

The Artist's Remorse: Retrospection And Memory In Post-War Japan In An Artist Of The Floating World By Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes of retrospection, memory, and remorse in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel An Artist of the Floating World. Through the central character, Masuji Ono, Ishiguro depicts the plight of an ex-propaganda artist in post-war Japan, haunted by the moral choices of his past. But the novel explores how identity is shaped by memory and how historical narratives evolve across generations. An exploration of the novel's symbolism, narrative structure, and thematic depth is undertaken, as this research sheds new light on the specific way the novel examines collective and personal guilt in a society which is rapidly modernizing.

Keywords: Retrospection; Unreliable Narration; Historical Accountability; Cultural Amnesia.

INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* is a meditation on memory, regret and self-reconciliation. The novel follows Masuji Ono, a retired artist, as he navigates post-war Japan and wrestles with his past work promoting nationalism. Ishiguro builds a thoroughly self-examining story, showing how people recalibrate their histories when facing guilt and shifting social morals. This analyzes Ishiguro uses retrospective optics to cast light on the complexities of memory, artistic responsibility and the oscillating historical conscience. The theme of remorse as an evolving process is another as, In Ishiguro's view, remorse is not an instantaneous realization of guilt, but a gradual, sometimes unconscious evolution. Ono provides no anguished confession of regret. Instead, we see his self-awareness deepen as he rewrites old memories, that is, a demonstration of how memory itself is inconstant and rereading its history on a loop. By the end of the novel, Ono never fully condemns his past actions but acknowledges the changing world around him: "One can only wish these young people well." This seemingly simple statement carries layers of resignation, quiet acceptance, and lingering doubt. He does not explicitly apologize, yet the final tone suggests he understands, at least partially, that the world has moved past him.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF POST-WAR JAPAN

Japan was transformed politically, socially and culturally in the years post-war. The country was devastated after its loss in World War II, enduring destruction on a massive scale, economic ruin and an identity crisis. The novel takes place in the late 1940s, during the American occupation (1945-1952), a time that was instrumental in transforming Japan's political foundations, economic policies and social morals. Under U.S.-led occupation, General Douglas MacArthur oversaw democratic reforms, including creating a new pacifist constitution (1947), demilitarization, land reforms and the dismantling of Japan's imperial and militarist institutions. One of the most important features of this transition was the cultural transformation from nationalism and loyalty to an empire to democratic ideals and rationalization. Intellectuals, artists and other former supporters of Japan's militarist policies were made to grapple with their actions in the past. In the post-war period there was intense scrutiny of those who had enabled wartime propaganda and nationalist rhetoric. Between 1946 and 1948, war crimes were addressed in the "Tokyo Trials" (International Military Tribunal for the Far East), which further shaped Japan's historical memory. Kazuo Ishiguro depicts this turbulent moment in *An Artist of the Floating World* through the character of Masuji Ono, a once successful artist who employed his work as a vehicle for nationalist propaganda. His internal struggle reflects the ordeal of many people who had once taken imperialism for granted but later had to cope with Japan's defeat, its war crimes and a new state of greater moral incomprehensibility. The book also emphasizes the generation gap between those who

lived through the war and a younger generation inspired by Western ideals. This shift is embodied by Ono's daughters and their future husbands, who regard their father's past warily, as the novel shows how individual and collective memory evolve in relation to history a complex, resilient process. The historical background of *An Artist of the Floating World* is crucial to understanding Ono's inner turmoil as he tries to establish his place in a world that has abandoned the values he had cherished most. Ishiguro's own life history, with its quiet narration and fallible memory, transmits the psychological and social effects of the war in Japan, suggesting the complexity of responsibility, guilt, and cultural change after the war in Japan.

THE METAPHORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 'FLOATING WORLD'

The novel's title, *An Artist of the Floating World*, has deep symbolic significance. The ukiyo (浮世), or "floating world," traditionally refers to Japan's hedonistic culture, that of the Edo period, with its pleasure quarters, geishas, and fleeting beauty. For Masuji Ono, the world was originally an aesthetic ideal; however, he subsequently abandons it for propaganda painting designed to promote Japan's imperial interests. Ishiguro nonetheless rechannels the floating world metaphor to describe Japan's post-war confusion and Ono's own precarious sense of self. The term comes to signify transience not just of art but of political ideologies, social order, and personal identity. Ono himself bemoans the transience of his own past: "It is perhaps important to understand that the world of pleasure, the so-called 'floating world,' was not the eternal or real world, but one that existed only in fleeting moments." This admission is his recognition that his once-respected artistic ideals have been made obsolete by rapidly modernizing Japan. The metaphor also refers to Ono's personal existential drift, for he cannot reconcile his past to the changing present.

