

On The Idealized Image and Japanese Moral Narratives: A Case Study of *an Artist of the Floating World*



Dan Huang¹, Jingdong Zhong²

^{1,2} School of English, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China

ABSTRACT: *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro is set at the end of World War II. It reveals the psychological trauma caused by the war, the self-help method adopted by the characters to heal themselves, concerning “idealized images” and Japanese moral narratives, which are consistent with the narrative ways adopted by the contemporary Japanese government to deal with the negative effects of war. The novel creates a “positive image” by means of morality and memory interweaving, half true and half false, avoiding the serious and taking the light to demonstrate the “mainstream memory” which is more acceptable to himself and the public. In dealing with the moral conflicts of war trauma, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World* creates idealized image through using Japanese moral narratives to shape and strengthen it. When his moral conflict, his idealized image, and his real self can not be reconciled, the house and pub provide him a stage to escape from reality, to hypnotize himself through his own achievement, to ignore his own impact on the war, to reshape his heroic image with Japanese heroic narrative. For the reader, through the repetition and emphasis of the prosperous and the modified description of the house and Kawakami’s Pub, Ono’s career and contribution are also enhanced, his own achievements are exaggerated, and militarism behaviors are blurred so as to make the effect of diverting the reader’s attention from Ono’s sins that urge war outbreak, add fuel to the destruction caused by the war which is highly similar to the application of the Yasukuni Shrine in current Japanese political strategy. On the basis of examining the contents mentioned above, which reflect the nation’s way of coping with the war trauma from the perspective of individuals, this study attempts to help people better understand the continuity and complexity of the negative effects of war. Meanwhile, it hopes that the Japanese government can transmit the negative information of war more objectively so as to have a clearer and more reasonable identity.

KEYWORDS: *An Artist of the Floating World*, Kazuo Ishiguro, the idealized image, moral narratives, heroic narrative.

I. INTRODUCTION

Japanese British writer Kazuo Ishiguro’s second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1985) is set in post-war Japan and centered around a wartime radical artist Ono. After the war, with the reconstruction of morality, this artist doubts his own actions during the war. By means of reminiscing narrative and moral narrative, he rewrites his memories and transfers his wartime militarism propaganda, which is intensified the destruction caused by war. He avoids the serious reflections while highlights the light ones, constantly presenting himself as a positive image with an identity in the past. Bases on all this Ono tries to reconstruct his self-identity. Anyhow, the moral conflict runs through the entire work as a mainline, while the reformulation of memory serves as a weaving tool. Thus one kind of moral narratives becomes unavoidable, which tend to confuse the truth, concerning half-true and half-false memories so as to to maintain a heroic image.

Previous researches of this novel have been primarily concentrated on the perspective of historical issues, nationalism, and the deception of memory which are the causes of Japanese moral narratives, while the studies on these narratives themselves are still inadequate. Based on the concept of the idealized image put forward by Karen Horny and theories of moral narratives proposed by Akiko Hashimoto, this paper will do a closer examination of Ono’s heroic narrative in the novel.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Timothy Wright (2014, pp. 58-88) published the essay “No Homelike Place: The Lesson of History in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*” in 2014. From the historical point of view, this essay examines the change of Ono’s attitude before and after the war, analyze the narrative style, and discuss how the history is repressed, concealed, manipulated, re-normalized, or twisted in *An Artist of the Floating World*. Wright defines this kind of combination of historical background and narrative technique as an aesthetic through which he expounds on the relationship between history and morality. The focus of the paper is still on the way of how the history and the memories are distorted, their moral connections and how the two interact to shape Japan’s postwar memory, rather than the method of moral narrative. The essay “The Descent of The Japanese Patriarch: from

