Architectural Projections in Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Prose and the Concept of *Uchi*

Andreea IONESCU[*]

Key-words: *alterity, house symbolism, concept of Uchi, within-without, Japanese culture*

1. General outlines

To the western eye the house symbolises a variety of things which have been passed on through different forms of dissemination. In this way it would be no surprise and no problem to anyone to identify the image of the house in an advertisement for life insurance as a symbol for stability, longevity, or safety. Though generally regarded as a positive symbol by the general public, the house has been endowed by literature with other less optimistic attributes.

In the literary field the imagery of the house starts from the safe haven which denotes the classical representation but takes on new meaning according to genre, literary movement or even the ethnic background of the readers. In a horror, or a thriller narrative for example, the house may assume the significance of the opposite that has been so far mentioned – *i.e.* a confinement method, or a source of entrapment. The eerie image of the house in the opening of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* which, upon mere sight, offers "a sense of insufferable gloom" is a prolepsis (Genette 1980) meant to warn the reader of the atrocities which are about to unfold. Dickens' Satis House from *Great Expectations* stands for the decadence and decay of the various wealthy upper classes, while F.S. Fitzgerald's portrayal of the house in *The Great Gatsby* reminds of social status, power and influence.

When ethnicity is added to the already overwhelming amount of associations the image of the house may have, completely new overtones appear. This is precisely the case of Kazuo Ishiguro's prose. British writer of Japanese descent, he has been highly acclaimed by both critics and the general public as one of the prominent literary figures of present times. Despite often denying any connection to the Japanese cultural milieu, his novels hint at the opposite. In particular his first two novels which are set in post Second World War Japan

[*] "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi, Romania.

„Philologica Jassyensia", An X, Nr. 1 (19), 2014, Supliment, p. 247–255.

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

abound in subtle Japanese references to history, literature or customs that are hidden to the readers not familiar to the Nippon ways.

This paper aims at identifying the instances in which the house is used as a symbol, and explaining what it stands for by filling in with information from the Japanese culture in order to have a wider view of the matter. The approach chosen will be based in the cultural studies area of expertise due to the necessity of creating a clear understanding of certain concepts present in the Japanese culture and society.

2. The vertical Japanese society

One of the defining aspects of the Japanese society is the fact that as opposed to western civilisation which is characterised as being horizontal, the Japanese one is vertical. According to Nakane Chie, a lead Japanese sociologist, "the essential types of human relations can be divided, according to the ways in which ties are organized, into two categories: vertical and horizontal" (Chie 1973: 23). Western thought has generally tended to equalise the people within society: be it democracy or socialism, people are viewed as equal. Every individual needs to be unique in their own way and individuality is in fact probably one of the key components of the western civilisation as well. Regardless of social status or wealth, one could be president, or the hired help, everyone stands on equal footing as a principle and is his/her respected, distinctive self.

The hierarchy of the Japanese vertical society starts with the emperor himself and then descends to incorporate the rest of the people based on their social status, wealth, gender or age. For instance an elderly person or the boss would certainly be superior but children, students in lower classes, younger siblings or subordinates would be inferior. Society splits into three categories for any Japanese: seniors (*sempai*), juniors (*kōhai*), and colleagues (*dōryō*) (*Ibidem*: 26). And while the distinction between the first two categories is clear for anyone, there may even appear certain differences between the members of the category of colleagues:

> The vertical relation which we predicted in theory from the ideals of social group formation in Japan becomes the actuating principle in creating cohesion among group members. Because of the overwhelming ascendancy of this vertical orientation, even a set of individuals sharing identical qualifications tend to create a difference among themselves. As this is reinforced, an amazingly delicate and intricate system of ranking takes shape (*Ibidem*: 25).

Although someone may share a social rank similar to another's, more subtle differences may emerge among these, like the year of their graduation, or how long they have been employed in a company. Along with this manner of classifying all the people around oneself another concept needs to be explained for a better grasp of the social and cultural implications that the symbol of the house can gain in the two narratives considered for this analysis.

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

3. The *Uchi-Soto* distinction

The Japanese are not individualists; it is believed that the good of the group is more important than the good of the individual. It would not be comfortable to be singled out and offered praise, because one must strive to obtain praise for the collective that they are a part of, not for themselves. The concept of *uchi-soto* adds to the verticality of the Japanese society further context by placing each individual inside or outside a social circle. The words that make up this notion can literally be translated as home and outside, but it is widely associated with the idea of within-without and it refers to the distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. Both the verticality of the society and the *uchi-soto* are directly reflected in the Nippon social customs and even the language itself.

