CHU-CHUEH CHENG

Chic Clichés: the Reinvention of Myths and Stereotypes in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson observes that a community is conceived through reading common materials such as newspapers or serialised novels.[1] Anderson's observation captures the milieu of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, but for the era of global communication, the formation of common knowledge has since assumed a different pattern. Language and images in the mass media have quickly been substituted for traditional reading materials because their relatively easy accessibility and wider circulation enable a far greater community to establish a common ground. A noticeable number of contemporary authors writing in English, conscious of this change, are adopting the mass media as an effective apparatus to reach readers beyond the restraint of a geographical border. They hold that low-contextual visual or verbal texts of the mass media demand of the reader minimal background knowledge, and that frees them from the difficulty of

cultural barriers.

Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-British novelist of the TV-consuming generation, is among those who embrace the mass media as an indispensable component of his literary creation. He discerns in

reiterates in his texts generalisations that deny differences among individuals, and inserts

novel *Pale* discloses how

England, Niki, like her father, conceives Etsuko as a victim of an "oafish" husband and readily exalts her as an extraordinary figure worthy of poetic dedication. Deep-rooted in Niki's assumption (as well as her father's) is the fabled dichotomy of a constricting Japan that denies women their needs and a liberating Britain that empowers them to pursue happiness.

The image Niki holds of Etsuko corresponds to that in Western fantasy: the Oriental woman, vulnerable and helpless, awaits the white knight in shining armour to rescue her. The ostensible parallel Ishiguro cultivates between *Pale* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* [10]

Remains derides Britain's self-delusive superiority by juxtaposing its drastic decline to America's postwar ascendance. As the butler-narrator Stevens's motorcar meanders along the bendy country road, his mind drifts from the "greatness" of Britain to the "greatness" [15] of the butler[16]. The myth of Great Britain, according to Stevens's logic, is metonymically explained through the fable of the great butler, and the uncouthness of America further accentuates Britain's sophistication. Stevens envisages the prominence of his nation in terms of mundane trivialities, for he firmly believes that by acting and speaking in a certain manner he will inhabit the role of the quintessential English butler. Such a conviction is best illustrated in the oratorical differences he discerns between his "witticism" and Mr. Farraday's "bantering." The

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details acquired secondhand through a Japanese boy, Akira, in his neighbourhood. Banks recalls Akira portrayed the Chinese districts as a chaotic world where “dead

in pompous philanthropy and yet conclude in mortifying self-disillusion. The pompous rhetoric of benevolent paternalism is later deflated. Colonel Hasegawa, an older Japanese man, cautions Banks that the Japanese solider whom he mistakes for Akira is in fact a deserter. For the detective, an even more mortifying fact is that Wang Ku the Chinese warlord has been his benefactor, paying for his education and living expenses in England, and that “the heart of serpent” does not originate from China but emerges from the West (for Philip is "the Yellow Snake" he has been hunting). The irony is palpable: Banks the white knight is in fact an orphan bewildered in the Oriental world, and he himself a burden of his Chinese other.

with Wood's wording, remains just as incisive: to be orientalised is emphatically not to be Oriental. The aforementioned four novels oe4-iovel

resembles Etsuko's reminiscence of the city: both image and text call to mind popular tourist sights that remain so hastily glimpsed, hazily comprehended, and yet so promptly recognisable.

Set in Hiroshima, *Artist* shares with *Pale* the novelist's preference for metaphorical landscaping and the strategic deployment of snapshot images. Places in the city are either associated with their owners or referred to by their nicknames: throughout the narrative, the little bridge near Ono's house is named "The Bridge of Hesitation" while the bar owned by Mrs. Kawakami is "Mrs. Kawakami's." Ono relates his memory to the narratee "you," who are presumably unfamiliar with the things and events in Hiroshima. The opening paragraph depicts a panorama the narratee would enjoy from "the Bridge of Hesitation." The narratee is soon led to Migi-Hidari, the pleasure district of the city, and subsequently to where Mrs. Kawakami's bar is located.

The pleasure district, inseparable from geishas, is both a site of Ono's nostalgia and a sight of the familiarly exotic. The landscape of Hiroshima, as Ihe

glimpses evoke in the collective imagination recurrent sights of Japan from tourist snapshots and postcard illustrations.

In a metafictional moment, Ishiguro has Ono tease the theatricality of "Japonaiserie"[31] in his artistic production and, more trenchantly, the eagerness of foreign consumers who prize contrived exoticness. Ono recalls that during the tutelage of Master Takeda, he was commissioned to paint "geisha, cherry trees, swimming carps" because they looked "Japanese" to foreign buyers.[32] Ono's decoding of the strategy to produce "Japanese" art implies Ishiguro's self-mockery: in his literary construct of Japan, he similarly manipulates the reader's faulty equation of appearance and substance.