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History to Literary Representation” (2014) by Andreea Ionescu focuses on analyzing why the end of World War II was regarded as a turning point in Japanese identity from the perspective of culture by comparing the decline of the father image in the two works with the decline of the Japanese national leader. Draw the conclusion of the similarities among them: all experiencing identity crises and trying to rebuild their authority, likewise, the author deduced the crisis consequences difference between Japanese reality and novels. The main point is to reflect the identity crisis of the father through the Japanese moral narration form in the work and to reflect the whole Japanese nation, but there is little analysis of the role and function of Japanese moral narratives. Concerning the growth experience of Ishiguro’s immigrant background Bulent Cercis Tanritanri and Fatma Karaman’s essay “Searching Identity in *The Remains of The Day* and *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro uses the unity of existentialism and philosophy to explore the protagonist’s identity dilemma, and through the comparison with the characters in the novels, they analyze the reasons for the formation of Ishiguro’s writing style. They argue that Ishiguro’s immigration background has prompted his identity recognition issues: “He indicates that his family is loyal to their roots, language, and culture; therefore, he wants to return to his country but he doesn’t consider his Japanese is enough to have a conversation” (2018, p. 92), which intrigued Ishiguro to search for identity and existence in his novels and deal with cognitive problems, thus forming his writing style. “Memory in T/Rubble: Tackling (Nuclear) Ruins” (2019) by Marilena Parlati. This paper analyzes how does Kazuo Ishiguro reconstructed post-war life in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *A Pale View of Hills* through unreliable memories of individuals and groups, and tries to reveal the influence of the atomic bomb from the unreliable and fragile state of individual memories to explore Japan’s postwar memory in the form of group. This paper still focuses on the fallibility of memory and the origin of cultural memory in postwar Japan, with not much analysis of relevant moral narratives.

III. OVERVIEW OF THE IDEALIZED IMAGE

The Idealized image is a concept expounded by Karen Horney (1885-1952), an American psychologist and psychiatrist, who is a leading representative of Neo-Freudian psychoanalysis. Horney defines this concept in *Our Inner Conflict* (1945) as “the creation of an image of what the neurotic believes himself or herself to be, or of what at the time he or she feels he or she can or ought to be” (2016, p. 92). More precious, this implies two ways of coping with conflict. “One of these is to put such distance between oneself and one’s fellows that the conflicts are set out of operation,” while “the other consists of repressing certain aspects of the personality and bringing their opposites to the fore ” (Horney, 2016, p. 92). Why do individuals have to create this kind of image? The trauma is psychological as well as physical. The purpose of creating an idealized image is to seek self-protection, to obtain a sense safety. When the moral conflict is beyond the acceptable scope of personality itself, such an image can transform the its effect so as to alleviate psychological trauma, to ease helplessness and breakdown, to maintain the normal life and social relations function.

As stated by An Tianwei, “after World War II, Japanese people generally experienced the anxiety of value belonging and the deprivation of their sense of existence and lost themselves. Their own psychological defense mechanism will inevitably prompt them to take all kinds of measures to alleviate the impact of the mind, suppress the painful feelings” (2020, p. 92). Due to the presence of multiple unstable internal and external factors, a consistent idealized image becomes conscious and necessary to unite the population. Such factors are concerned with physic-geographical environmental and the ideological conflicts in the postwar period. As Hegel points out, “[G]eographical environment is an important part of shaping the character of a nation” (Cited by Chen, 1999, p. 23). The complex and diverse natural environment and frequent natural disasters have shaped the characteristics of Japanese people who lay emphasis on the status quo and are easy to accept changes. As Chen states, “[t]he complexity and diversity of Japan’s natural environment, coupled with the constant uncertainty caused by disasters, have created a flexible and practical character of the Japanese people: they are good at adapting to all kinds of circumstances” (1999, p. 24). The concentration on the status quo and the flexible national character provides an opportunity to avoid the sense of being defeated in the post-war period. Through focusing on the postwar reconstruction, the postwar and prewar national condition has been intangible split open. In this way Japan is reasonably discarding the war accountability by spectator’s point of view.

