

Perspectives on the American influence on Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Introduction

Since Kazuo Ishiguro is ethnically Japanese, early reviewers and scholars like Bruce King described him as a “foreign” or “international” writer as if he needed to be categorized (Wong 8). At the beginning, this may have worked to his advantage since it helped to launch his career and his “emergence as a writer coincided with an atmosphere that highlighted his role as a bicultural author” (11). Having moved to the U.K. as a young child from his birthplace of Nagasaki and having both a “foreign” name and appearance, it gave him an exotic appeal. However, he was educated in the U.K., he speaks English as his first language, and he is a British citizen. In addition, Ishiguro admitted, in a conversation with Oe Kenzaburo, to having little memory of Japan and that the Japan that is the backdrop for his stories and novels is one of his imagination (Shaffer 53). His view of Japan, therefore, is a personal one in which certain, well-known aspects of Japanese thought and culture are featured such as filial piety, honor and loyalty towards one’s superiors, loyalty to one’s affiliated group, and a connection between honor and suicide. Such cultural concepts differ from American thought and culture. In Ishiguro’s second novel that is set in Japan, *An Artist of the Floating World*, many of the Japanese characters have to face the consequences of their wartime actions and come to terms with the defeat of their country and the American occupation. This paper will consider how the protagonist of this novel, Masuji Ono, views the foreign or American influence on Japan from his own perspective and through the perspective of his relationships with the younger generations. Ishiguro shows the differing points of view toward American influence, which illuminates the country’s struggle with its identity and the difficulty of integrating a foreign culture with its own.

I. Ono’s encounters with the West

Ono recalls that as an idealistic young artist with the Takeda firm he was unable to pursue art for art’s sake. The fact that Ono refers to the place as a “firm” rather than a studio emphasizes the business aspect of his first workplace. The artists were under pressure to produce quickly as the Takeda firm “prided itself on its ability to provide a high number of paintings at very short notice” (66). Master Takeda emphasized that “if we failed to fulfill our deadline in time for the ship leaving harbour, we would quickly lose future commissions to rival firms” (66). The mention of the paintings shipping from a “harbour” hints that the main clients reside abroad and are, therefore, foreigners. Later, Ono confirms this when he describes the types of paintings that he and his colleagues had to churn out:

We were also quite aware that the essential point about the sort of things we were commissioned to paint — geishas, cherry trees, swimming carp, temples — was that they look ‘Japanese’ to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out, and all finer points of style were quite likely to go unnoticed. (69)

This passage also shows not only Ono’s irritation of having to paint for a certain demand but an implicit contempt toward foreigners for not being able to notice “finer points of style.” While he did not like the “art-as-a-business” atmosphere of the Takeda firm, Ono was proud about his own ability to work fast while maintaining his artistic integrity.

In order to further develop his talent, Ono decides to accept the invitation of Seiji Moriyama, a *ukiyo-e* painter whom Ono regards as a “true” artist. While the subjects of Moriyama’s work were traditional — women of the pleasure district or the “floating world” of the title — he strove to modernize his style in that:

his work was full of European influences... (and) he had long abandoned the use of traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colour, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance. And, no doubt, he had taken his cue from the Europeans in what was his most central concern: the use of subdued colours. (141)

Moriyama, called the “modern Utamaro,” thus put his efforts into incorporating a Western approach to colors in his *ukiyo-e* paintings. However, this “modern” and “foreign” approach ends up being considered “unpatriotic” during the war (203). Ono chooses to leave his mentor because he himself wants to pursue “a new approach” with which, he tells a friend, he can make “a significant contribution to the people of our nation” (163). His first painting, experimenting with this new approach, depicts boys in kendo poses with “the manly scowls of samurai warriors” along with the bold slogan “the young are ready to fight for their dignity”; this shows a startling departure from *ukiyo-e*, a rejection of Moriyama’s influence, and a move from “true” art to propaganda (168). Ono’s original good intentions to bring about social change through his work end up promoting the nationalism that leads to the war. Unlike Ono, Moriyama opts to exercise freedom of expression, remaining open to foreign influences as he believes that his goal is “to capture the unique beauty of the world” and not allow his artistic endeavors to be tainted by political matters (150).