THE FUNCTION OF MEMORY AND RETROSPECTION IN THE NOVEL

Memory is a central theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, not just affecting the self-image of the protagonist but also the novel's narrative structure. Ishiguro creates a narrative in which the past is not just narrated but re-created through the eye of an unreliable narrator, Masuji Ono. The author explores the flexibility of memory, which is affected by personal biases, intentional omission, and the relentless passage of time. Through Ono's introspective narration, the novel explores issues of guilt, justification, and the psychological need for self-preservation.

THE NATURE OF UNRELIABLE MEMORY AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Ono's memories are not absolutely reliable. He consistently distorts historical facts to present himself in a more favourable and exclude or downplay inconvenient facts. His memories oscillate between pride in his artistic achievement and tacit admissions of his moral involvement in wartime propaganda. Sometimes he presents himself as a man of distinction who shaped Japan's cultural and political destiny; at other times, he admits that his actions might have hurt others. This inconsistency forces the reader to question the truthfulness of his account. The unreliability of Ono's memory is a psychological defence mechanism an attempt to protect himself from feelings of guilt and remorse. As Japan moves away from its militaristic past towards a democratic nation, Ono cannot reconcile his old values with the changing ideals of society. His selective memory allows him to maintain dignity while also facing the unpleasant facts of his past behaviour.

PERSONAL VS. COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Ishiguro contrasts Ono's individual recollections with collective memories in post-war Japan. While Ono holds fast to a sentimentalized image of himself as patriot artist, his own generation remains suspicious, if not disdainful, of his history. His daughters, Noriko and Setsuko, and son-in-law undermine his record obliquely, suggesting society no longer honours men like him in esteem. This generation gap in memory accentuates the chasm between those who had willingly cooperated with wartime propaganda and those who had paid the price of that heritage. The younger characters interrogate Ono's past without calling him to direct condemnation, reflecting the way in which post-war Japan navigated post-war discourses of complicity and culpability often electing instead to proceed without confronting past remorse. When it comes to memory as a means of self-preservation Ishiguro deploys memory as a dynamic tool subservient to present requirements rather than an inflexible depository of the past. Ono's autobiographical narrative betrays his internal conflict as he seeks to come to terms with his past and

elude ultimate blame for what he has done. He tactically builds his account to support his self-perceived altruism, sometimes conceding his error but never embracing the fullness of responsibility. This is an attempt to follow a larger paradigm in post-war Japan, where in those who had enabled imperialist ideologies sought to reshape their own legacies in terms of the new democratic politics. Through the introspection of Ono himself, Ishiguro illustrates the purposes of memory at the individual and collective level to cope with the trauma of the past. By withholding absolute recall of the past, the novel challenges the reader to wonder how history comes to be remembered, who maintains power over it, and how people reconcile past conduct with a fluid system of ethics.

EARLY CONFIDENCE AND PERCEIVED INFLUENCE

At the start of the novel, Ono sees himself as a famous and admired man who has been an important figure in the political and cultural life of Japan. As an artist, he was changed from creating work in the traditional “floating world” style of painting, with its emphasis on pleasure and enjoyment, into producing nationalist propaganda art that served the war regime. He is convinced in his work that his artistic input was crucial in the shaping of the national ideology and is proud to have served what he saw as a cause of honour. Ono’s initial confidence is evident in his dealings with others, in which he assumes the role of authority and wisdom. His thoughts on his career imply that he views himself as both mentor and guiding figure in the world of art and his broader society. Ishiguro introduces subtle doubts into the reader’s impression that Ono’s view of himself may not be accurate. As the story progresses, Ono grows more attuned to subtle but significant shifts in his social standing. His daughters, Noriko and Setsuko, and their potential husbands’ express concerns about the family’s reputation, suggesting that Ono’s previous associations will stifle their own future ambitions. These conversations mirror a wider cultural shift in post-war Japan and the country’s effort to distance itself from its imperial history. In this new culture, former members of the wartime government are no longer revered but, instead, suspected or even embarrassed. A telling moment in Ono’s life occurs when he runs into old friends and former students, expecting a reception akin to that which he had previously enjoyed. Instead, he is welcomed with hospitality laced with discomfort. His former colleagues avoid discussing their shared past, and his students have moved out of the sphere of his influence, symbolizing Japan’s wider effort to look to the future and distance itself from its imperial history. Ono is forced to acknowledge that his actions, once deemed patriotic, are now viewed through a different prism. But instead of taking full responsibility, he tries to reinterpret his previous decisions in a way that still maintains his sense of pride.

MASUJI ONO’S PATH OF REGRET AND RATIONALIZATION

Masuji Ono, the main character in *An Artist of the Floating World*, embarks on a psychological journey of shifting pride in previous success and increasing awareness of his moral culpability. Ishiguro presents Ono as a man torn between two competing influences: his own justification of his war activities and the complex but unmistakable social shunning that confronts him in post-war Japan. The journey is deeply reflective, guided by memory, remorse, and the changing judgments of others around him.

