

# Asian Resonance

## Political Representation in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and the *Remains of the Day*



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### Abstract

Narrative form and its relationship to history, politics and ethics give the readers a scope to add layers of meaning and we are free to foreground and locate the meaning of the text from its omissions, transpositions etc. An evaluation of the aesthetic environment of political thought and actions in the narratives add new layers of meaning. By translating the politically repressed events using Gerald Prince's concept of Disnarration and Linda Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafiction, this paper will explore the restrained mode of expression used by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novels, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Further, this paper intends to evaluate the politicised past that the characters in the novels had forgotten or rather repressed in order to survive as individuals in society. Disnarration brings to fore the manipulation of artistic talent for political propaganda repressed under the garb of oblivion in the two novels. The narrative in fact disnarrates and subverts the political state of affairs prevalent at the time and showcases the characters were accomplices to historical forces at work.

**Keywords:** Disnarration, Metafiction, Repression, Foregrounding, Historical Forces

### Introduction

Story is a living thing and it would be quite pertinent to say that since the beginning of time we understand the world through stories. Stories have the power to shape social events through different frameworks that have certain inherent patterns. The patterns can be identified by focusing on the sequence of events so as the underlying meaning can be discovered. This article attempts to read Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) in the light of Gerard Prince's theory of Disnarrating the story. It will focus on historicizing the text and the social context of the story, using the tools of New Historicism to analyse the narrative's occluded signification.

Narratives have the power to resonate beyond the immediate community, to a larger community. Narrative techniques like Gerald Prince's disnarration is a novelistic solution for narrating the antinarratable or what should not be told. Stephen Greenbalt's comment that "Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Greenbalt n.p.) seems relevant to this discussion since this article endeavours to explore the occluded political representation in the novels of Nobel laureate British writer, Kazuo Ishiguro.

### Aim of the Study

Using post-structural mode of analysis, this article aims to disnarrate the two novels of Kazuo Ishiguro and foreground the fictionalised political representation. The focus of the paper will be to rethink and reframe historical and political narration using Gerald Prince's concept of disnarration. This paper will also discuss the significance of remembering and acknowledging the political involvement in the repressed past and how it acts as a step towards healing the damage that war inflicts.

### Review of Literature

The mass destruction of two World Wars, the development of technologies which threaten global annihilation, the rise of totalitarianism, and extermination at concentration camps have eventually shattered our

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existing standards for moral and political judgement. Such scenarios eclipse the possibility of a meaningful political agency. This leads to a state of judgement and implies that tradition lies in shattered fragments around us and "the very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone" (YarEncyclopedia of Philosophy "Arendt").

Hannah Arendt, one of the most original, challenging and influential political thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose work continues to provide inspiration for political philosophy said that "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the dedicated communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience), true and false (i.e. the standards of thoughts), no longer exist" (Arendt 474). Such ideas also form the basis of postmodern fiction which is characteristic of Ishiguro's work. In an essay titled *The Work of Representation* (1997), the sociologist Stuart Hall discusses the relationship between politics and representation and the systems representing both "...we give meaning to things by how we represent them....The politics of representation, then, revolve around issues of power and control over one's own self and its representations and reproduction by other" (Salazar "The Work of Representation"). In the same line of argument, we can draw on Frederick Jameson's view that literary creation can't take place in isolation from political context. According to him, political context bridges the gap between theoretical speculation and textual analysis. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson emphasised on the political interpretation of the literary text that "conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretative methods current today—the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation" (17).

It is worth noting that none of the representational forms of art such as films, paintings, literature etc. are neutral because it is impossible to divorce them from the culture and society that produces them. Moreover, when we talk about a particular period, like post world-war II certain conditions are indispensable. The power struggles and their history are preserved within the systems of meaning. While a postmodern way of reading text poses a serious challenge to the conventional understanding of the writings, it also gives the readers a stimulus to interrogate and explore the hidden layers of meaning.

Interestingly, Kazuo Ishiguro in a telephonic interview to Nobel media after the announcement of the 2017 Nobel Prize in literature said that "... one of the things that's interested me always is how we live in small worlds and big worlds at the same time, that we have a personal arena in which we have to try and find fulfilment and love. But that inevitably intersects with a larger world, where politics, or even dystopian universes, can prevail" (Smith Ishiguro – Interview). Ishiguro's words are meaningful in the context as this article seeks to uncover the political scenario

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prevalent at the time through the two novels under study.