When one speaks to a person from an out-group, they must be honoured while the in-group must be humbled. This happens through the language itself with the help of honorary terms and auxiliaries. The *uchi-soto* groups can be viewed as intersecting circles. Defining each individual's position within these circles depends on the different aspects of one's life: age, gender, context, and situation. A person can be part of different in-groups at any given time. The smallest one is represented by the self, the next logical one would be one's home and family, another in-group may be one's company, and even inside the company there can be many different in-groups and out-groups according to the different divisions the company has.

> The manner in which this group consciousness works is also revealed in the way the Japanese uses the expression *uchi* (my house) to mean the place of work, organization, office or school to which he belongs (Chie 1973: 3).

In the relation to a person from a different country, the in-group for a Japanese person would extend to the entire Japanese nation and, for this reason, as a foreigner, in Japan one will only be treated with the deepest respect. However, things may become extremely difficult if one should try to integrate the *uchi* of the Japanese nation.

4. The Japanese *ie*

The concept of *ie* is also very much related to the *uchi*. Both of these are readings of the same character in Japanese which can be translated by house, or home into English.

> The essence of this firmly rooted, latent group consciousness in Japanese society (*uchi*) is expressed in the traditional and ubiquitous concept of *ie*, the household, a concept which penetrates every nook and cranny of Japanese society (*Ibidem*).

In Japan, tradition requires that the house and all other belongings be inherited by the eldest son. It is not uncommon for families that do not have a male heir to adopt a boy for this sole purpose. After he marries, the wife must

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

follow him into the house of his parents, the *ie*. The young couple will in time inherit everything after the demise of the husband's mother and father.

> *Ie* represents a quasi-kinship unit with a patriarchal head and members tied to him through real or symbolic blood relationship. In the prewar civil code, the head was equipped with almost absolute power over household matters, including the choice of marriage partners for his family members (Sugimoto 2010: 157).

However, there are only a few young men who still accept this type of inheritance and choose a life in the countryside in order to follow the family tradition and continue their fathers' heritage. Most of them choose to move to a big city, complete their studies and work for a company, creating their own family, not continuing the one of their fathers. Even in the narrative of *A Pale View of the Hills* there is an indication of this practice when the protagonist asks her father-in-law how he feels about his new house. He then argues that the old house was "too big for an old man" (p. 76) hinting at the fact that the eldest son had refused to move in the old family house with his wife and child. In this situation the "old man" had to sell his house and buy a smaller one. The narrator then mentions her regret towards this situation and her melancholy in what regards seeing the old house but her father-in-law does not answer her, but rather he prefers to change the subject pretending like he had not heard her. Despite the practice of abandoning the *ie*:

> […] the ideology associated with the *ie* system still persists as an undercurrent of family life in Japan, and some of the key ingredients of the *ie* practice survive at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Sugimoto 2010: 158).

5. The *ie* in *A Pale View of the Hills*

Having in mind all that has been mentioned above, but especially that *uchi*, or *ie* literally translates as home, or house, it becomes interesting that the first two novels written by Kazuo Ishiguro have the image of the house as a central backdrop.

In *A Pale View of the Hills* the protagonist-narrator, Etsuko is first portrayed in her British country house from a small, quiet village where she receives the visit of her younger daughter, Niki. The house is described to have a study, sitting room and kitchen on the ground floor, and a top floor, where the bedrooms are. There is also a small garden where the narrator relaxes by tending to it, and even an orchard. There aren't many architectural details of the house; rather, it is depicted as a regular, comfortable, very British house.

> When your father first brought me down here, Niki, I remember thinking how so truly like England everything looked. All these fields, and the house too. It was just the way I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased (p. 104).

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

The way the narrator describes the house is precisely what revives the idea of "home" as one reads through, to the extent that Britain is Etsuko's *uchi* and she feels integrated within the small British society that she is a part of. Moreover, when she encounters one of her neighbours, she is referred to as Mrs. Sheringham, leading the reader to conclude that the community acknowledges her integration. The only section of the house that feels eerie and foreign is Keiko's former room, where everything is as she left them. This segment of the house can be viewed as an out-group, or else *soto*; the room of the daughter who was entirely Japanese becomes a representation of otherness completing the image created about her throughout the text.

