KAZUO ISHIGURO – CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND THE INTERNATIONAL WRITER BRAND

Dr. Angela Stănescu
angelastanescu@yahoo.com

Abstract: The article examines the issues of Ishiguro non-membership to a certain cultural and literary tradition, starting from the author's reflections on his own cultural hybridity and the inability to fully identify nor with cultural area of origin or to the adoption one. Under cosmopolitanism virtue the literary influences that he claims and the desire to synthesize a literature that transcends in national and cultural specificity, Ishiguro prefers and comes to embody the concept of „international writer".

Keywords: national identity and British / Japanese culture, hybridity, ethnicity, citizenship and global cultural heritage, literary traditions, postcolonialism, postmodernism, history, international writer.

In the company of emblematic postcolonial novelists like Naipaul, Rushdie and Mo, writing of colonial and postcolonial displacements, Ishiguro may at first sight appear as the 'odd-man-out', since neither his biography nor his fiction can be related to the warping experience of the colonial or postcolonial condition. However, what links him to this group is his non-European origin and heritage, grafted on his adopted Britishness. To begin with, his status as a Japanese-born, English-speaking writer, whose novels are set in Japan and Europe, has conferred his work an aura of novelty and exoticism. Since his bicultural vantage point does not pre-suppose the more overtly political agenda of former colonials, his perspective has been deemed to offer a wider scope and fresh vistas on the postmodern world. Secondly, his bicultural heritage has often been associated with the promise of foreignness and exoticism, invariably welcomed by an increasingly outward-gazing, novelty-avid public. Ishiguro himself suspects that the prompt publication and positive reception of his first novel might have had a lot to do with the climate of openness to multicultural perspectives, so pervasive in the British literary landscape from the Eighties onwards. Malcolm Bradbury diagnoses this climate as a

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

new era for English letters: 'The British fiction of the Eighties felt less like the writing of a common culture than of a multiplying body of cultures, adding to the mixed fund of myths, the surging sea of stories, and extending and varying the prevailing notions of what the British novel might be' (Bradbury 415).

Ishiguro is the first to admit that 'this new spirit of ethnic and stylistic multiculturalism that has been widening the vision and range of…the British novel' (ibid. 414) paved the way for his own emergence in the literary marketplace. He relates the inaugurating moment of this diversifying opening to Salman Rushdie's fulminating rise to notoriety, following the awarding of the 1981 Booker Prize to *Midnight's Children*:

> *[Rushdie] had previously been a completely unknown writer. That was a really symbolic moment and then everyone was suddenly looking for other Rushdies. It so happened that around this time I brought out A Pale View of Hills. Usually first novels disappear…without a trace. Yet I received a lot of attention, got lots of coverage, and did a lot of interviews. I know why this was* (Ishiguro, quoted in Vorda and Herzinger 134-5).

While Ishiguro appears to sell himself short here by being unduly modest, he fully captures the spirit of the moment. But as he began to assert his own distinctive voice in this multicultural chorus, he found himself caught in something of a paradox, which Cynthia Wong describes thus: having enjoyed the 'early attention bestowed on him…as an exotic writer…he subsequently fought against the very labels that earned him such positive notoriety' (Wong 8).

Nevertheless, Ishiguro is not easy to place in the eclectic mass of British postmodernist fiction, particularly as he is determined to resists and eschew simple categorizations, especially those which tend to 'peg [him] as a foreign writer' (Wong 8) 'simply because he has a foreign-sounding name' (Lewis 14). He chose to define himself as an 'international writer', on the basis of the universal scope of his thematic concerns and appeal. However, this self-assumed label has proved to have its pitfalls, as it has been loosely ascribed to all writers of bicultural ancestry and multicultural visions, irrespective of the individual or collective historical contexts from which they write. Biculturalism has usually been linked to postcolonial concerns, and there is a tendency to associate Ishiguro with the quite recent

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

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 12-3). 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). It is ironic that what he recognizes as an auspicious moment for his emergence as a writer has functioned at the same time as an overpowering factor in 'such stereotyping of his ethnicity as one element of being an international writer' (Wong 11). Such a situation is defensible, however, on the grounds that the same 'movement towards multiculturalism and a celebration of cultural diversity…coincided with an atmosphere that highlighted his role as a bicultural author (Wong 11). Still, in terms of

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

addressability, his position diverges from the mainstream concerns of postcolonial writing, articulated from the position of historically constructed subjects, who engage colonial or neo-colonial discourses, decolonization movements, nationalistic ideologies or dramatic developments in their countries of origin. For such writers, fiction becomes a dialogical locus of opposition and resistance, of an articulation of difference and otherness which countervails the very discourses of globalization. Very often, the critical emphasis on their foreignness has been equated to a reiteration of the Orientalist perspective. Cynthia Wong warns against 'these somewhat patronizing terms that situate Ishiguro's Japanese ancestry as the main source of his writing', insisting that 'such emphasis on the author's Asian ancestry distracts from the large human themes' (Wong 10) intrinsic to his work. In other words, the increasing internationalism or multiculturalism of British fiction itself, epitomised by a plethora of bicultural writers, has come to undermine Ishiguro's own, quite different conception of the term.

The homelessness of a new humanism

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

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

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).

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

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

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

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

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 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'

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

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

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)

affinities with the Japanese canon is not entirely groundless or far-fetched, so long as it does not degenerate into reflex stereotyping.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

IYER, Pico, 'The Nowhere Man', in *Prospect*, February 1997; 'A New Kind of Travel Writer', in *Harper's Magazine*, February 1996, 30-2.

JAGGI, Maya, 'Dreams of Freedom', in *Guardian*, 29 Apr 1995, 28.

JAGGI, Maya, 'Kazuo Ishiguro Talks to Maya Jaggi', in *Wasafiri*, 22/1995, 20-24.

KING, Bruce, 'The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro', in *The British and Irish Novel since 1960*. Ed. Acheson, James, NewYork, St. Martin's Press, 1991, 192-211.

LEWIS, Barry, 2000, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, Manchester University Press.

PARKES, Adam, 2001, *Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day: A Reader's Guide*, New York & London, Continuum.

SHAFFER, Brian.W., 1998, *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*, University of South Carolina Press.

VORDA, Alan, HERZINGER, Kim, 'An interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', *Mississippi Review*, 20/1991.

WILSON, Jonathan, 'The Literary Life: A Very English Story', *New Yorker* 6 March 1995.

WONG, Cynthia, 2000, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, Tavistock, Northcote House.

BDD-A4091 © 2009 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:52:20 UTC)