Ishiguro's representation of England continues to exploit such conflation. In *Remains*, landscape markers strategically construct an England resembling the idyllic world the tourist-reader expects to gaze upon. When visiting various attractions by car, Stevens follows religiously the instructions that Mrs. Jane Symons offers in *The Wonder of England*. In Salisbury, Stevens visits the renowned Cathedral, a majestic building with "its looming spire being visible wherever one goes in Salisbury," and there he admires "a view of the sun setting behind that great spire."[33] Travelling to Somerset, he entertains the possibility of taking a detour to visit the village of Mursden, where the firm of Giffen and C. was once located. In Weymouth, Stevens,

such as Dr. Fu Man Chu (played by Boris Karloff) of *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932)

floral painting, and the other features a woodblock illustration of a pleasure quarter with Mount Fuji visible from afar. The First Vintage International edition of *Artist* adorns the black cover with a partial image of an Asian woman bordering the upper right-hand corner and

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Sachiko exemplifies. Antithetical as Etsuko and Sachiko may appear, they are in fact two facets of one person.[43] Weaving Sachiko's past into her own, Etsuko implies that to pursue a better future for her daughter Keiko, she, too, has defied traditional womanhood and suffered the dire consequences of her decision. In Etsuko's incongruous recollection, Sachiko's impropriety may very well mirror her own defiance, divorcing Jiro and uprooting Keiko from their homeland. The presence of Sachiko adds depth to the characterisation of Etsuko. Sachiko may very well be a foil for Etsuko to highlight her docility or, more probably, a double role Etsuko plays in a recollection of dubious nature. Etsuko's remembrance conceals with partial revelation a sophisticated woman: her acquiescence proves merely illusory and her serenity deceptive.

Equally deceptive characterisation is noticeable in Ono of *Artist*. At first glance, Ono may give the impression of a Japanese patriarch because early on he presents himself as an artist of "good character and achievement" whose social status has incurred extensive reverence in Hiroshima. Ono's self-portrait resembles the authoritative father figure that one frequently glimpses on TV or in the cinema. But the domineering figure Ono depicts himself to be merely constitutes one facet of his intricate personality. In early stages of his life, Ono rebelled against his superiors: first his father, then Master Takeda (his first teacher-employer), and much later Master

Mori-san (his second teacher-employer). Though once a defiant youth, the retired artist is not receptive to the juniors' challenges: he tolerates neither the aesthetic deviation of his former student Kuroda nor the political divergence of his son-in-law Suichi.

Under the pretence of quiet retirement, Ono's remorse for his militarist past rattles. Wandering in the bomb-damaged house, he is nostalgic for the prewar years during which he exerted considerable influence in his circle. Ono, according to his younger daughter Noriko's observation, is no longer "a tyrant" ordering people around but a "gentle and domesticated" figure frequently "moping."[44] The illusion Ono holds of himself collapses as discussions of former militarists' *hara-kiri* stir up his guilt. With its pathos of heroic self-annihilation, *hara-kiri* is purposefully deployed to encourage the anticipation of Ono's suicide. The artist, however, is not a gallant warrior. Contrary to a samurai who commits suicide to convey a heartfelt apology for earlier misdeeds, Ono opts for an action of a less drastic nature. He makes a semi-public confession. The gesture, comically timorous, animates an otherwise monotonous character; it, too, resituates the Japanese patriarch in a quotidian existence and re-tn-10(e)4(r)43(, i) suhn Ja3(a)-22(y)20( )]TJ -2

Gregory Mason holds that *shomin-geki*, the Japanese cinematic genre about the everyday life of humble civilians, offers Ishiguro "an alternative tradition to the discredited clichés of militarism and suicide" because his novels correspondingly explore the mundane yet rather sad existence of ordinary people.[45] Mason considers Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa exerting a perceptible impact on Ishiguro's style and theme, citing *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960), *The Heart* (1955), *Ugetsu* (1953), *Tokyo Story* (1953), and *Late Autumn* (1960) as major sources of influence that help shape Ishiguro's portrayal of Japanese characters.[46] He holds that while scenes of noodle-shop, bar, and drunken men in *Pale* and *Artist* are reminiscent of those in Ozu's films, Ishiguro's recurrent theme of nostalgia and regret echoes Kurosawa's concern over the collapse of traditional values in postwar Japan.

Japanese cinema, indeed as Mason convincingly argues, instils in Ishiguro's memory images of his native society, but it merely constitutes one of the numerable forces that determine his vision of the world. Whether in genres, storylines, or characterisation, the novelist also borsTwiuf 0 Tc 0 Tlist alsup5-4(ps)-4(e)4(s)-1(t)-2(ha)4(t)-2(lh)2(is)

Joyce Carol Oates remarks: “In the hands of a less gifted writer, Stevens would have been a stock figure of pathos or biting satire; Ishiguro presents him as fully human in his blind devotion to a fading authority, both deluded and noble.”[49] Indeed, Ishiguro prevents Stevens from being a cardboard figure by advancing his sightless devotion onto eventual self-disillusionment. Through the discrepancy between Stevens’s pompous talk of professionalism and his ineffable regret for the life wasted, the novelist unfolds a remorseful being whose illusion and disillusion invite both ridicule and sympathy.

