

The Portrayal of Women Characters in Ishiguro's Select Novels

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Abstract

The winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, Kazuo Ishiguro is a British novelist, screen-writer and lyricist of Japanese origin. He has been a recipient of a number of awards and honours including Booker Prize (1985), Order of British Empire (1898), Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1998), Order of the Rising Sun (2018).

The female characters in the novels of Ishiguro exhibit highly complex behaviours. Certain characters face serious oppression yet stand strong, while others lose their minds. Therefore, these characters could be understood properly only if they are studied under feminism.

The ideology of equal status for women in social, political and economic spheres is broadly termed as feminism. The theories about problems faced by women due to gender bias in the fields of politics and sociology are classified under feminism. Furthermore, all movements and struggles aimed at the betterment of women's lives were brought under the umbrella of feminism. It can be classified into three periods. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present.

This paper aims to study certain major female characters of Ishiguro from the novels, *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*.

Keywords: Feminism, Fertility, Feminine Psyche, Oppression.

Introduction

The winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, Kazuo Ishiguro is a British novelist, screen-writer and lyricist of Japanese origin. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan, on 8 November 1954. When, in 1960, his father began research at the National Institute of Oceanography, Ishiguro and his mother moved to England with him. He was schooled in Surrey at a boys' school. He studied Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, a member of the postgraduate course run by Malcolm Bradbury, where he met Angela Carter, who became an early mentor.

He has been writing full-time since 1982. In 1983, shortly after the publication of his first novel, Kazuo Ishiguro was nominated by *Granta* magazine as one of the 20 'Best of Young British Writers'. He has been a recipient of a number of awards and honours including Booker Prize (1985), Order of British Empire (1988), Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1998), Order of the Rising Sun (2018).

He is popular for his novels *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, *When We Were Orphans*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Buried Giant* and *The Unconsoled*. He has also writing for the screen and lyrics of popular music.

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Over the course of time, its focus shifted into different aspects relevant to the era. Thus, it can be classified into three periods. The first feminist wave was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third extends from the 1990s to the present. Feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. It is manifest in a variety of disciplines such as feminist geography, feminist history and feminist literary criticism.

Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within Western society, ranging from culture to law. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights, such as, rights of contract, property rights, voting rights; for women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights including access to contraception and quality prenatal care; for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for workplace rights, including maternity leave and equality in wages; against patriarchy and all sorts of discrimination which was triggered by gender.

For a major portion of time, West European and North American white women from middle class society were the proponents of feminist theories and movements. Yet, alternative theories of feminism have been proposed by other race women too. As the civil Rights movement gained momentum in the US and the European colonialism in Caribbean islands, Latin America and Africa started to decline, these new ideas and theories of feminism also started to grow faster.

This paper aims to study certain major female characters of Ishiguro from the novels, *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*.

Plot-overview

The Remains of the Day is the 1989 novel by Kazuo Ishiguro, where the protagonist, Stevens, is a butler with a long record of service at Darlington Hall, a stately home near Oxford, England. Stevens is the stereotypical English butler, who is all work and no play. He goes off on a journey in 1956. His major purpose was to meet a former housekeeper at Hall and bring her back to work. During his journey, he narrates incidents of 1920s and 1930s. Throughout his journey, Stevens vents out his insecurities and regrets in life, occasionally

justifying his actions. At the end of the journey, his life comes full circle when he understands the follies in his character and decides to make amends so that he can live a more fulfilling life.

A Pale View of Hills was Ishiguro's Post-graduate dissertation which was later published as his first novel in 1982. It is the story of Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman living alone in England, and opens with discussion between Etsuko and her younger daughter, Niki, about the recent suicide of Etsuko's older daughter, Keiko. As the story progresses the readers come to know that Keiko was Etsuko's daughter from her first marriage and Niki was born in her second marriage to an Englishman. After her remarriage, Etsuko had moved to England with her husband and her two daughters. But, unlike Niki, who was half English, Keiko was totally a Japanese girl and thus unable to communicate in English. This makes her a recluse and isolated in her life and finally, led to her suicide. Etsuko carries the guilt in her mind of having caused Keiko's death. As the narrator, Etsuko tries to redeem herself through self-justification in the story.

