there is one concern that torments him. A former student had written an article on the education reform in a magazine and had smeared the name of his former educator by giving him as an example of how not to teach.

His downfall becomes a generality; the older male generation feel redundant and cannot reconcile with the new ways. In an outburst to his son, Ogata uses as an example the reform in education as a symbol for all that has been transformed in order to embrace a new way: "Take what happened in my profession, for instance. - Here was a system we'd nurtured and cherished for years. The Americans came and stripped it, tore it down without a thought" (Ishiguro 1990: 36). It is quite clear from this how a shift in the general public opinion transformed what had been an exemplary mentor into an outdated senior who has nothing to be proud of regarding his entire career. "I devoted my life to the teaching of the young", Ogata says bitterly "And then I watched the Americans tear it all down" (Ishiguro 1990: 36).

Moreover, his son, Etsuko's husband, is greatly disrespectful

towards him, never paying attention to what he says, and generally ignoring his entire person. Ogata lacks the authority a father figure, especially a Japanese one, should have, just as the Father of the nation had lost his, too. He is always confused in some way, about the world which he no longer fits in, but also about the attitude that his son has adopted towards him. Throughout the text, the only concern Jiro has is his job. He intends to be polite to his father, but manages to be the exact opposite. Every conversation they have seems to be unilateral due to Jiro's lack of interest in whatever his father says; all he seems to be doing is agree constantly with his interlocutor, just so that the drudgery could be over. Unable to relate in any way to his son, the father desperately tries to finish a game of chess which Jiro was not very eager to play in the first place.

The final betrayal, though, comes when the son confesses that he actually agrees with the negative review of his former mate and that some things are bound to change in order to develop. It comes as such a blow to Ogata that he does not even know how to react, while his son just excuses himself saying it was late:

Jiro wished his father a good night's sleep and left the room. For a few seconds, Ogata-San gazed at the door through which Jiro had disappeared as if he expected his son to return at any moment. Then he turned to me with a troubled look. (Ishiguro 1990: 37)

Not even when the old man tries to confront the student that denigrated him, does he get an apology. On the contrary, he is bluntly told that, despite all his good intentions, his efforts had been misguided, and that he and his colleagues had led the youth of Japan down a dark road and on to the dimmest moment in the entire history of the nation.

4. *An Artist of the Floating World*

The corroded image of the father figure is even more transparent in *An Artist of the Floating World* since the viewpoint is shifted to that of a retired painter. From the very beginning, Masuji, the narrator, is depicted as an old widower who lives with his nagging younger daughter. The fall in social status that Masuji has had to face is greater also. Due to the fact that during the war he had painted posters for the propaganda and had turned in one of his students (who opposed his mentor's practice), Masuji is now cast out to the outer limit of society.

Old acquaintances avoided him, and even his daughter's engagement is broken because of his past mistakes. On the verge of a new wedding opportunity, Masuji has to face his demons and own up to his past choices, regardless of how uninspired they had been. Again, the father of an important household faces loss of his authority over his daughters, who constantly pester him into doing different things in ways that he is not comfortable with.

When Setsuko, the eldest daughter, visits the family home, Noriko, the youngest, rudely explains their father's new habits and attitude:

'Father takes a lot of looking after now he's retired. Noriko went on, with a mischievous grin. 'You've got to keep him occupied or he starts to mope.' [...]

'Setsuko probably has no idea of what you're like these days, Father. She only remembers you from when you were a tyrant and ordered us all around. You're much more gentle these days, isn't that so?'

I gave a laugh to show Setsuko this was all in good humour, but my elder daughter continued to look uncomfortable. Noriko turned back to her sister and added:

'You don't seem to believe me, Setsuko. Father's very different now. There's no need to be afraid of him anymore. He's much more gentle and domesticated.' (Ishiguro 1989: 6)

The way in which this patriarch is belittled in the words of his own daughter becomes representative of the entire nation's attitude towards the elders during those revolutionary times in Japan. They had lost all influence, authority, or respect from the younger generations due to their questionable actions during the war, and the only option left available to them in order not to become pariahs is to admit their mistakes and ask forgiveness from their descendants.

A painful encounter for the protagonist is with one of his former students, whom he had stepped in for and aided on more than one occasion, and who is now insisting that Masuji go to clarify to his employers how they have not shared the same opinions. He is so desperately trying to deny his involvement with Masuji that he clings to a memory of a minor disagreement that they had had.

'Forgive me, Sensei, but as it happens, the matter has come to have some significance. The committee is obliged to be reassured of certain things. After all, there are the American authorities to satisfy...' Shintaro trailed

off nervously. Then he said: 'I beg you, Sensei, to try and recall that little disagreement. Grateful as I was – and still remain – for the wealth of things I learnt under your supervision, I did not always, in fact, concur with your view.' (Ishiguro 1989: 64)

When Masuji finally admits to his mistakes, he does so with reluctance and only at the last possible moment, when it appears quite clearly that the promise of an engagement for his younger daughter is yet again threatened by his career.

'My paintings. My teachings. As you see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. All I can say is that at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken.' (Ishiguro 1989: 78)

Despite previous hostility, though, as soon as he admits that he had been wrong and seals the engagement, he is forgiven by the family of his soon-to-be son-in-law, just as the Japanese nation forgave its leader and started focusing on restoring the glory of the children of the sun.

'Suichi has just that same feeling. He has expressed on a number of occasions recently his opinion that after four years of confusion, our country has finally set its sights on the future. 'Although my daughter had addressed this remark to Taro, I had the distinct impression it had been made for my benefit (Ishiguro 1989: 115).

5. Conclusions

As it was detailed above, Kazuo Ishiguro's prose has a keen resemblance to history. Still, however mimetic of life fiction may be, similarities inevitably reach an end. In *A Pale View of Hills* the fathers in the narrative surrender in their attempts to integrate and gain acceptance in the new world order, and retreat in their solitary homes, while still yearning approval from their children, or they simply vanish without any further explanation. In an alternate dénouement, the patriarch in *An Artist of the Floating World* achieves absolution, after hesitantly admitting that he might have committed errors in judgement during his war-time propaganda days, and expressing regret towards his past thoughtlessness, thus salvaging his status, hinting at a happy 'forever-after' ending.

Neither of the options offered in the two novels correspond to what actually occurred in Japan after the confusion which followed the end of the war. Facts show that, subsequent to their defeat in the war, Japan set its goal on a complete recovery, but overachieved and transformed into one of the richest, most technically-advanced, sophisticated countries in the world. However, the harsh reality is that despite still admiring their Father, the emperor, the loyalties of the masses shifted towards a new leader, the company, for the sake of which no compromises were made, the overwhelming majority of people sacrificing themselves and their families in the process. This, in turn, materialised into dysfunctional families with children and mothers suffering from either depression, or psychopathic tendencies, and fathers never managing to integrate into their own families due to the enormous amount of time spent at their companies. (see Nathan 2004)

One may think that, despite the tragedies of family-life, economy would, at least, be high. However, this is not the case, Japan having been struggling with recession ever since the early 90s. To sum it up, while the resemblances of Ishiguro's prose to reality may offer an insight of a troubled period in Japanese history, it is the differences between the resolutions of the novels, be them grim or blissful, and physical life, that catch the attention of the reader familiar with Japanese culture. Whether it was intended as an alternative to reality, or as a mode of taunting the savvy reader, this artifice manages to elicit reflections.

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