In the article titled "Public Memory, Private History: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*" (2000) James M. Lang's focus is on narrator's effort in Ishiguro's novels to present historical accounts that invariably suppresses or distorts private memories. He discusses about deterministic tendencies of national collective memories. Similarly, in "Misrecognizing History: Complicitous Genres in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*" (2005), Bo G. Ekelund discusses about clusters of meanings that can be elicited from the novel, *The Remains of the Day* when we analyse it as a travelogue of Steven's journey through the English landscape presenting the imperialist ideology of people he interacts with on this motoring trip. The writer presents it as a political memoir through the interesting perspectives that Steven encounters on his interactions with people. We don't find the writer either decoding the conversations or the silence to elicit meaning.

In both the articles cited above, the writers present historical accounts and political intrigues through the narrator's perspective. It is about locating history through personal stories. This article analyses a different dimension of storytelling through disnarration, since disnarration focuses not on what happens but on what does not and elicits meaning embedded in silence as well as in partial conversations. Such analysis is significant in foregrounding the political scenario at the time concealed in the narrative.

## **Political Representation in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*:**

Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is based on the aftermath of the Second World War while *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is a haunting evocation of life between wars. The novels raise significant doubts about the relationship between freedom and the city in its melancholic representation of lost urban community. Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* muses over the decline of British Empire and is unable to accept the ways of his American employer, Mr Faraday, the new custodian of Darlington Hall. He keeps comparing Mr Faraday to Lord Darlington and is of opinion that, "an American gentleman and his ways are often very different" (14). He takes pride in "the feeling that one is in the presence of greatness. We call this land of our Great Britain.... I would venture that the landscape of our country alone would justify the use of this lofty adjective" (29). He is unable to accept the change post-war brings in and says: "I do not imagine German bombs have altered our countryside so significantly" (12). He blatantly denies working for Lord Darlington in the past which is a contradiction to his earlier pride in his position as a butler in the Darlington household. For example, when Mrs Wakefield, a guest at Darlington Hall asks him, "But tell me, Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him". Steven replies, "I didn't, Madam, no" (130).

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Similarly, Masuji Uno in *An Artist of the Floating World* paints the picture of a devastated Japan after atomic bombings through the description of the cities. "All around, there is nothing but a desert of demolished rubble.... 'War damage,' Mrs Kawakami calls it" (26). Uno basks in the memory his past glory as a famous artist, but has no answer to his grandson Ichiro's query about his paintings and his career as an artist. Uno's repressed past under the garb of a popular artist seems threatened when Ichiro says: "Father says you used to be a famous artist. But you had to finish.... Father says you had to finish. Because Japan lost the war" (32).

The characters are disturbed when questioned about their past and mostly take recourse in silence. The "strategic silences and suppressions" in both the novels, represented in the protagonist's concealed past, invites the reader's speculation (Proctor *British Council*). Ishiguro does not describe minute details of the events. Rather, his characters conceal their past and it is left to the readers to find historical parables in the text and disnarrate the lines adding new layers of meaning. Ishiguro's remark in an interview underlines the significance of such narrative analysis:

Well, I don't try to be a quiet writer. That's really a question of technique more than anything else. There's a surface quietness to my books—there aren't a lot of people getting murdered or anything like that. But for me they're not quiet books, because they're books that deal with the things that disturb me the most and the questions that worry me the most. They're anything but quiet to me. (Thaxton *Interviews with Ishiguro*)

Linda Hutcheon writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002) that Postmodernism "is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political" (1). It "undermines and subverts the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge" (1). An evaluation of the aesthetic environment of political thought and actions in the narratives renders them connotative with various new meanings and significations. Gerald Prince's ideas in *The Disnarrated* (1988) that "the most important function of the disnarrated is a rhetorical/interpretative one.... It foregrounds ways of creating a situation or ordering an experience, emphasises the realities of representation as opposed to the representation of realities, and signifies something" (5) is significant to this discussion. By translating the politically repressed events using Gerald Prince's concept of Disnarration and Linda Hutcheon's Historiographic Metafiction, this article unveils the restrained mode of expression used by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novels, *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. It will unravel how the politicised past that the characters in the novel had forgotten in order to survive as an individual in society is disnarrated through silences. The novels of Ishiguro show how individuals moving along with the tide become agents of political ideologies. It is through

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the character's emotional relationship with the past that the characters enter into a broader relationship with politics.

