# KAZUO ISHIGURO'S 'INTERNATIONAL WRITING' AND THE HOMELESSNESS OF A NEW HUMANISM

*ANGELA STANESCU*
'Valahia' University of Targoviste
angelastanescu@yahoo.com

*Abstract:* The present article examines the professions of creed and multicultural literary identity of Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the most celebrated contemporary British novelists, who, rejecting all critical attempts at pigeonholing his work on the criteria of nationality or ethnicity, prefers to define himself as an 'international writer'. The paper highlights the ways in which the writer's claim to an international theme and global identity is verified by his texts.

*Key-words:* postmodernism, postcolonialism, nationality, ethnicity, cultural hibridity, biculturality, multiculturalism, *international writer, global culture, literary globalization*

Kazuo Ishiguro uses the term 'international writer' to indicate the universal scope of his concerns and appeal, his vision of our postmodern vulnerability as 'orphans', or 'butlers' struggling for 'a pale view' of reality in the increasingly 'floating world' of a human condition that leaves us 'unconsoled'. It is this vision of an ultimately deracinated humanity that justifies his alignment with the mainstream of postmodern and postcolonial writing, rather than his ethnicity or nationality. What he does share with the writers he is often grouped with, apart from a vision enhanced by the vantage point of biculturality, is the overpowering theme of displacement, of a deracinated humanity, alienated from the world and from itself, facing an elusive reality of impermanent answers and provisional truths. As the Wunderkind of the advent of multiculturalism and diversifying visions, Ishiguro was to become the very emblem of this migrant identity, providing Bradbury with a fitful title for his chapter on the fiction of the Eighties: 'Artists of the Floating World'.

Whilst his alignment with the homeless writers of London's cosmopolitan diaspora sharing the condition of in-betweenness may be a useful starting point, his work is after all a product of a more encompassing postmodern spirit. Any attempt to pigeonhole him is particularly difficult, as he appears an outsider to any identifiable group. Jonathan Wilson insightfully describes his irreducible literary identity: 'Ishiguro does occupy a singular place in British writing: he is neither native-born nor a descendent of the Old Empire, and thus stands outside the peculiarly charged and ambivalent relationship between the ex-colonies and Britain' (Wilson 100). In this light, Ishiguro, himself 'wary of labels and such forms of group identification among writers, even at the risk of appearing lost or 'homeless' among the crowds' (Wong 12), is consigned to the margins of a literary landscape roughly divisible between either native or postcolonial writing. Paradoxically, it is his own sense of cultural alienation that may link him to both ends of the spectrum.

His self-professed outsidedness has given criticism the cue for an interpretation of his work through the concept of displacement. Barry Lewis makes a solid case in favour of such a view, contending that Ishiguro's admission to being '*stuck on the margins*' is an act of 'aligning himself with the postcolonial emphasis on the marginal, the liminal, the excluded' (Lewis 13). His sense of his own acculturation is the key to his pervasive sense of homelessness:

> My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into…thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer. I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a very English Englishman and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either. And so I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be my history (Ishiguro, quoted in Oe and Ishiguro 82-3).

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This elusive sense of homeliness or belonging to a spatially circumscribed history links him to the self-image projected by Naipaul, that of the perpetual exile. But the image of the postcolonial refugee is transcended by Ishiguro in his concept of homelessness as the crux of the postmodern condition in the so-called 'era of displacement', as Lewis calls it: 'He is, in short, a displaced person, one of the many in the twentieth century of exile and estrangement…the age of both exiles and chameleons, those displaced involuntarily and those who chose to drift and adapt' (Lewis 1-4). Ishiguro's biography recommends him as belonging to both of the above types. Displaced involuntarily at the age of six, when his family moved to England, he made the most of his experience by choosing to adapt. Yet, he often presented the early rupture with his native environment as a disruptive event. It would be too much to call it an exile, although Lewis describes it in these terms:

> ...leaving his home in Japan was a wrench for him as a child…This traditional extended family provided [him] with a secure and stable infancy. When he left for Britain in 1961, he was suddenly exiled from this safe haven, an exile made even more unsettling by the uncertainty about when or whether the family would return (Lewis 8).

Without equating it to a trauma, as 'he does not subscribe to Freudian theory' (Wong 2) when it comes to assessing his own inscape, Ishiguro admits that it left him with a sense of 'emotional bereavement or emotional deprivation', a regret for 'never having gone back…[for the] whole person he was supposed to become (Jaggi 20-4). Like his protagonists, he feels nostalgia for missed possibilities, wondering about the kind of person he might have been. Though not overcharged with the raw nerves of unhealed exile, this sense of loss may be deemed as a defining streak of his personal and artistic temperament. This is how he describes it:

> For me, the creative process has never been about anger or violence, as it is with other people; it's more to do with regret or melancholy. I don't feel I've regretted not having grown up in Japan. That would be absurd. This is the only life I have known. I had a happy childhood, and I've been very happy here. But it's to do with the strong emotional relationships I had in Japan that were suddenly severed at a formative emotional age, particularly with my grandfather (Ishiguro, quoted in Yaggi 23).