SYMBOLISM AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Several narrative techniques and literary devices enable Ishiguro to add the richness of the novel’s theme. The symbol of the ‘floating world’ portrays Japan’s fluctuating cultural climate and the confusing identity of Ono. His house, initially a symbol of prestige, now turns out to be a relic of the past, mirroring his ideals. The nonchronological progression of the story as well as the fractured memory conveys the nature of unsteady recollections and substantiates the fact that remorse is an extended and active process.

THE BATTLE BETWEEN JUSTIFICATION AND REMORSE

The entire novel captures Ono’s inner monologue as he undergoes the psychological battle between pride and remorse. He sometimes accepts that his actions must have had unexpected consequences, particularly when he recalls instances when his nationalist artworks brought about the demolition of people opposed to the war. Still, he never totally owns his guilt, as he tends to justify his actions as having altruistic intentions. Ishiguro masterfully employs Ono’s narrative in such a manner as to make clear the inner struggle. Ono’s narration of past events frequently portrays contradictions, at times amplifying his role and at other times diminishing it as he seeks to clear himself of blame. The narrative approach makes evident the role of guilt in shaping memory as well as self-preservation. The core issue the novel brings up is whether Ono ever feels remorseful or whether remorse is his reaction to the current attitude of society towards him. His hesitance in claiming total responsibility proves that, just like his contemporaries, he is stuck between embracing the bad of the past and struggling to preserve his dignity.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ONO'S HOUSE

Ono's house is a potent symbol of status, decline, and the relentless passage of time, as when he starts, the house symbolizes his social status and artistic power, as he reminisces nostalgically about when he bought it from a respected family. But as the novel unfolds, the house, like Ono's reputation, is a relic of a bygone era old-fashioned and eclipsed by Japan's reconstruction. At one point, Ono sees the physical decline of his house, remarking: "There was a time when this house was admired, when its solid wooden pillars and spacious rooms were considered a mark of distinction." But with Japan's modernization of its cities, the house's glory is lost, reflecting Ono's own declining relevance in society. The new buildings and younger generations, who lack a sense of the past, symbolize a move toward a distinctive national consciousness. This contrast serves to emphasize Ono's failure to cling to a legacy that has lost its significance. In addition, the house's dark, isolated spaces symbolize Ono's inner isolation—both physically and emotionally. It is a psychological space in which he relives and reinterprets his past, emphasizing how physical spaces in Ishiguro's fiction often symbolize profound themes of memory and identity.

NONLINEAR NARRATIVE AND FRAGMENTED RECOLLECTIONS

Ishiguro organizes the novel nonchronologically, illustrating that it is impossible to freeze memory or to be objective. Rather than following a linear narrative, the narrative jumps back and forth through various phases of Ono's life, disclosing selective memories, revision, and self-deception. Ono's narrative is remarkably unreliable his memories shift as he attempts to justify or cover up his past behaviour. The broken structure mirrors his psychological struggle: "Perhaps I am remembering it incorrectly. It is possible that I have slightly exaggerated the event in my recollection." These instances draw attention to Ishiguro's judicious deployment of retrospective doubt, suggesting that Ono is not so much informing the reader as trying to convince himself. The fractured composition of the novel supports the idea that guilt is a process that continues, that unfolds, rather than a revelation.

A NOTABLE FEATURE OF DIALOGUE AND IMPLICIT COMMUNICATION

Perhaps the most typical tool of Ishiguro is the understatement that accompanies dialogue, where characters never directly inform the reader of what they are thinking but rather make indirect comments, silences, and insinuations. Much of Ono's realization of his waning power comes not through direct confrontations but through courteous evasions and backhanded compliments from others. For instance, when his daughter Setsuko tactfully alludes to the family's reputation, she avoids direct criticism of Ono, opting to phrase the concern in guarded language: "Father, perhaps the past is best where it is." This tool, which has been termed 'Ishiguro's restraint,' forces the reader to infer between the lines, symbolizing Ono's gradual awareness of his loss. The reserve of his daughters, the reluctance of his former peers to discuss the past, and the withdrawal behavior of his students all serve to create an environment in which guilt is unspoken but palpable.

CONCLUSION

An Artist of the Floating World is a brilliant interweaving of personal memory and historical accountability. Masuji Ono's retrospection encompasses the larger postwar confrontation with troubled allegiances and remade morals in Japan. The long tale told in Ishiguro's deft construction, searching with psychological emphasis, makes it powerfully a work about regret, identity, and historical interpretation. Ultimately, in raising the assertion that memory is not a given but changing upon reflection through self-awareness and cultural transition, it places the novel squarely in the realm of postmodernity.

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