

An Imagological Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans from an imagological point of view. The storyline follows the life of a prominent British detective in his endeavour to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearances from their family home in Hong Kong. The images projected by the narrative reflect the centre of the empire in transition, with an accent on the reversal of the classical standpoints of characters, and a colony struggling to cope with the horrors of war as well as a change in vassality.

Keywords: imagology, identity, otherness, national character

The much acclaimed British author of Japanese descent Kazuo Ishiguro needs little introduction, his books being praised by critics and avid readers alike. His writing is often chameleonic. His first novels take after one of the most celebrated Japanese styles of writing, the *nikki*, a first-person narrative which can be associated with the diary style in Western countries. *Never Let Me Go* approaches the science fiction genre in an Orwellian presentation of a dystopic future, while his latest release, *The Buried Giant*, has caused an uproar because it deals with the British folklore surrounding mythical creatures such as pixies, dragons, and the knights of Arthur, and was, thus, classified as a fantasy novel, a genre considered as lesser by literary criticism.

1. *When We Were Orphans* – An Overview

The focus of this paper falls on Ishiguro's fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans*, a first-person narrative which can easily be labelled as a detective novel, although it still carries the imprint of the Japanese *nikki*, each chapter being marked by date. It follows the life of Christopher Banks, a young and prominent detective on the London scene between the two World Wars, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the overexploited Sherlock Holmes.

The anachrony-filled narrative first details Christopher's hard work to rise to social fame through his impressive detective skills, then takes the reader on a journey to his childhood in the International Settlement of Shanghai where, first

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his father, and then his mother, were abducted only a few weeks apart. During his time in Shanghai, the focus of the narration falls on the boy's friendship with the son of a Japanese diplomat who lived in the house next to their own, while also giving details about the Chinese staff both houses used, or Mrs. Banks's social activities. By the end of the 1930s, his status already established, Christopher decides to revisit Shanghai in an attempt to find his parents, feeling that it was both the goal of his life, but also an expectation of the society, somehow imposed on him more or less overtly. As his investigation progresses, the line between what is real and what is imaginary becomes blurred for the detective, while he realises that his memory is not to be fully trusted either, in a typically Ishigurian manner. He manages to find out where his parents were kept just after their abduction, and he convinces himself that, somehow, after thirty years, they would still be there. Unfortunately, the house in question is in the Japanese-occupied part of Shanghai, where he arrives with great difficulty, encountering on his way a wounded Japanese soldier whom he believes to be Akira, his childhood companion, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. After escaping unharmed from this borderline psychotic episode, he eventually finds out that his father had not been, in fact, abducted, but that he had eloped with his mistress and had died after a short while stricken by typhoid. His mother, though, had been kidnapped by a Chinese warlord whom she had met during her campaign against the opium-importing companies, on which occasion she had also stricken and insulted him, triggering his retribution. The detective story ends on a lighter note for the protagonist, as he can, finally, enjoy the company of the family he so craved for, his conscience at peace for having at long last rescued his mother and obtained her pardon.

Focusing on Christopher's quest for maturity, social and professional recognition, and forming a family, the text foregrounds the shaping of his identity and the problems he encounters. Being raised in two completely different cultures, the narrator becomes a hybrid of both and is often presented struggling to gain acceptance within at least one of the societies he frequently comes in contact with.

2. On Imagological Grids

Such issues as national identity and stereotyping are central to imagological studies. Considering what coping with people of a different nationality traditionally implies, Joep Leerssen remarks that: "The default value of humans' contacts with different cultures seems to have been ethnocentric, in that anything that deviated from accustomed domestic patterns is 'Othered' as an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity" (2007: 17). Such contacts find their reflection in a wide range of texts where they generate images of the Other and, implicitly, of the self, which imagology explores using tools from various fields such as comparative literature, cultural studies and/or anthropology.