Ono also shows a negative attitude toward foreign influences after the war when he is about to attend his daughter’s *omiai* at a hotel. The prospective husband’s family, the Saitos, have chosen Kasuga Park Hotel, which Ono first smugly comments “has a certain vulgar air about it” (105). He later elaborates further about it:

For many years, the Kasuga Park Hotel had been amongst the most pleasant of the Western-style hotels in the city, these days, though, the management has taken to decorating the rooms in a somewhat vulgar manner — intended, no doubt, to strike the American clientele with whom the place is popular as being charmingly ‘Japanese.’ (116)

Ono repeats the word “vulgar” in reference to Western or more specifically, American, taste and he shows an annoyance to catering to those tastes and what they consider to be “Japanese.” Ono’s view of the U.S. seems to confirm Goto-Jones’ assertion that “(t) he popular view of ‘Americanism’ in Japan at that time was of an uncultured land of bubblegum, tall buildings, and moral vacuity” (83).

However, it is not only in the context of artistic preferences that Ishiguro describes the American role in post-war Japan. Ono’s formal pupil, Shintaro, meets with him to discuss his application for a teaching post. Under similar circumstances in the past, Ono’s pupils would approach him to give them a recommendation; however, in this case, Shintaro essentially asks for the opposite: he implores Ono to tell anyone making any inquiries about him that he was in disagreement with the work they were doing during the war. Shintaro fears that his association with Ono and his “Chinese poster campaign” will be discovered by the American authorities (102). Part of U.S. General MacArthur’s plan for reform in Japan involved a “purge of the politically offensive” (Goto-Jones 93); Shintaro thus had reason to worry about possible background checks by the employment committee. He does not particularly feel contrition for his wartime propaganda work but he is anxious about its repercussions on his own life. Ono sees the cowardliness and hypocrisy of Shintaro’s behavior in reaction to possible American influence on his future

In addition to Shintaro, Ono has an accidental encounter with Jiro Miyake, who was originally engaged to marry Noriko, but backed out for unknown reasons later. While they waited for a tram together, Miyake tells Ono about the company president’s recent suicide. He explains the situation the following way:

“Our President clearly felt responsible for certain undertakings we were involved in during the war. Two senior men were already dismissed by the Americans, but our President obviously felt it was not enough. His act was an apology on behalf of us all to the families of those killed in the war.” (55)

The Americans had punished the company by firing two people but the company president wanted to take full responsibility for his actions in his own way, first attempting *harakiri* and then gassing himself. While Ono reacts with shock and dismay, Miyake and his colleagues feel relief for this assumption of responsibility, whether it was through suicide or dismissals by the American occupiers. Miyake then comments that the ousting of the people that got Japan into the war will allow them to “forget our past transgressions and look to the future” (55). In these two examples, Americans represent a threat to career prospects to people like Shintaro or salvation to the young in the purging of the older guilty parties while preserving the company. But Miyake’s attitude that the crimes or misdeeds committed during wartime can be forgotten is problematic but typical of his generation’s desire to turn its back on the past.

II. Noting the American influence on his family members

Ono's daughters, Setsuko and Noriko, appear to recognize that their father's work during the war was somewhat problematic but they tend to downplay his actions. Setsuko initially worries about the outcome of Noriko's latest *omiai* negotiations and she advises her father to take "precautionary steps" to ensure its success; Ono interprets her comment to mean that he should ask for people's silence regarding his wartime activities in the same manner as Shintaro. However, as Ono agonizes about how his past may affect his children's future, Setsuko later tells him that he was only an artist whose influence was merely within his own limited sphere and she accuses him of not seeing "things in a proper perspective" (192). Once her sister is safely married off to Taro, she no longer feels concern about the past. Both of his daughters are more focused on the present and future and their own households are their primary concern. The two sisters excitedly praise their new Western style apartments despite their cramped quarters. In contrast to the more spacious, traditional Japanese style of house, they describe their homes as "very easy to keep clean and the ventilation is most effective; in particular, the kitchens and bathrooms ... are of Western design and are... infinitely more practical" (156). Ono finds their homes claustrophobic and describes his own large house with pride, talking about the difficult "auction of prestige" that he had to endure in order to purchase it from a very famous, local family. His daughters simply see his house as old, damaged, and unappealing and are not interested in the Sugimura family or their illustrious history in the neighborhood.

