Ishiguro's literary Freudianism

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Abstract:

The article argues that Ishiguro's novels, whose socio-political, historical and cultural contextualizing has often invited interpretations pertaining to postcolonial or cultural theory and criticism, are primarily concerned with the exploration of the arcane processes of self-perception and self-definition, charted at the level of the unconscious matrices conditioning one's self-consciousness and conscious articulations of identity. The underlying thesis is that Ishiguro's fiction offers explorations of the human psyche which can be interpreted in a psychoanalytical key.

The author aims to demonstrate the indebtedness of Ishiguro's characterization techniques to the Freudian theories of displacement and repression and the function of these subconscious phenomena as protective mechanisms of the psyche. It illustrates the ways in which the self-awareness of Ishiguro's protagonists is affected and distorted by phenomena such as displacement, repression and self-delusion, meant to alleviate the consciousness of failure. The demonstration focuses the author's own professions as to artistic concerns with the psychic mechanisms of self-protection, set in parallel with Freud's analysis of the respective processes, which inform Ishiguro's representations of identity, thus justifying a Freudian reading of his work.

Key words: psychoanalysis, Freud, psyche, dream, consciousness, the unconscious, self, displacement, repression, defence mechanisms, therapy, self-consolation, self-deception, concealment, revelation

The limitations of cultural critical perspectives on Ishiguro's fiction

Biculturalism has usually been linked to postcolonial concerns, and there is a tendency to associate Ishiguro with the quite recent tradition of Commonwealth writing, represented mainly by writers affected by the experience of colonialism, decolonization, migration – the so-called Third World cosmopolitan intellectuals. More often than not, such an association has been based solely on his Asiatic origin and novel-settings, and it is this superficiality of perception which Ishiguro justifiably finds annoying. In defining the features of this new brand of 'international writer', Bruce King aligns Ishiguro with Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta and Timothy Mo, as exponents of 'the new internationalism', who 'write about their native lands or the immigrant experience from within the mainstream of British literature' (King, 193). This view ignores the fact that the historical and political experience of most bicultural writers emerged from the space of the former empire makes them prone 'to examine concepts of ethnicity and alternative history (Lewis, 12-13). Their fiction is mainly informed by an oppositional counter-discourse, rife with unresolved issues such as Orientalism, the construction of colonial or postcolonial identity and agency, considered from particular positions of race, ethnicity, religion, marginality, minority, subalternity.

While these concerns decentre Eurocentric cultural perceptions onto the larger world stage of the postmodern drama, the outlook they yield is still anchored into specific, historically determined spaces and contexts. It is clear that Ishiguro does not fit this mould. Addressing the question of the suitability of a postcolonial reading of Ishiguro, Barry Lewis stresses the limitations of such a perspective, alongside critics such as Kana Oyabu and Steven Connor: 'Ishiguro does not tackle the colonial mentality or the issue of polycultural identity directly…these topics are not within his purview' (Lewis, 13). It would seem that the general interpretation of Ishiguro's internationalist stance fails to 'denote his literary goals and not his ethnicity alone', invariably 'attempting to capitalize on his exotic status', although 'ethnicity is not intended as the main subject of any of his books' (Wong, 8-9).

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

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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. 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' (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.

The psychoanalytical approach as an universalising perspective

The theme of displacement, though central to his work, acquires valences pointing beyond the concept of literal geographic dislocation or socio-cultural alienation. While most of his characters seem to be alienated from their environment due to tidal waves of historical change, their experience of displacement emerges more as a psychic phenomenon of displaced self-identification, pertaining to the psychic processes theorized by Freud's psychoanalysis, particularly to his theory of displacement and repression as key phenomena actuated by the defensive mechanisms of the psyche. This study aims to argue for the validity of a psychoanalytical reading of Ishiguro's novels, which are concerned with the psychic conditioning of displaced identity, repressed self-knowledge and other instances of suppressed impulses such as cognitive, relational, emotional or sexual repression.