According to Daniel-Henry Pageaux, any image stems from the identification of an *I* opposed to an *other*, a *here* opposed to a *there*, the image being the expression of a difference between two cultural realities, or spaces; it is the representation of a cultural reality through which the individual, or the group, who conceived it translates the social, cultural, and imaginary space where they intend to situate themselves (Pageaux 2000: 82-84)¹.

The literary image, as it is represented in a text, becomes an ensemble of ideas regarding *l'étranger* obtained through a process of literalisation and socialisation. At the same time, an image may lead to problematic intersections, proving to be an important factor in the functioning of a society within its own ideology. The image of the *other* or of the observed culture, is complementary to that of the observing culture, the *self* being dependent on the denial of the *Other* in order to exist. Pageaux, then, points out that imagotypical texts can only be decoded by readers who recognise the image.

According to Pageaux, there can be three types of relations between the *Self* and the *Other*, dubbed as fundamental attitudes towards the *Other*: *mania* - in which case the culture observed is perceived as superior to the observing one by the *self*; *phobia* - when the *other* is viewed as inferior to the *self*; and *philia* - when the observed culture is experienced as positive and complementing the culture of the *self*. The fourth attitude he advances describes a situation in which the exchanges between the *self* and the *other* are indicative of a tendency of overcoming national boundaries (Pageaux 2000: 96-98).

To sum up, in Joep Leerssen's terms, the theories proposed by D. H. Pageaux define an "*imagologie*, much indebted to a Lévi-Straussian anthropology, as an *imaginaire* of perceived characterological (and national-characterological) diversity" (2007: 23).

One of the most acclaimed imagology scholars is Joep Leerssen. According to him, an image is "the mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or nation" (Leerssen 2007: 342) while national characterisations should be regarded as tropes which obtain familiarity by repetition - whenever an individual encounter appears, the primary reference would be to a related textual instance, not to the empirical reality. He claims that these representations signal the existence of two types of images: auto-images and hetero-images. While the former deal with the characterisation of the *self*, the latter provide a depiction of the *other*. In addition, he also suggests national images collect into *imagemes*, which are "characterized by (...) inherent ambivalent polarity" (Leerssen 2000: 276).

An image may also be subject to changes; not because of transformations in the national character of a country, but because the attitude towards that particular nation changes, as was the case of the Germans before and after the two World Wars. Despite their tendency to change, though, all images of a given nation can be regarded as opposite sides of a complex human character, one

complementing the other. Along these lines, in Leerssen's view, auto-images and hetero-images are to be taken equally into account for both the spectated, i.e., the observed culture, and the spectant, i.e., the observing one. When an image remains constant in time, however, it becomes a cultural stereotype.

Finally, it is asserted that "our way of thinking in terms of 'national characters' boils down to an ethnic-political distribution of role patterns in an imagined anthropological landscape" (Leerssen 2007: 29). This claim is, however, partially contradicted by the Dutch social psychologist and anthropologist, Geert Hofstede, who claims that the roles that imagologists like Leerssen identify as part of an imagined discourse actually have real-life consequences which he thoroughly details in his *Cultures and Organisations. Software of the Mind* alongside G. J. Hofstede and M. Minkov (2010).

Geert Hofstede asserts that any culture is made up of four kinds of variables: symbols - words, phrases with particular meaning; heroes - influential figures in society; rituals - gestures, habits, ceremonies; and values - the deepest manifestation of culture, which can be reformed with great difficulty and which represents the core of one's culture. Furthermore, finding individuals who share one's values enables them to create a moral circle, otherwise known as an in-group; these can vary highly, from social class level, to gender, generation, ethnic or national level.

National identity is not a fundamental part of national values, as it is rooted in practices - shared symbols, heroes, rituals. Thus, identities can shift, as in the case of successfully assimilated migrants. However, second generation migrants are a mixture, having a tendency to identify with the original country in the adoptive one, and with the adoptive one when they travel back to their parents' homelands.