In *Post-conflict Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach* Katzenstein says:

Post-conflict politics is often marked by four processes which they usefully name as medicalization, criminalization, memorialization and missionization. The first two categories are conduits that transport the violence of war into post-conflict trauma and crime politics. Memorialization is similarly reserved for the most part for actors seeking meaning in the violence they suffered or perpetrated. The political conflicts over the meaning of the past are intense, consequential, and can linger for many decades. (xiii)

In both the novels, the protagonists introspect on their direct or indirect political associations that still haunt their present and seem to fog their future. The characters try to make a sense of their past by revisiting and reconsidering their past. The private memories of the characters give us a glimpse of the historical events that shook the world without directly narrating them. This is the hallmark of Ishiguro's narrative technique whereby, the political accountability of the major protagonists is brought to focus in the reader's mind. As the protagonists enter into a mode of retrospection, the reader is gently exposed to the moral, emotional and political questions they face. In addition to this, important aspects of their personality and states of mind are exposed.

In *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, Rebecca Walkowitz discusses on the idiosyncrasy of narrative style: "Conrad, Joyce and Woolf ask how national experiences can or should be represented, but contemporary writers Rushdie, Ishiguro, and Sebald ask as well how novels might function as effects or symptoms of a national culture" (20). This observation echoes the innovative narrative strategies of the writers like Ishiguro to confront, analyse and diversify the language of political commitment. It is out of Steven's unwavering devotion towards Lord Darlington that he fails to see the latter's discrimination towards the Jews. He considered it "nonsense ...to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic" and had no "association with organisations like the British Union of Fascists" (Ishiguro *The Remains* 145). Steven's continuous denial invites speculation which ultimately leads to unravelling of secrets. Such acts of negation, calls for disnarration. The reference to Lord Darlington's meeting with fringe groups like Blackshirts, associated with anti-Semitic ideologies, shows that he himself subscribed to such ideologies. Steven's continuous denial about Darlington's association with the Fascist groups was the result of the false ideals, that he was serving those great gentlemen "who further the cause of humanity" (147). He took pride in his service which he considered "a contribution to the course of history"

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(147). His unflinching devotion surfaces again when he doesn't question Lord Darlington nor takes a stand for his Jewish colleagues when Darlington says: "We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall" (155). According to Lord Darlington, this decision is meant for the security of the visitors but his stance seems questionable.

Readers today appreciate cosmopolitan ideals and are quite inclined to overlook literary classifications. Instead of making his work an index of transnational politics, Ishiguro's narratives showcase his characters' commitment towards particular ideologies under the garb of cosmopolitanism. The narratives represent the experiences of the characters in the context of racism and imperialism. "Cosmopolitan style emphasises the tradition of cosmopolitan posture or attitude and explores how developments in modernist literary style coincide with the new ways of thinking about political critique" (Walkowitz 8). By using cosmopolitan ideals Ishiguro makes an occluded political representation.

A close analysis reveals how events are re-contextualised to challenge the imperialistic mentalities as in *The Remains of the Day*. The protagonist, Stevens tries to camouflage his identity as a butler of Darlington Hall, perhaps to conceal his indirect involvement with fascist politics of which he is ashamed of. The historical background of Fascist regime and the extermination of Jews affect his present. The personal compromises that he made to deliver professional excellence have left him with a deep sense of regret. For instance, he couldn't convey his feelings to Miss Kenton nor could he attend his ailing father. His unflinching dedication towards Lord Darlington associated his service towards Fascist politics. Throughout the novel, Ishiguro never mentions directly about this repressed secret associated with fascist politics, instead, the representation is ironical and draws the reader's speculation. Steven is not just a character but the guiding spirit of the novel who makes us question about the repressed secrets and the shameful compromises.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens doesn't consider it normal to reveal his sentiments or get nostalgic about things. He is apologetic about reading a love story and on getting nostalgic after reading Miss Kenton's letter. Miss Kenton's words aptly describe him: "Why Mr Stevens, why, why do you always have to pretend?" (154). Much is said when left unsaid and that is the technique that Ishiguro masters at. It is through "controlled omissions and digressions" (Matthews & Groes 60) that Ishiguro hints at the political involvement of his protagonists. In both the novels, Ishiguro buries the political ties of the protagonists that leave the readers in a quizzical frame of mind. This sets in motion the process of unravelling the occluded political representation.