Ishiguro's concern with self-consolation and therapeutic writing, of dormant emotions or desires concealed in locked recesses of the mind, sounds intriguingly like the unease of his own narrators, and their tentative incursions down memory lane, where they pick their way gingerly through the tentacles of past hurts or denials, in a therapeutic attempt to soothe the pain of loss or waste. This is undoubtedly the major theme of Ishiguro's fiction, with its subsumed motifs of memory, the dynamic tension between concealment and revelation, courage and cowardice, understanding and confusion. It is in this respect that Ishiguro's ethos comes closest to his international or universal ideal. For his real concern lies not so much in physical exile or migration, but in 'the emotional exile of his characters…people searching for their souls and a way to feel at home despite their pain' (Wong, 6). His narrators are rather exiles of the mind, alien to the territory of their identity, migrants in a past which looks like a foreign country. They become displaced in a dimension of their consciousness which they are afraid to explore. Ishiguro's avowed concern with the defence mechanisms which divert people on the safer tracks of self-delusion and self-protection invites a reading of his novels as fictionalised anatomies of displacement in the Freudian sense of the term.

The term of displacement, semantically referring to acts of removal, change or substitution, has gained in the wake of Freud's theories a new area of signification, related to psychic phenomena and processes. And even though Ishiguro does not overtly manifest an interest in Freudian tenets as such, his own probing of consciousness comes very close to the notion of displacement as it is used in psychoanalysis. His preoccupation with the individual's consciousness of the self covers the terrain prevalent in Freud's analysis of the functions of displacement, a phenomenon related to the centrality of the pleasure principle in the workings of the psyche. The term 'displacement' was initially used in reference to the dynamics of dream processes, to describe the process by which any unpleasant dream content is replaced by symbols and images protecting the conscious against the painful recognition of latent fears or desires. It is a phenomenon of symbolisation which displaces the real significance of the dream, thus alleviating any discomforting awareness.

In waking life, the term has been associated with any unconscious act by which the mind displaces emotionally threatening material, through unconscious gestures or strategies which prevent such content from becoming conscious. Thus, the concept initially confined to explaining

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dream processes, has by and large come to be used for any phenomenon related to the defence or protection mechanism of the psyche, in states of waking and dreaming alike. It denotes the unconscious mechanism of transferring a psychic charge, of an affective or more complex nature (an association of affective and ethical factors like belief and opinion), from its original object to another object. The transfer is determined either by the unacceptable nature of the object for our conscience or by the actual unavailability of the object itself. Freud sees displacement as one of the major characteristics of the primary processes participating in the unconscious. The displacement of tensions from one representation to another is produced through an associative chain.

In Freud's theory of dreams, displacement becomes evident in 'the dissimilarity between the content of the dream and the dream-thoughts' (Freud, *On Dreams*, 91), and is described as follows: 'in the course of the dream-work the psychical intensity passes over from the thoughts and ideas of to which it properly belongs onto others which in our judgement have no claims to any such emphasis (Freud, *On Dreams*, 91). Thus, displacement is seen primarily as a process of transference, of shifting emphasis off the significant material onto seemingly unrelated and trivial images. It is this process which enables the individual to avoid tension or psychic intensity, by releasing it into the realm of insignificant trivia. Displacement lies not only at the core of dream processes, but underlies the essential strategies of survival. Freud argues that this process of transference is ultimately subsumed to an unconscious strategy of concealment.

> No other process contributes so mush to concealing the meaning of a dream and to making the connection between the dream-content and the dream-thoughts unrecognizable. In the course of this process, which I shall describe as 'dream-displacement', the psychical intensity, significance or affective potentiality of the thoughts is…transformed into sensory vividness (ibid.).

In the wake of this analysis, the time-honoured metaphor of 'life as a dream' has proved, from Plato to Shakespeare or Lorca, to be informed by a viable intuition of the dynamic of inside and outside, mind and life, the conscious and the subconscious. We may say that Ishiguro's narrators live a dream of themselves from which they are unwilling to awake, in order to eschew the pain of disillusion. It is a dream in which the intensity of truth has been displaced onto symbolic substitutes of the self's essence, bound up with 'the sensory vividness' of memory, whose flow appears to wrap them into a series of displacements.