Identity and culture should be differentiated, although they are often confused. People with different identities may share basic cultural values (e.g. Irish Catholics and Protestants), while people with different cultural backgrounds may be part of a single group with a single identity (e.g. academia). In order to fully grasp the extent to which cultures vary, Hofstede has pinpointed four dimensions of culture stemming from the basic problems encountered in societies, common to traditional and modern ones alike. A fifth one and a sixth one have also been identified and added to the revised version of his study on *Cultures and Organisations*.

The first dimension, power distance, measures the degree of inequality in society, the acceptance and expectations that people in less powerful positions have in relation to the more powerful ones. In countries with a large power-distance relation, people believe in a well-defined social order which cannot be easily altered; anyone who is labelled as superior - a manager, an elder, a teacher - must be treated with respect and their authority should not be challenged. On the other hand, in countries with low power distance, people try to balance the

distribution of power and challenge those who hold authority positions whom they do not consider above themselves (Hofstede et al. 2010: 53-88).

Individualism-collectivism, the second dimension, relates to “the role of the individual versus the role of the group” (Hofstede et al. 2010: 90). In an individualist society, each person will only take care of himself/herself and his/her immediate family, and will treasure leisure over pay. Interestingly, it was discovered that countries which belong in this category are usually wealthier. By contrast, the collectivist society is driven by the individual’s self-image as part of a group defined as “we”; in such a society, it is expected that one person financially support a large number of people belonging to their extended family in exchange for their unconditioned loyalty (Hofstede et al. 2010: 89-134).

The third dimension described is masculinity-femininity. While masculine societies can be characterised by striving for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for their accomplishments in an environment driven by competitiveness, a feminine society will value cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and the quality of life, targeting harmony above all else (Hofstede et al. 2010: 135-186).

The dimension called uncertainty avoidance refers to the attitudes that members of the society will adopt regarding situations which involve uncertainty and ambiguity. It is relevant here to take into consideration the viewpoint such a society has in relation to the fact that the future cannot be controlled or predicted. In countries where uncertainty is strong, people are more anxious, exhibiting a strict moral code whence deviant behaviour and ideas are punished. In countries where uncertainty is weak, people are more relaxed and more open to innovation (Hofstede et al. 2010: 187-234).

Long-term orientation - short-term normative orientation deals with the relation a society has with its own past, present and future. A low level shows an inclination to avoiding change in society norms and maintaining longstanding traditions, while a high level expresses an encouragement for efforts in the present for a better future (Hofstede et al. 2010: 235-276).

The last dimension, indulgence - restraint, basically measures the amount of happiness present in societies. More indulging ones easily allow the fulfilment of the basic human drives related to enjoying life and having fun, while societies with high restraint suppress the gratification of needs and stipulate strict social norms to control them (Hofstede et al. 2010: 277-298).

The research undertaken by Hofstede et al. was based on surveys carried out in the field offices of different subsidiaries of the IBM Corporation and has practical functions. However, it can also be used as theoretical frame for imagotypically-significant texts along with the concepts put forth by J. Leerssen and D. H. Pageaux, which were presented above.

3. Centre-Margin/ Superior-Inferior/ Backward Periphery-Modern Centre

Taking into consideration the theories advanced by Daniel-Henry Pageaux, Joep Leerssen and Geert Hofstede, as detailed above, and the steps they proposed for an imagological study (also synthesised in one analytical grid by Ioana Mohor-Ivan and Michaela Praisler in "Some Theoretical Considerations on Imagology"), the present paper attempts to study the images constructed in the text of Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans*. The focus of the analysis will first fall on the identification of the hetero-images and the assessment of the terms in which *otherness* is articulated. Another important step will be to identify the dichotomic coordinates which underlie the representation of the *other*, in order to finally corroborate the investigation of the form and function of images within the text (Mohor-Ivan and Praisler 2007).