When We Were Orphans is the fifth novel by Ishiguro, published in 2000. It can be termed a detective novel. Christopher Banks, an English detective is the protagonist of this novel. He spent his early childhood in the Shanghai International Settlement in China in the early 1900s, until his father and his mother disappeared within a few weeks of each other, when the boy was about ten years old. Christopher was sent to live with his aunt in England. He becomes a successful detective and intends to solve the case of his parents' disappearance. He is under the misconception that there is a great mystery behind the vanishing of his parents and that solving this would help prevent an impending global catastrophe. In the end, he understands the truth and is disillusioned at its triviality. His father had died by then and he finds his mother at a mental asylum.

Never Let Me Go is a 2005 science fiction novel by Ishiguro. The novel takes place in a dystopian version of late 1990s England, where the lives of ordinary citizens are prolonged through a state-sanctioned program of human cloning. The clones are raised in establishments, away from the mainstream society, in the form of schools and they are considered as students there. Once they reach adolescence, they start donating internal organs to normal human beings in need. All "donors" receive care from designated "carers", clones who have not yet begun the donation process. The clones continue to donate organs until they "complete", which is a euphemism for death after the donation of three or four organs. The novel revolves around three clones – Kathy, Ruth and Tommy. They were friends from the school for clones, Hailsham. They go through the ebb and flow of friendship and relationship. As the novel closes, Ruth and Tommy are dead and Kathy, nearing her first donation, drives off to horizon in the consolation that she would soon be reunited with Tommy.

Portrayal of Women

It is interesting to note that a lot of women characters in the novels of Ishiguro resemble the stereotype of 'Japanese women'. To begin with, in the novel *A Pale View of Hills*, the major characters Etsuko, Keiko, and the minor characters such as Sachiko and the wife of Hanada are greatly dependent on others. Except in the case of Keiko, these supporting structures are the men in their life. Etsuko's marriage to Jiro, though not particularly a sad one, was not a fulfilling one. After her marriage fails, she seeks refuge in the affection shown by a British man and soon marries him.

Another reason for this marriage is to provide a better life to Keiko, though it did not work out. In fact, it had an opposite reaction on Keiko. She was alienated in her own family. Her insecurities were made prominent

and it led to her suicide, which is another significant trait in Japanese culture. As a race, the Japanese had always glorified suicide with the rituals and considering it as a means of regaining their honour. This belief is exemplified in the news report of her suicide in the novel. Etsuko is shocked to find that the English people have stereotyped the Japanese as a race addicted to suicide.

Keiko, unlike Niki was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room. (*A Pale View of Hills*, 13)

In many ways, Sachiko is similar to Etsuko. This does not come as a surprise, as they are both stereotypical Japanese women. Sachiko is portrayed as a woman desperate to find a husband after the death of her first husband. Her motivation behind this is the same as Etsuko's, that is, to provide a better life for her daughter. Despite the repeated betrayal from her American boyfriend Frank, she harbours hope that somehow she will be able to move to the US with him. Her loyalty to him is characteristic of Japanese women's submissive behaviour to their spouse.

The incident of Hanada and his wife voting for different persons is an example of the general expectations from a woman in Japan. The people often believe that women should not have any opinion of their own. Their opinions are supposed to reflect their husbands' opinions. In the event that they choose to go against the decision of the husband, it is strictly punished with violence.

Is that really true?" Ogata-San asked. He had not spoken since I had come back in with the tea. The other three stopped laughing and the pale-faced man looked at Ogata-San with a surprised expression.

"Well, no." He became suddenly formal and gave a small bow. "I didn't actually hit her."

"No, no," said Ogata-San. "I meant your wife and yourself—you voted for separate parties?" (APH, 15)

Similar stereotype behaviour is found in other women characters of other novels too. For instance, Sarah Hemmings in *When We Were Orphans*, Miss. Kenton in *The Remains of the Day* and Ruth in *Never Let Me Go* too show desperation when it comes to having a spouse or partner.