Since displacement is commonly associated with self-protective mechanisms, Ishiguro's frequent allusions to his interest in phenomena of self-deception, self-protection and self-concealment justify an approach to his work via Freud's theory of displacement. He has often admitted to 'trying to explore…how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection' (Mason, 336). The emphasis on the element of language is significant. While starting from issues pertaining to psychology, Ishiguro, like any artist devoted to the art of wording thought and emotion, is intent on the verbal strategies employed in human discourses dealing with aspects of personality and self-definition: 'The language I use…tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning and tries to hide away meaning' (Vorda and Herzinger, 135). His 'investment in interior, psychological concerns' (Shaffer, 8) is thus inextricably linked with the study of the linguistic patterns discernable in the characters' articulation, or rather, misarticulation of their sense of self. Ishiguro's exploitation of language in order to highlight the characters' linguistic manipulation of their self-image results in an artfully conducted rhythm of psycho-linguistic patterns. Hence the diffusion or even effacement of plot in favour of the foregrounding of consciousness and its shaping of discourse: 'I'm not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional aspect, the…position the characters take up at different points in the story and why they need to take up these positions' (Mason, 342).

Another concept which can be applied to Ishiguro's treatment of his characters' idiosyncrasies is that of repression, a phenomenon Freud conceives as akin to and conjugated with the functions of displacement. While displacement can be described as the ascendant circulation of

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unconscious impulses towards the pre-conscious or conscious levels, repression is the process operating in the opposite direction, as a descending or regressive censorship, through which the conscious pushes away unacceptable, instinctual impulses into the margins of the unconscious. This type of top-to-bottom control or censorship is denoted by the terms of repression or denial. Repression represents the process operated by the subconscious by which certain images, ideas, tendencies or desires unpleasant to the subject or contravening to his received moral norms, are rejected from the sphere of conscious processes to the level of the unconscious, or simply kept out of the field of consciousness. Repressed tendencies do not simply remain deposited in the unconscious, but have a dynamic character, striving to penetrate and re-renter consciousness. Hence there emerges the permanent, subterranean conflict between the repressed tendencies and the moral conscience which suppresses them. The repressed elements insinuate themselves into the consciousness disguised as symbolic forms, through phenomena like sublimation, *acte manqué* (act whose explicit envisaged result is not attained, coming to be replaced by another, as a compromise between conscious intention and unconscious, repressed drives), *lapsus linguae* or dreams. Repression operates most manifestly at the level of memory processes, where certain disrupting images are simply blocked or distorted in order to alleviate unpleasantness.

Ishiguro's novels seem to translate these immeasurable, abysmal phenomena into manifest, perceptible illustrations, dramatised through the characters' actions, behaviour and discourses. Their engagement with their present reality or remembered past is figured in their confessional narrative projects. The narration of the self becomes an intricate game of instinctive concealment and unwitting revelation, a kind of Rushdean 'snakes and ladders' of memory, which amounts to a fictional study of repressive mechanisms. Disclaiming the stance of the classic master-puppeteer, Ishiguro pretends to confer his characters a certain autonomy, distancing himself like a kind of spectator, in order to follow 'their thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves' and observe 'how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends' (Mason, 347). His own description of his protagonists' recursions to memory is described in terms attesting to his psychoanalytical insights into repressive phenomena.

> [They] know what they have to avoid and that determines the routes they take through memory, and through the past. There's no coincidence that they're usually worrying over the past. They're worrying because they know there isn't something quite right there. But of course memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception (Ishiguro, quoted in Swift, 23).

Ishiguro prefers the notions of self-deception and self-protection to those of displacement or repression, but his novels unambiguously invite a psychoanalytical reading. The present study attempts an analysis of Ishiguro's textual practices along these lines, highlighting such phenomena as displacement, repression, self-delusion and the sublimation of guilt, phenomena characteristic of the psyche's defences against pain, loss and failure.

Irrespective of the cultural or existential context particular to each novel, Ishiguro's fictional voices tell one and the same archetypal story – that of human beings struggling to forget their bereavement and reassure themselves in order to survive and carry on. At crucial moments of crisis and change, their memory begins to ripple the calm surface of their existence and fissure their contrived composure, in a process of repressed, yet irrepressible 'unforgetting'. Nevertheless, they manage to reconcile themselves to its shadows and look ahead with a renewed, if ostensibly fragile, optimism. Psychological displacement is doubled by the linguistic displacement of the narrators' chameleonic discourses, aimed to beguile and abscond just as much as they let out. The web of euphemistic allusions, dissimulations, understatements, of insinuating meanings encoded in the elaborated lacework of verbal decorum, performs an act of textual displacement which the reader is called upon to retrace. The aura of mystery, of suspected, yet elusive significance, or the thrill of discovery and recognition challenges the reader to detect the character's discursive displacements and misplacements, to reconstruct a picture in which everything falls back into place.

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