As for the ideological conflict, the ideological conflict in different periods, the changes in the field of ideology in Japan continued from the early stage of World War I to the late stage of World War II, with various forms and large gaps. At the end of World War I, the ideology promoted in the name of democracy also became a principle in education and the media. Anyhow, during the time of World War II, democracy had given way to militarism because the war mentality was dominant. However, when Japan was defeated in the end, revived were democratic ideology, anti-war voices and peace education. Therefore, “they suffered emotionally from disorientation when the nation suddenly lost the war and subsequently went through the total subversion of wartime values and ideologies: now the war was wrong, and democracy replaced imperialism” (Matsuki, 2001, p. 538). There were inconsistencies in the enlightenment and conduction of consciousness, which brought people in a confused and chaotic state, for whom it was quite natural to create an idealized image which could be used to temporarily ease the conflict, to better build consensus and stabilize the interior. In short, the Japanese could rebuild their self-cognition, regain trust in the government, and take confidence in the nation once again.

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Nevertheless, the illusion created by the idealized image is as fragile as a bubble, for it is nothing but an unconscious phenomenon, which can possibly make patients feel satisfied, but cannot get rid of the gap in real life. “Unlike normal people, sufferers have more difficulty in accepting and recognizing their true selves, and their perceptions of the real self are more debased and divorced from reality like their idealized images” (Horny, 2016, pp. 93-94). Therefore, when a patient’s sense of superiority is questioned and the gap between the idealized image and authentic self is too large, patients will try their best to maintain hysterically at any cost. When the idealized image is faced with disfigurement, the patient will generally adopt the coping style of deference or alienation and so on. “He may appear amenable or even gullible but at the same time he will pile up secret resentment against this ‘coercion’” (Horny, 2016, p. 142). “Compartmentalizing is thus as much a result of being divided by one’s conflicts as a defense against recognizing them” and “the fact of living in compartments is the more fundamental and that it would account for the kind of image created” (Horny, 2016, p. 135). Apparently, “living in compartments” creates a space of privacy for the patient, a defense mechanism that allows the patient to indulge in such an idealized image of himself or herself, oblivious to reality. The maintenance of such a image relies on moral narratives.

IV. OVERVIEW OF JAPANESE MORAL NARRATIVES

“Moral narrative refers to a narrative about human life growth and social development that contains a moral value or has the potential to explain the moral value and is mainly manifested by speech and action” (Feng, 2019, p. 39). The moral narrative is not equal to objective events themselves and the events described can be modified or interpreted by value when they violate the values propagated. The process of moral narrative is the process of value interpretation, as well as the process in which value is constantly created, constructed, and generated (Feng, 2019). The enlightenment significance of moral narrative are meant to the transmission of values and the shaping of social ideology so as to put the society to move forward. “Collective moral narrative sublimates individual life and collective life, turning the experience of human life and life into collective moral narrative by forming collective self-consciousness and reflective ability” (Wen, 2020, p. 43).

Japanese moral narratives are such a conciliator being used when individual memories were miscellaneous and mused in the context of the defeat of the war, when the recognized mainstream memory went against the image of the individual and the country, when the gap between the purpose of enlightenment and value transmission were extended. That is to say, Japanese moral narratives are used to preserve the Japanese idealized image and make it still convincing. In *The Long Defeat* (2019) Akiko Hashimoto elaborate three kinds of Japanese moral narratives — heroic narrative, victim narrative and perpetrator narrative. As she states, “memory narrative is a communication carrier, revealing the narrator’s dependence and anxiety in solving self-identity. The reason why interpretations of difficult “facts” at issue diverged because people wanted to make the past and present more acceptable” (Hashimoto, 2019, p. 28). Therefore, Hashimoto generally calls these narratives moral narratives and subdivides them into these three types.