Sarah's desperation springs from her desire to be of some value in the society. She hopes to achieve this through marrying some man of high reputation in the society. As an orphan, she believes that if she ever had parents, this would be one way of making them proud. She does not even think of any ways to achieve reputation for herself.

'If my parents were alive today,' she said, 'they'd be telling me it's high time I was married. And perhaps it is. But I won't do what I've seen so many girls do. I won't waste all my love, all my energy, all my intellect—modest as that is—on some useless man who devotes himself to golf or to selling bonds in the City. When I marry, it will be to someone who'll really contribute. (WWWO, 47)

In the case of Miss. Kenton, it can be seen that she is clearly in love with Stevens, Yet, she does not confess her love to him as she feels it is inappropriate for a woman to propose to a man. She waits for Stevens to say it first. When she finds that Stevens does not propose to her, immediately she moves on to find another man and marries him. She is not happy with her life with him and decides to part with him, but when she finds

that her daughter is getting married and that grandchildren are on the way, she choose to stay with him. She says that she has learned to love him. This is a sign of submission and resignation.

The behaviour of Ruth is highly erratic and selfish. Her love for Tommy is due to her need for a partner and not due to deep love for him. She even splits up when him at one occasion. But, later, when she finds that Tommy is attracted to Kathy and Kathy also reciprocates the feeling. She decides to barge into their midst and tears them apart. Finally, in her last days, she corrects her mistake. But, it could never make up for the lost time. It should have been you two. I'm not pretending I didn't always see that. Of course I did, as far back as I can remember. But I kept you apart. I'm not asking you to forgive me for that. That's not what I'm after just now. What I want is for you to put it right. Put right what I messed up for you. (NLMG,)

Oppression of Women

Some of the women characters in Ishiguro's novels face oppression at domestic and social level. The examples of these are the mother of Christopher Banks in *When We Were Orphans*, Sachiko and the wife of Hanada in *A Pale View of Hills*. These women are real fighters in their life but they are unable to escape their fate throughout.

The mother in *When We Were Orphans* faces the cruellest form of oppression under the hands of her captor, Wang Ku, a drug lord. She is abducted his henchmen soon after her husband deserts her for his mistress. He is motivated by her act of causing him insult. Her act was not deliberate but Wang Ku was not able to digest this insult from a woman. He therefore abducts her and makes her his concubine. He takes pleasure in beating and insulting her in front his guests. She accepts all this for the sake of her son. She compromises with Wang Ku on the condition that he provides for the education of her son, who was sent away to live with an aunt after her abduction.

his mother offended an opium warlord who arranged for her to be kidnapped and kept her as his concubine. She agreed to submit to him provided he made a financial allowance for Banks until he grew up. Some 22 years later the warlord died and she disappeared in war-torn China. (Finney)

Sachiko's oppression is self-inflicted as it was her choice to stay with Frank, who was a drunkard. She works hard to make enough money to move to the US. But, Frank squanders it all on alcohol. The way he treats Mariko is also suspicious. Sachiko in her desperation does not kick out Frank and sees him as her way to a better life in the US. However, it is highly doubtful if frank would ever take Sachiko and Mariko to America. Despite all this, she stays with frank and suffers throughout. This way her oppression has its roots in her desire for a better future of her child, which is also the case of Banks' mother.

The oppression faced by Hanada's wife has quite a universal appeal as women all around the world seem to lose their opinions and decision making rights to their husband. In this case, even her right to vote was under attack. She was asked to vote for the party favoured by Hanada and when she opposed to it, she was threatened with corporal punishment. When other people hear this story, their surprise is not about him threatening to beat her if she voted against his choice, but about the fact that his wife voted for some other party than the one he favoured.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that Ishiguro has been quite successful in portraying his women characters. Though, most of these women exhibit qualities and character traits of the Japanese stereotype of women, they also possess the universal appeal, in the case of motherly instinct exhibited by them. They are mostly ready to suffer for the sake of their children. Moreover, Ishiguro's understanding of the condition women worldwide is visible in the treatment meted out by these women in domestic and social spheres. He has pictured the agony of women and their mental strength to sometimes bear sufferings and at other times to overcome them.

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