5.1. The family house from Nagasaki

Early in the unfolding of events, Etsuko's memories, triggered by Niki's visit and the suicide of her elder daughter, start flooding the narrative as she remembers a summer during her pregnancy with the late Keiko. She was living with her husband in a newly-built apartment building.

> Each apartment was identical; the floors were tatami, the bathrooms and kitchens of a Western design. They were small and rather difficult to keep cool during the warmer months, but on the whole the feeling amongst the occupants seemed one of satisfaction (p. 4).

It transpires from this fragment what she actually thought of the place, but was unable to express at the time. Despite the "general feeling of satisfaction" it seems that the narrator was indeed not satisfied because she only mentions in an objective style either the negative or the not-so-negative aspects of her former apartment, but no qualities. This could strike as rather odd having in mind that she was a married young mother-to-be with a decent financial situation during a time of great distress not only in Japan, but in the entire world – the period immediately following the Second World War. As far as it is revealed from the text there was no obvious reason for her to feel displeased with her house. Rather one gets the feeling that it was the home, the *uchi*, that she was not content with. Furthermore the location where the apartment building was located appears to reflect more than just that:

> […] our block had been built last and it marked the point where the rebuilding programme had come to a halt (*Ibidem*).

There is a feeling that an end of a period and the beginning of another is about to come. As if the apartment building is somehow metaphorical of Etsuko's entire life which was on the edge of being radically altered.

5.2. The shabby cottage

During the summer portrayed in Etsuko's memories, she develops a rather strange friendship with a woman named Sachiko who also had a daughter and

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

who was living near the apartment building. In fact, from Etsuko's apartment window the small, tattered cottage could be spotted.

> One wooden cottage had survived both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers. I could see it from our window, standing alone at the end of that expanse of wasteground, practically on the edge of the river (*Ibidem*).

It is generally assumed that Sachiko is a doppelganger of the protagonist onto whom the negative, shameful or disturbing images are projecting onto. In fact, it could be presumed that the cottage represents the stage in the protagonist's life which followed the one described above. The architecture of this house is pictured as a traditional country house from Japan but throughout the entire text one is constantly reminded of how shabby it is, or that there was no electricity.

> The cottage was tidy, but I remember a kind of stark shabbiness about the place; thewooden beams that crossed the ceiling looked old and insecure, and a faint odour of dampness lingered everywhere. At the front of the cottage, the main partitions had been left wide open to allow the sunlight in across the veranda. For all that, much—of the place remained in shadow (p. 7).

Additionally it is insisted upon the fact that inside the house it was always dark regardless of how sunny the weather was outside. On more than one occasion the poverty of the house is contrasted against some elegant objects that Sachiko had, like for example a fine tea set giving the impression that her life has not always been so plain. Also, the reader is reminded several times that beyond the cottage lay a forest just beyond a river. All of this leads to the conclusion that this hut represents more than just a means of accommodation. It becomes symbolic of the darkest time in the protagonists life, a period so dark that led her to the very edge of civilised living.

From how the two houses are presented, it is quite clear that the nice apartment which she shared with her first husband is considered *uchi*, and the small hut is considered *soto*. Etsuko does not deny her Japanese-ness, but she denies certain aspects of her life. Her doppelganger's house, which she looks down on from her high window in the apartment building is a decomposed, small , old house situated near a beautiful complex of blocks but only because it had not been torn down until that point. Somehow it had escaped the atomic bomb, and the demolitions necessary to build the new Japan, and it stood opposite the new structures as a reminder of a less than honourable past, bearing a resemblance to the dim period it stands for in the memories of the narrator.

6. *An Artist of the Floating World* – the house as centre

In *An Artist of the Floating World* the narrative opens with the location of the protagonist's house and follows with a short digression about how it came to be in his possession. Here too the house is central to the full understanding of the text. It is described as an institution in itself, large, grandiose, with many rooms

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

and an tasteful interior garden; a "fine cedar gateway" guards the entrance, while "the roof with its elegant tiles and its stylishly carved ridgepole" (Ishiguro 1989: 2) complete the image. The house also had added to it:

> […] an eastern wing […], comprising three large rooms, connected to the main body of the house by a long corridor running down one side of the garden. This corridor was so extravagant in its length that some people have suggested Sugimura built it – together with the east wing – for his parents, whom he wished to keep at a distance (*Ibidem*: 4-5).