The perpetrator narrative is used to “emphasize the criminal acts of imperialist aggression and exploitation carried out by Japan in China and The Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia, it emphasizes the violence and harm inflicted by Japan” (Hashimoto, 2019, p. 11). This kind of narrative requires the narrator to face up to and take responsibility for the crime, and its implicit meaning is the affirmation of the violation in the war and the official certification of the act of violence. It is no hard to understand that this narrative is not widely accepted in Japan in that it does not contribute to the post-war authority to maintain ideology and social stability, to set examples for the generation, to inherit the spirit of the past. Instead of the perpetrator narrative, the heroic narrative is more frequently used by the Japanese to make people feel indebted by highlighting the heroic sacrifice or death of the country, in order to cultivate a sense of belonging to the country, while diverting attention from the country’s culpability for starting and losing a war” (Hashimoto, 2019, p. 10). This kind of narration exaggerates the role of war and heroes but covers up the essential aggression. The Japanese government advocates that today’s peace and prosperity are based on the sacrifices of the past, but it obscures and restricts the dissemination of such details as why the war began and what the heroes sacrificed for. The idiomatic way of heroic narrative tends to link sacrifice to progress, and emphasize the courage that soldiers face death, but not clear what the definition of the so-called “progress” is.

As for the Japanese victim narrative, it is a way that “exaggerates the cruelty and military violence of the war, emphasizes the suffering along with the affliction of the victims to advocate peace, so as to divert attention from the aggressiveness and defeat of the war” (Hashimoto, 2019, p. 10). Such a narrative are usually presented in the form of massacres, aerial bombardments, etc. To be more specific, it is to transfer the identity of those Asian victims who were occupied by Japan but were thousands of miles away and then, tried to assimilate the disaster it suffered from the disaster it brought as an aggressor so as to magnify the Japanese image as the victim itself to cover up the identity of aggressor and perpetrator.

After World War II, rebuilding national identity, restoring national order, and promoting economic recovery became a superior priority in Japan. Due to the heavy defeat and the accompanying doubt on the rationality of the war, the Japanese authority were required to take measures in the aspect of ideology. They created a “positive” idealized image for the rapid development and maintenance of vested interests. To shape and convince the public of this idealized image, redefined Japanese moral narratives

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based on objective reality are adopted. To some degree, this can be revealed in *An Artist of the Floating World*, which is mainly concerned with the heroic narrative

V. A CASE STUDY OF AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

As mentioned in section two, one of the ways to create the idealized image is to “put such distance between oneself and one’s fellows that the conflicts are set out of operation” (Horny, 2016, p. 92). This way is adopted by Ono, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World*, who becomes autistic after the defeat of Japan. He has advocated militarism during the war and now he has to reduce his sphere of activity and social circle, which represents his self-protective and escapist behaviour. Thanks to these measures, he is better able to avoid accusations, criticism, and interference from the outside world. Staying in his comfort zone, he can still freely rewrite and maintain his idealized image as an heroic artist with great achievements, status, and respect during the war. This image is formulated mainly through the narrations concerning the flourishing in Ono’s house and Kawakami’s Pub.

The novel starts with Ono’s victory at a prestigious auction, the recognition of his own achievements, and the purchase of a luxury home. Throughout the novel, Ono’s status is described eleven times. Words of high frequency, such as status, respectable, fame, enhance his sense of pride and reinforce his idealized image as a revered patriotic artist for his wartime contributions. The idealized image of himself is mostly reflected by recalling the admiration of others. In Ono’s memory, he is often referred to as “Sensei”. Moreover, “We are greatly privileged to have a benefactor of such influence and generosity” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 21. Hereafter only the page number of this textbook referred to in parenthetical citations), which also reflects the idealized image of Ono. Apparently, Ono’s memories are not consistent due to moral conflicts, and he even deliberately conceals his faults. He is constantly extolling his own fame and career by avoiding any details, however, he does retain the memory of his own praise, which clearly means the idealized image he picture of himself. Take the conversation among Ono, Mrs. Kawakami and Ono’s student Shintaro as an example. Mrs. Kawakami: “Everyone always looked up to Sensei as the natural leader around here.” “A good point, Obasan, Shintaro said. ‘In olden times, if a lord had his troops scattered after a battle, he’d soon go about gathering them together again. Sensei is in a similar position” (p. 76). Here, the word “Lord” means “a man of high rank in the nobility (Hornby, 2016, p. 1235)” which embodies Ono’s idealized image, a hero image with prestige and power that can dominate. In addition, the sentence “A lord must gather his men” (p. 76), appears three times, which proves Ono’s desire for this image, a person with authority, control, dignity, and status, a master, chief, or ruler, “the natural leader”.