Adaptation has meant translating this 'tug-of-war between a sense of homelessness and being 'at home'' (Lewis 3) into a position of personal and artistic freedom from any partisan allegiances or causes except those of his art. He has come to represent 'a more positive trend encouraging placelessness…which accelerated the globalisation of culture [and]…led to the formation of a new breed of displaced person, one who is proud not to feel affiliated to any specific country or culture' (Lewis 4). Pico Iyer's description of the postmodern condition befits Ishiguro's sense of feeling equally homeless, yet at home everywhere. 'We pass through countries as through revolving doors, impermanent residents of nowhere. Nothing is strange to us, and nowhere is foreign [or]…If all the world is alien to us, all the world is home' (Iyer 30). It is Iyer, too, that designated Ishiguro as 'a great spokesman for the privileged homeless' (Iyer 32). It is a position he shares with Naipaul, Rushdie or Mo, for whom 'the phrase 'privileged homeless' is…not necessarily an oxymoron in an era of displacement…[where] immersion in the cultures of both East and West…enables [them] to become rooted in rootlessness' (Lewis 5). For these writers, in-betweenness has been sublimated into a special kind of intellectual freedom from any socio-historical constituency. Yet, they do pertain to a constituency they have themselves created, that of the writer who 'is typically between two worlds and thus produces a hybrid text' (Lewis 14).

Looking back, we may say that the postmodern displacement of literary identity is only a culmination of an earlier tradition of congenial stateless writers who have marked the history of fiction while 'being between cultures and identities' (Lewis 14): Wilde, Conrad, James, Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov. Brian W. Shaffer sees no reason why it should 'come as a surprise' that

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artists like Ishiguro, Naipaul or Rushdie 'now rank among England's most distinguished contemporary novelists', particularly 'in a century of British prose fiction heralded and shaped by such transplanted authors as the Polish Joseph Conrad and the American Henry James' (Shaffer 1). Undoubtedly, these unsettled homeless minds are the founders of a house of fiction capacious enough for everyone, in which Ishiguro has his own window onto the world. The house of fiction is the closest thing he can claim as his home, which Lewis sees as 'a halfway house, neither Japanese nor English, somewhere in-between departure and arrival, nostalgia and anticipation' (Lewis 1).

Adhering to the literary cosmopolitanism so characteristic of Rushdie's own 'genealogical tree of fiction', Ishiguro reclaims his literary ancestors from among a quite eclectic group. Undermining the stereotyping tendency of criticism to associate him with the Japanese novelistic tradition, he affiliates himself to a classic European canon, and indicates Dostoevsky and Chekhov as congenial spirits and significant influences, 'two god-like figures in my reading experience' (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 15). Lewis notes: 'From the former he absorbed the exploration of deep psychic dissonances, and from the latter the divining of subterranean currents of emotion' (Lewis 12). Thus, Ishiguro grows to hybridise the two Russians' quite different approaches of probing the unfathomable depths of the human psyche. Temperamentally and stylistically, his tonality evokes Chekhov's twilit, nostalgic, confining universe of domesticity. His novels evince the still surface of everyday negotiations with reality, the slow movement through the trivia of daily existence, unfolding in an even flow which hides unexpected and threatening depths. Ishiguro emulates Chekhov's 'carefully controlled tone' (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 15), with its undertones of simmering emotion, and the apparently plotless, uneventful surface of his prose. He acknowledges to his deliberate effacement of plot: 'I try to put in as little plot as possible' (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 15). This accounts for 'the spare precision...the slow pace and relative unimportance of plot…the steady, unhurried focus on ordinary life' (Parkes 15), which have come to constitute the hallmark of Ishiguro's oeuvre. While admitting to his preference for Chekhov's vibrant understatement, he confesses to being lured by the more tumultuous universe of Dostoevsky: 'I do sometimes envy the utter mess, the chaos of Dostoevsky' (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 15). It is something he attempted in the dense, nightmarish and menacing psychological disorientation of *A Pale View of Hills* or *The Unconsoled*. The latter novel has also been associated with the work of Kafka, or even Thomas Mann or Thomas Bernhard, all of them 'artists who were also 'between cultures'' (Lewis 12). Alternatively, Ishiguro is often compared to Henry James, on grounds of their shared preoccupation with the psychological minutiae of their characters' interaction with the world, and the primacy of an 'international theme', focused on the individual's awareness of cultural difference and alterity.