The neighborhood of an old bar that Ono once frequented before and during the war is also undergoing change. Mrs. Kawakami's small, shabby bar finds itself surrounded by large, modern office buildings. These buildings are muscling out the old ones and Mrs. Kawakami realizes that her "little world has passed away and will not be returning" (127) so she decides to close down her business. Thus, living quarters and buildings also represent the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, and show how the younger generation prefer the latter as symbolic of progress that the American occupation has helped to make possible. Ono sees this with some sadness as if he himself is also being made obsolete. As Wright points out, Ono "equate(s) the emergent new Japan with American destruction and the disappearing old world in which he had flourished" (67).

Ono's son-in-law, Suichi, also looks towards the future but, as a survivor of the war in Manchuria, he shows his hostility openly toward the older generation who had lead Japan into war. He was close to his brother-in-law, Kenji, who died during the war and feels angry about the wasted lives of many young men like him. When Ono attempts to defend the loss of lives as "brave deaths," Suichi's response makes his feelings clear:

"Those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? They're carrying on their lives, much the same as ever. Many are more successful than before, behaving so well in front of the Americans, the very ones who led us to disaster.... This is what makes me angry. Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility." (58)

Suichi is disgusted with the profiteering of such people who have escaped punishment for their wartime activities and instead now curry favor with their former enemies. His anger is aimed toward the war-mongering, older generation, not the Americans. Instead, he sees the political and social changes that the Americans have brought as a positive force.

As a result, Suichi encourages his son to look up to fictional American heroes rather than Japanese historical figures that Ono admires like Lord Yoshitsune. Setsuko explains that her husband "believe(s) it's better (Ichiro) like cowboys than he idolize people like Miyamoto Musashi" and that he "thinks that the American heroes are the better models for children now" (36). Minamoto Yoshitsune and Miyamoto Musashi are renown as a warrior and swordsman respectively and thus refer back to a warring and unstable past; thus, Suichi and his wife would find them as objectionable heroes to worship, especially soon after Japan's defeat. It is thus not surprising that when Ichiro does play-acting, he chooses to imitate the Lone Ranger, the quintessential hero of the Republic serials called. "The Lone Ranger." The Lone Ranger is a masked cowboy hero with a loyal, Native American sidekick named Tonto and he rides a stallion called Silver. As the last surviving member of the Texas Rangers, he seeks to "avenge wrongs throughout the Old West" ("Lone Ranger"). Ichiro gallops around Ono's house, trying to utter English words and shouting "Hi-yo Silver!", one of the Lone Ranger's famous lines. He is such a fan that he insists that his parents buy him a ten-gallon hat (35).

In addition to the Lone Ranger, Ichiro also admires Popeye the Sailor, a popular character in the comic strip, *Thimble Theater*, that first made his appearance in 1929. Popeye was so popular that short films featuring him as the hero were made from 1933, which is how he became even more famous to Americans and probably how Ichiro came to know him. The Popeye.com site describes Popeye as “a good-guy underdog with bulging forearms” and “a penchant for canned spinach.” Ichiro knows this well, as he pretends to stuff his face full of spinach in order to become strong like Popeye (151). For the American public, Popeye is a charmingly unsophisticated everyman who takes on challenges with determination, and these qualities make him a well-loved, iconic character. In addition, when the character of Popeye was first introduced, his famous line was “Ja think I’m a cowboy?” which links him to the Lone Ranger.

Ono does not know of these popular foreign heroes nor does he even recognize them as American. However, he can share one of Ichiro’s interests in a different pop icon. Ichiro tells him he wants to see a monster movie, unnamed but most probably Godzilla (Wright 79). Godzilla is considered to be a metaphor for nuclear weapons as Japan has been the first and only country to experience its consequences. Setsuko hears from her father that Ichiro wants to see the movie but she doubts that he would like “a film like that” (38). She proves to be correct. When Ono and Ichiro actually go to see it, Ichiro is frightened despite his earlier bravado and he hides under a raincoat whenever the monster appears on the screen. Even before seeing the movie, Ichiro had drawn pictures of the monster with a lot of red flames and “panic-stricken people fleeing in all directions” (33). These images of violence and destruction and Ichiro’s fear of the monster show a negative view toward such movies. Compared to the monster movie, the American films that Ichiro likes feature sympathetic, human heroes that fight against evil villains, offering a simple and positive image and essentially promoting American culture and thought.