Probably the clearest image a reader might capture from the text refers to the opposition between centre and margin, which is here reinforced by the one between what is perceived as superior and inferior, respectively. During the protagonist's stay in Shanghai as a child, the Settlement, a place especially built for the foreigners residing in the city, is described as an area that is clean, neat, even classy, but, above all, safe for children to move around unhampered. However, their parents banned their entry into the Chinese part of the city – a clear proof of what the representatives of the centre actually thought of their marginal adoptive country:

It is slightly surprising to me, looking back today, to think how as young boys we were allowed to come and go unsupervised to the extent that we were. But this was, of course, all within the relative safety of the International Settlement. I for one was absolutely forbidden to enter the Chinese areas of the city, and as far as I know, Akira's parents were no less strict on the matter. (Ishiguro 2009: 33)

In complete opposition to the modern, superior settlement of the migrants, the centre-proper of the city is described as chaotic, with crowds flooding the dirty streets, with cars and rickshaws engaged in an unruly traffic, and danger lurking at every corner. All this amounts to a horrifying experience for the two young boys who sometimes spend their time fantasising about an imaginary, exotic world, the boundaries of which lay merely a few streets away from them. This imagined world of horror deepens the already substantial difference between what is considered modern and civilised and that which is rural, barbaric in the eyes of a child:

Out there, we were told, lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth and evil men. [...] There were no proper buildings, just shack upon shack built in great proximity to one another. [...] There were, moreover, dead bodies piled up everywhere, flies buzzing all over them, and no one there thought anything of it. (Ishiguro 2009: 33)

The reader, thus, perceives the International Settlement as the civilised, superior centre as opposed to the rest of Shanghai, which is perceived as the inferior,

backward margin. This, of course, adds to the general description of the Western British world civilising the barbarian Chinese.

Moreover, the Chinese that are described in the text further this opposition. There are two stereotypes of Eastern men described in the text – the other-worldly and the savage. The former are portrayed as spiritual, simplistic creatures surrounded by an aura of mysticism in comparison with the pragmatic, fact-driven, British businessmen or diplomats. In the neighbours' house, Christopher discovers a very old Chinese male servant whom his friend Akira is terrified of. The latter is described as being the only Chinaman who does not smile back at children, always keeping to himself, facts which the two friends find to be a giveaway of his true nature – a murderous sorcerer who cuts people's hands off to transform them into spiders. Aside from the intervention of the two children's imagination, which creates fantastical features for the old servant, a stereotype of the Chinese may easily be identified: all Chinese people are familiar with the occult.

The second type of Chinaman presented in the text is the ruthless, barbaric warlord who cannot be controlled by anyone. A proleptic section in the text provides the perfect description of such a man who, as the reader later understands, was going to abduct the protagonist's mother:

[Akira] had seen a man – some powerful warlord, he supposed – being transported on a sedan chair, accompanied by a giant carrying a sword. The warlord was pointing to whomever he pleased and the giant would then proceed to lop his or her head off. Naturally, people were trying to hide themselves the best they could. (Ishiguro 2009: 33)

Nevertheless, the East is represented by China only; the Japanese, encountered both times Christopher is in Shanghai, are not seen as inferior to the British and equal to the Chinese, but rather like the British, which may be translated with the view that both nations conquered and colonised Chinese territories in mind, or perhaps as a continuation of the historic relationship Great Britain and Japan had at that time – with Japan often being called the England of Asia, and seen as a sort of protégé of its European 'big sister'. The historical context of Shanghai's occupation by Japanese troops is not, however, very much detailed upon in the text, and the Japanese remain there with an emphasis on the personal relationship of the narrator to his childhood friend of this ethnicity.

4. Femininity vs. Masculinity

Apart from the opposition between East and West, here is yet another one which is generally taken into account with regard to this dichotomy: the feminine East is faced with the masculinity of the West. The Orient is generally viewed through western eyes as feminine, elusive, sensual, and idle in contrast with the masculinity, assertiveness, vigour of the Occident. In Ishiguro's text, though, the

two roles are disturbed as the East assumes the masculine part and the West the feminine one.