However, the bulk of critical opinion on his work has been obsessed with tracing a Japanese ethos or mood in his novels. In spite of Ishiguro's unambiguous attempts to discourage such cultural stereotyping, he is often compared with writers such as Masuji Ibuse, Yasunari Kawabata, Natsume Soseki or Junichiro Tanizaki. But even as he tries to play down such affinities, his comments on these authors sound almost self-referential. For example, he circumscribes Kawabata to a ''classical' tradition of Japanese prose writing…which placed value on lyricism, mood and reflection rather than on plot and character...Kawabata needs to be read slowly, the atmosphere savoured, the characters' words pondered for their nuances' (Ishiguro, quoted in Parkes 23). This sounds uncannily like a description of his own prose, which shows that a discussion of Ishiguro's affinities with the Japanese canon is not entirely groundless or far-fetched, so long as it does not degenerate into reflex stereotyping.

## Displacement as the postmodern existential condition

Maybe because of the author's professed 'homelessness, classlessness [and]…his lack of a country to call his own' (Lewis 4), Ishiguro's work has been mainly examined 'through the optic of displacement, and its effect upon his themes, characters and style…[since] the concepts of dislocation and homelessness…are versatile tools in exploring the richness of Ishiguro's writings'

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(Lewis 2). Barry Lewis observes that 'displacement is a word that often crops up in criticism of Ishiguro's novels' (Lewis 15). More often than not, the problem of displacement at the core of his work has been bound up with a biographical perspective focussed on the author's own cultural rootlessness. In addition, the writer's foreignness has also elicited associations with the literature of exile, which has enriched English fiction since the modernist era up to this day. Ishiguro's exilic identity has been equated with the very source of his thematic concerns. Abdul R. JanMohamed describes the dialectic of exile and deracination as a haunting sense of absence: 'the notion of exile always emphasizes the absence of "home", of the cultural matrix that formed the individual subject; hence, it implies an involuntary or enforced rupture between the collective subject of the original culture and the individual subject (JanMohamed, quoted in Lewis 5).

The exilic condition is believed to be imprinted on one's mindscape or artistic sensibility, leaking, as it were, into the work itself. Consequently, Ishiguro's characters are considered to share the author's sense of homelessness. On the other hand, as Lewis warns, 'the surge towards diversity creates in its wake, inevitably, a sense of homelessness…an intense desire for home and stability' (Lewis 5). Ishiguro's sense of detachment from a fixed centre of cultural self-consciousness can account for his novels being 'very rooted in a particular house or place' (Oe and Ishiguro 82-3). His writing is permeated by a longing for a homely space, since 'the fictions re-enact the struggles between the individual and the collective, the vision of home and the sense of homelessness, with settings that literally house these crucial themes' (Lewis 5). However, the promise of homeliness seems to forever elude Ishiguro's narrators, as 'the main characters…live in houses that are not quite homes…they are simply dwellings, convenient places from which to manage their private and public affairs' (Lewis 7). Similarly, Kana Oyabu stresses that the houses from which the characters negotiate their relations with the world are deprived of the rooting intimacy of a real home, as they 'are neither their birthplaces, nor where their parents lived, nor even where they have full and happy family lives' (Oyabu, quoted in Lewis 7).

However, the displacement affecting Ishiguro's humanity is not an overtly manifest phenomenon, like the endemic, historically determined malaise of the disenfranchised colonials of Naipaul, or like the traumatic mass dislocations inflicted by the socio-political upheavals of Rushdie's epos. It is rather a psychic unease, attributable to the characters' changing perception of their identity, under the pressure exerted by an uncomfortably remembered past upon their present and future. Their experience of displacement may be defined as an insinuating, subverting mood rather than a truly exilic condition. So, while we may agree with Lewis's view that Ishiguro's characters 'are no longer at home with themselves, as they try to regain the dignity they have lost', it seems rather extreme to see them as 'being displaced from their natural surroundings' (Lewis 3). Their sense of displacement is rather a longing to coincide with an ideal version of themselves, a sense of wonder about a missed turn towards an alternative identity, or the menace of a glimpsed void, from which they try to protect themselves behind the walls of words. Writers themselves are believed to construct imaginary versions of home for their characters and for their own visions. Georg Lukacs defines any fictional creation not only as a vehicle of our images and understanding of life, but also as an expression of an endemic 'homesickness…[or] the urge to be at home everywhere' (Lukacs, quoted in Wong 6). It is this restlessness that Ishiguro seems to confess to when conceding that a writer's motivation may have something to do with some semi-conscious sore: 'I think a lot of [writers] do write out of something that is somewhere deep down and, in fact, it's probably too late ever to resolve it. Writing is a consolation or therapy' (Ishiguro, quoted in Vorda and Herzinger 151).

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