III. View of the Saito family regarding American democracy

Finally, Taro Saito, the man Noriko ends up marrying, and his family, speak with optimism about the future and show a belief in American democracy. During the *omiai* meeting at the Kasuga Park Hotel, they discuss the post-war demonstrations happening on the streets that have resulted in some injuries. Taro expresses his approval of American democracy but acknowledges the difficulties of its adoption in Japan:

“Democracy is a fine thing, but it doesn’t mean citizens have a right to run riot whenever they disagree with something. In this respect, we Japanese have been shown to be like children. We’ve yet to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy” (120).

Dr. Saito agrees with his son, responding with “At this moment, our country is like a young boy learning to walk and run. But I say the underlying spirit is healthy. It’s like watching a young boy running and grazing his knee.” (120) Dr. Saito clearly sees the current unrest as the growing pains Japan must endure before it can accept the new constitution and fully adopt democracy.

After Taro and Noriko marry, Ono has another occasion to discuss the post-war changes Japan is undergoing. Taro, like Suichi, embraces the American influence because he believes that Japan should have a “complete overhaul” and that the country “needed new leaders with a new approach appropriate to the world of today” (185). The remark “new approach” is reminiscent of both Ono and his former mentor, Moriyama. Ono expresses some doubt, fearing that the good aspects of Japan and its culture are being discarded indiscriminately and asks his son-in-law:

“But tell me, Taro, don’t you worry at times we might be a little too hasty in following the Americans? I would be the first to agree many of the old ways must now be erased forever, but don’t you think sometimes that some good things are being thrown out with the bad? Indeed, sometimes Japan has come to look like a small child learning from a strange adult.” (185)

Ono, like the Saitos, uses the parent-child motif to describe the relationship between the U.S. and Japan, but he modifies the adult with the adjective “strange.” This may be his way of pointing out the difference in culture and thought. He wonders whether it is appropriate for Japan to remake itself so completely and fears that Japan will lose its identity in an increasingly Americanized world order. These sentiments seem to echo similar feelings of novelist, Natsume Soseki, who had doubts about the wholesale adoption of Western ways endorsed by Meiji intellectuals like Fukuzawa Yukichi.

Taro, however believes that the advantages of following the Americans far outweigh any such disadvantages:

“(B)y and large, the Americans have an immense amount to teach us. Just in these few years, for instance, we Japanese have already come a long way in understanding such things as democracy and individual rights. Indeed... I have a feeling that Japan has firmly established a foundation on which to build a brilliant future.” (185, 186)

Setsuko supports Taro's point of view by expressing her husband's opinion that “our country has finally sets its sights on the future.” (186). Both couples feel hopeful, seeing a rosy economic future with Taro's job at KNC and Suichi's job with Nippon Electrics. Ichiro, as Setsuko and Suichi's child, represents the future of the country and he declares his ambition to become the president of his father's company. The seeds of American capitalism have already taken root in Ichiro to the delight of his parents and aunt and uncle. Ono is not as certain about the future, having lived through the rise and fall of his country through a nationalistic and imperialistic era.

Conclusion

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro addresses the issue of war responsibility and how various characters deal with it or refuse to do so. Ono, the protagonist, struggles with his unwitting involvement as an artist of propaganda posters who had only wanted to produce meaningful work and make a contribution to Japanese society. He tends to be proud of Japanese culture and ways and looks at Western culture and ways with doubt and suspicion. Ono agonizes over the past while his children and grandson live in the present and look with hope towards the future, enjoying the changes, including the material and social ones, under the American occupation. The Japanese people accept a constitution written by Americans, putting an end to militarism and imperialism. Suichi encourages his son, Ichiro, to idolize iconic but fictional American heroes like the Lone Ranger and Popeye rather than Japanese historical figures. Ono's children and their spouses are eager to embrace modern, Western ways and believe that by following the American example, they can be optimistic about the future. The younger generation wants to move forward and separate itself from its tragic past without having fully dealt with its repercussions, not only within the country but also within Asia and by extension within the world. The American influence was forced upon a defeated nation but it also helped Japan achieve its post-war economic miracle; however, the changes made in such a short period of time threw the nation into confusion in regards to its identity, a situation similar to that of the Meiji Era. Kazuo Ishiguro's early works dealing with post-war Japan offer a unique perspective of “a modern society that is continually negotiating its identity and role in a world of global capitalism” (Goto-Jones 149).

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