The "floating world" in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* is a subject for artistic representation. It refers to the pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light, which is symbolic of the lost glory. It also denotes a country, a social milieu

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and a past that the protagonist of the novel is unable to escape. Masuji Ono, a respectable artist of 1930s and an imperial propagandist remembers and reconsiders his past actions that pronounce him as a collaborator in disgrace. The novel opens in post-world-war II Japan, with the protagonist describing his home near "the bridge of Hesitation" (1). On disnarration, hesitation is connotative of the hesitation to uncover the past, hesitation to acknowledge one's involvement in war and hesitation to accept the transformation after war. The very first line of the novel refers to the destruction caused by war. Politics and art are blended and represented in the novel. The main protagonist, Masuji Ono, an artist, refuses to represent the real world while his imperialist mentor denies freedom of expression to him. As "the raison de metre of politics is freedom", hegemony seems to jeopardise freedom of artistic expression ("Hannah Arendt"). Uno's creativity is suppressed right from his childhood, first by his father and later by his mentor. It is this suppression that he tries to escape.

Along with creative suppression, patriarchal domination also finds expression in the relationship between Uno and his father, which Uno carries on to maintain with his children. Ishiguro uses "metaphors of obedience" to "describe Japan's post-war relationship to the United States" (Walkowitz 185). Uno was successful in cultivating nationalistic sentiments in his son who ultimately joined armed forces and died in war, but he is unable to inculcate such values in his grandson. He finds Ichiro reluctant to watch a film associated with heroic nationalism. Also, his daughter Setsuko doesn't want her son to acquire the values passed down to her brother which is suggestive of the trauma post world-war. Uno is unable to acknowledge the fear his wife harboured when he cultivated nationalistic sentiments in his son nor is he able to understand Setsuko's apprehension about passing down such values to her son. It is therefore, in spite of Noriko and Setsuko's disagreement that he was eager to offer Ichiro a drink, which was a matter of chauvinism for him. He says, "You women may not understand, but these things mean a great deal to a young boy like Ichiro. It's a question of pride.... You women sometimes don't have enough sympathy for a boy's pride" (*An Artist* 157). According to Uno, it did no harm to his son to which Setsuko responds, "There is no doubt that father devoted the most careful thought to my brother's upbringing. Nevertheless, in the light of what came to pass, we can perhaps see that on one or two points at least, Mother may in fact have had the more correct ideas" (158). Uno's attitude brings forth the system of male dominance and war ethos associated with it, which legitimises violence. It also makes apparent that the battlefield continues to be understood and considered as a male bastion. Here Setsuko's remark shows that women didn't want to even indirectly aid in violence by nurturing their children in a completely different manner.

Albeit late, Uno realises that he needs to betray his past in order to live responsibly in the present. It is the questions posed by Ichiro that initiates him into the process of retrospection. The

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possibility of Noriko's future being affected due to her father's status as an artist makes him question his own conduct. In both the novels the main protagonists show a limited sense of intimacy with their dear ones. In conversation with her father, Setsuko keeps using phrases like, "very kind of Father" (157), "most kind of Father" (158). She uses these phrases immediately after presenting her point of disagreement with him. The freedom of entering into a conversation with a father and expressing views without fear seems curtailed. Setsuko always revealed inhibition in her conversation with her father. Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens too refers to his father in the third person. It is indicative of the hegemony camouflaged in these works in father-daughter and father-son relationships, respectively. This hegemony also corresponds to the America-Japan relationship during the world-war.

Stevens' false pride as a butler of the grand old English house and Uno's as an artist are indirect representation of their associations with war and militarism in the 1930s and early 1940s. Steven loses his father and Uno his son yet, both of them seem detached from them even much before they die. War brings with it a trail of complex set of experiences that proves liberating as well as suffocating which is evident in both the novels. As Turshen points out, "War often destroys the patriarchal structures of society that confine and degrade women. In the very breakdown of morals, traditions, customs and community, war also opens up new beginnings" (Turshen 20). Noriko and Setsuko are seen as liberated women in comparison to their mother. Similarly, after her separation Miss Kenton wants to live without the constrictions that marriage imposed on her. Uno and Steven's devotion to their duty and obligations makes them agents of political ideologies that they fail to escape.

### Conclusion

Disnarrating the sense of self-deception of the main protagonists and empowering their anecdotal experiences in both the novels using the political context unravels the damage that war inflicts. Ishiguro underlines the significance of remembering the past by speculating on the choices not made or roads not taken and ends with a thrust of optimism to move ahead in life. Taken together, this analysis suggests that Ishiguro's narrative is not straightforward or referential rather, the fragments of possibility, hidden behind the occluded political representation add new perspectives to narrative ideology.

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