The mansion had been built by a very wealthy man of great fame in the narrator's home city, Sugimura, whom is referred to time and again in the text as a very extravagant individual. The house is also constantly compared to its former glory from when it had been in its first owner's possession.

> Today, if I took you to the back of the house, and moved aside the heavy screen to let you gaze down the remains of Sugimura's garden corridor, you may still gain an impression of how picturesque it once was. But no doubt you will notice too the cobwebs and mould that I have not been able to keep out; and the large gaps in the ceiling, shielded from the sky only by sheets of tarpaulin (*Ibidem*: 5).

By continuously mentioning the glory days of the narrator's home it becomes an *ie* in the traditional sense, that has been mentioned above. It should have been passed from father to son in an uninterrupted link. Alas, the original owner only had female successors and after his death they have decided to sell it. However, the narrator feels that in a certain way he could be related to this important man from the past, and therefore entitled to become his heir to own the house. He even goes into great detail concerning how he had been hand-picked by Sugimura's daughters as worthy to buy the house.

From the first mention of the estate the focus shifts to the present times of the narrative in post Second World War Japan when the war, the lack of money but also the old age of the protagonist who is not able to keep up with all that needs to be done in a house as big as that, have taken their toll and its state has decayed. In this sense the house becomes a metaphor of the institution of monarchy, which had fallen from great heights during the Second World War and needed a lot of care and attention in order to become once again glorious.

The house represents the *uchi*, the in-group for Masuji. It is where most of the narrative unfolds. He does not feel that he is part of the Japanese society, which has so easily cast him out and forgotten, or even ignored him, becoming a representation of the *soto* in this manner. Because he does not feel at home during the present, contemporaneity becomes his *soto* while the past, where he felt comfortable, becomes his *uchi*.

Unfortunately, he cannot live in the past and has to make the difficult decision of leaving his comfort zone. The only time when he does leave the safety of his home, it is to resolve certain problems regarding his younger daughter's engagement and a couple of walks with his daughters and grandson.

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

The house is *uchi* for Masuji also in the sense of self. Just as he starts mending the different parts of the house that have been altered by the bombing during the war, he embarks upon mending his own name and on the whole, his life also. By the end of the narrative, house and owner have been fully restored.

7. Final remarks

The symbol of the house is one of several meanings and deep substance, but viewed from the perspective offered by the Japanese culture, the already overwhelming imagery of the house takes on new significance. Neither of the two protagonists feel that Japanese is their home culture, but nor do they desert it. They feel like once that was home. Masuji, for instance, chooses to do whatever it may take in order to become a part of it again, while Etsuko sets it aside although she accepts it as part of her past and her cultural heritage. The concept of *uchi* is clearly present in Kazuo Ishiguro's first novels, although it probably reflects in different ways. However, it can be concluded that both the Japanese ethnic background and cultural milieu act as a key component in the early prose of Kazuo Ishiguro.

Bibliography

Chie 1973: Nakane Chie, *Japanese Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973, 23; http://bookre.org/reader?file=2228662.

Dickens, Charles, *Great Expectations*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1400/1400-h/1400-h.htm.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*, http://www.publicbookshelf.com/fiction/great-gatsby/younger-vulnerable.

Genette 1980: Genette, Gérard, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, New York, Cornell University Press.

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *A Pale View of the Hills*, p. 7, http://bookre.org/reader?file=1460388.

Ishiguro 1989: Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World*, New York, Vintage International, 2.

Poe, Edgar Allen, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2148/2148-h/2148-h.htm#link2H_4_0007.

Sugimoto 2010: Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, http://bookre.org/reader? file=1026448.

Architectural Projections in Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Novels and the Concept of *Uchi*

As a metaphor, the house has been used to symbolise an array of things; it has stood for family, stability, or safety, but in the texts of Kazuo Ishiguro it gains new meaning. The symbolism of the house is central in all of his novels, however, in the first two, the setting makes the representations of the home have an echo of Japaneseness which the others lack. In *A Pale view of The Hills* the house is viewed through the eyes

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)

of the narrator from within her English country home into her earlier apartment, which she shared with her former husband, without it, down at the ragged hut where her doppelganger lives. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the house is presented as an old-fashioned, but grand Japanese-style villa looking desolate after the war had taken its toll, ever so similar to post-war Japan. The aim of this paper is to identify the instances in which the Japanese other is captured in the symbolism of the house through one of the key components of the Japanese culture, the concept of uchi-soto (within-without).

BDD-A8064 © 2014 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:52:31 UTC)