A related tactic of generic deviation is applied in *Orphans*. In the depiction of Christopher Banks, Ishiguro intentionally invokes Sherlock Holmes to produce the deceptive parallel. The similitude is purely transitory. As the narrative progresses, Banks departs further and further from the composed detective for whom he is at first mistaken. In stark contrast with the perpetually judicious Holmes, Banks is prone to childlike irrationality. Though vowing to eradicate evil at “the heart of the serpent” and solve the mystery of his parents’ disappearance, he fails to accomplish either mission. A twentieth-century caricature of Holmes, Banks is incapable of extricating himself from the entanglement of desire, anguish, crime, corruption and bureaucracy. In contrast to the conventional mystery that centres on the investigation of a crime, *Orphans* revolves around the detective’s personal life.

extent that he depends on Philip to unveil the truth.

Philip, an avuncular figure Banks used to revere, turns out to be a turncoat profiting from the rivalry of the anti-opium campaign and opium-trading warlords, and later "the Yellow Snake" masterminding various high-profile crimes in China. The treacherous and sinister Chinese Other (his parents' abductor and possibly the heart of the serpent) that Banks has all along imagined Wang Ku to embody is merely a minor villain. In fact, it is Philip, the devious and cowardly British Self (his compatriot and his mother's former fellow campaigner), Banks fails to detect.

The mystery, as it is disclosed, contains neither violence nor murder. To the great dismay of Banks and the reader, the truth of his childhood mystery consists of his father's extramarital affair, Wang Ku's abduction of his mother, and Philip's hypocrisy. Just as banal and mundane as its cause, the mystery ends with excessively prolonged and perhaps unduly deferred denouement. The generic principle of the detective story would prescribe the finale of *Orphans* to be Philip's confession, that is, the last chapter of Part Six. The novel, however, develops one chapter further, to Part Seven. Chapter Twenty-three appends the Banks-Philip confrontation, dissolving the earlier dramatic suspense. Instead of triumphantly declaring a case closed, *Orphans* concludes with Banks's lamentation. Thwarting the reader's anticipation, these divergences liberate Banks from the restraints of the Holmes clone for which he was

initially mistaken. He emerges as a fallible being, susceptible to desire, fear, prejudice and ignorance.

Structural irregularities in *Orphans* prompt vigorous discussionrian Fin ney praises *Orphans* for blending "the excitement of a detective novel with the psychological interest of the first-person confessional that characterizes his earlier work."[53] Wai-chew Sim attends to the conspicuous absence of orthodox detective actions: "Despite his gumshoe appellation,1-t-3(a)4(nk)-10(s)-1(ne)4(ve)4(r)3( )-10(g)10(e)4(t)-2(s)-1(

has succeeded in directing attention to stereotypes whose personality is conventionally subordinated to the development of a storyline. Resituating these characters at centre-stage of the narrative, he invites the reader to explore the human complexity beneath the façade of banality. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz notes, Ishiguro employs "cultural stereotypes" to construe his novels as "national allegories," conflates the features of his texts with the attributes of the cultures they appear to delineate, and eventually subverts these myths by disclosing "the fictionalization of cultural truth."[56] The indeterminacy of racial stereotypes and the heterogeneity of

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Maurice (1987). The dual locations of *Orphans* are created

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
2. Nermeen Shaikh, "Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro," (*AsiaSource*, 2002, screen 1; http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/ishiguro.cfm).
3. Ibid.
4. Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (London: Faber and Faber, [1982] 1991); *An Artist of the Floating World* (New York: Vintage, [1986] 1989); *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Vintage, [1988] 1993); *When We Were Orphans* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). Hereafter, these works will be indicated by abbreviated titles. *The Unconsoled* (1995) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) do not fit into the discussion of this essay, for neither text addresses the issue of cultural contention. *The Unconsoled*, set in a surrealistic world, tells how traumas consume individuals and incarcerate them in the haunting past. *Never Let Me Go*, set in the placidity of rural England, relates the disturbing story about human clones whose existence, ignorant of their origins and deprived of future, is solely to serve as spare parts in medical procedures.

51. Alden Mudge, “Ishiguro takes a literary approach to the detective novel,” *First Person Book Page*, 2000, screen 1; (http://www.bookpage.com/0009bp/kazuo_ishiguro.htm).
52. James Procter, “Kazuo Ishiguro” (*British Council*: screen 4; http:// www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth52&state=index%3Di).
53. Brian Finney, “Figuring the Real: Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*” (*Jouvert* 7.1, 2002, par. 12, http:// social.chass.nscu.edu/jouvert/v7is1/ishigu.htm).
54. Wai-chew Sim, “Kazuo Ishiguro” (*Review of Contemporary Fiction* 25.1, 2005),

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