Such a house image is not uncommon among Ishiguro’s numerous works, which remind the reader of the residence of Etsuko in *A Pale of Hills*, the Mansion in *The Remains of the Day*, the house of Banks in *The Shanghai concession*, and so on. House symbolizes a sense of belonging, which is common among protagonists in these works in the war or postwar period. For Ono, the destruction of the house after the war implies the loss of his sense of belonging. Besides, since the house is purchased through a credit auction during the peak period of Ono, it represents his value, honor, and self-identity. “Indeed, I felt somewhat flattered to be considered by this old and hidebound family as a worthy candidate” (p. 9). Then, along with the defeat and the destruction of his house, there is also a sense of anxiety about his loss of self-worth, his infamy, and his loss of self-identity “The house had received its share of the war damage...” (p. 11); “I have done what I can to prevent any serious deterioration...” (p. 12). Reconstruction after the war symbolizes his redemption.

Then, Ono’s emphasis on the the pub is no difference from that of the house. When Ono first introduces the pub, he mentions his contribution to the pub. “I had played my own small part in the Migi Hidari’s coming to so dwarf its competitors, and in recognition of this been provided with a table in one corner for our sole use” (p. 24) and this kind of remark regarding his pub worth, which comes five times throughout the novel. This shows Ono’s important position in the pub, which is also a symbol of his wartime fame and status, and also a microcosm of Japan’s “glory period” during World War II. These symbolic meaning of pub can be obtained by combining the time nodes in the article “ For this was 1933 or 1934-an unlikely time, you may recall...” (p. 63) with the patriotic theme of the pub “I explained, ‘that the proposed establishment be a celebration of the new patriotic spirit emerging in Japan today...” (p. 63), Thus, Kazuo Ishiguro employs circular narrative to portray the evolution of Japanese militarism and camouflaged patriotism by breaking out of the dimension of time and space through the pub image. Ono, pub, and the patriotic spirit they represent all went to the peak with the rise of the war but also went to wane with the defeat.

In short, Ono’s house and Kawakami’s pub are essential symbols and the inseparable parts of Ono’s Japanese heroic narrative. Both of them play a role in forming the idealized image of Ono. They record the war, break the time limit and thus help Ono to recall and witness the past. The comparisons among the house, pub, and the surrounding environment reflect the changes in Japanese society before and after World War II. It is in these places that Ono’s memories and reality interweave and they both symbolize the changes of Ono’s status with the rise and fall of war, with the same trajectory as Ono glory in the wartime, decline in the postwar. They also symbolize the changes in Japan itself and in international politics and the development and decline of militarism and nationalism in Japan before and after World War II.

CONCLUSIONS

In dealing with the moral conflicts of war trauma, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World* creates idealized image through using Japanese moral narratives to shape and strengthen it. When his moral conflict, his idealized image, and his real self can not be reconciled, the house and pub provide him a stage to escape from reality, to hypnotize himself through his own achievement, to ignore his own impact on the war, to reshape his heroic image with Japanese heroic narrative. For the reader, through the repetition and emphasis of the prosperous and the modified description of the house and Kawakami's Pub, Ono's career and contribution are also enhanced, his own achievements are exaggerated, and militarism behaviors are blurred so as to make the effect of diverting the reader's attention from Ono's sins that urge war outbreak, add fuel to the destruction caused by the war which is highly similar to the application of the Yasukuni Shrine in current Japanese political strategy.

This approach has also been adopted by the contemporary Japanese government, which provides a way from the novel to explore the practical application of Japan and the identity dilemma brought by its disadvantages. The uses of idealized images and Japanese moral narratives play a role in the reconstruction of post-war Japan's social order and view of the country. However, due to long-time indulgence in this non-objective narrative, the disadvantages of the contradictory narrative have been gradually exposed. In order to maintain the temporary balance, the use of a wider range of idealized images and Japanese moral narratives form a vicious cycle, resulting in the current identity dilemma in Japan.

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