Returning to the characteristics attributed to masculine and feminine societies by Hofstede's research, it is easy to identify the switch in the traditional roles between men and women/ male and female characters. To begin with, the mother and father figures seen in Christopher's parents during their time in the Settlement appear to have switched their traditional gender roles. The father is seen as a weak man, always struggling to keep up with his wife's ambitions, complaining that he cannot do a various array of things, lacking in authority and assertiveness. Christopher finds out about his father's struggles during his investigation in Shanghai: "It was difficult for him. He always loved your mother, loved her intensely. [...] And it was just too much for him, trying to come up to what he saw as her mark. He tried. Oh yes, he tried, and it nearly broke him." (Ishiguro 2009: 177)

His wife, on the other hand, is seen as a strong, outspoken, confident active person, involved in many projects, with no deficiency in firmness or influence. Probably the best way to illustrate her personality is to refer to her struggle to ban the opium trade in China. Seeing how negatively it affected the native population, she starts a movement against the British companies who imported the substance, despite the fact that her husband was working for one of them. She held gatherings at the family residence trying to bring awareness to other people and wrote letters to the companies in the attempt to explain what impact their actions had.

This misbalance proves fatal for the family and, after the parents' separation, the fate of those who did not abide by their classic roles takes a tragic turn. While the father is punished for not assuming a patriarchal position with the capital penalty, the mother is taught obedience by her abductor who makes her his concubine and treats her as a slave.

[...] when I saw her that time, she seemed well enough. But while I was there, I asked others in the household, people who would know. It wasn't just... just a matter of surrendering to him in bed. He regularly whipped her in front of his dinner guests. Taming the white woman, he called it. (Ishiguro 2009: 181)

Upon her kidnapping, for fear she might decide to take her own life rather than become his concubine, the warlord strikes a deal: in exchange for a comfortable life provided for her son, she was to show complete obedience. The image of Christopher's mother being dominated by the Eastern man completes the alteration discussed above of the West losing its masculinity in favour of the East.

5. Self vs. Other

Looking beyond the borders of China and comparing the English people living in the Settlement to the ones the reader discovers in London, a significant difference is revealed. The characters in the novel prove to have a context/ setting dependent

behavioural pattern. The variation becomes clear once Christopher travels back to China in an attempt at solving the enigma of his parents' disappearances, because some of the English gentlemen and ladies the reader becomes acquainted with in England travel to Shanghai as well. While in their homeland, all of them behave in a mannerly style, their description never drawing the attention of the reader in any extraordinary way.

When met again abroad, a shift occurs and the reader suddenly experiences their presence in a quite different manner; both men and women become embodiments of cultural stereotypes of Englishness, being labelled by foreigners as drunkards, as void of emotion, pompous, overly-eager to keep up appearances. This transformation is seen in all British people that the reader has the chance to encounter in both locations, the narrative offering its audience the experience of facing Englishness as an auto-image and as a hetero-image. This corresponds to Pageaux's understanding of the concept of image, which draws its substance from the differences between two places, or two intervals of time. However, while the text depicts vividly the discrepancy between a *here*, in this case London, and a *there* – Shanghai – during Christopher's adult life, at the time of the protagonist's childhood there is no *here* opposes to a *there*, leaving readers with a missing piece of the puzzle, guiding them into drawing the only possible conclusion: that Shanghai represented the place the protagonist identifies himself with as a child.

In fact, the narrator is the only person who suffers no alterations in character, and this is only due to the fact that, having been raised both in China and Britain, he became a hybrid fitting everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Despite identifying with the English, he is often othered by the rest of his colleagues and friends, many times being called strange to his face to his utter surprise and protest. This is a beautiful illustration of Hofstede's supposition that:

A common experience for second-generation immigrants is to identify with their country of origin while they live in the adoptive country of their parents but, in contrast, to feel that they belong to their new country when they visit their parents' country of origin. This is because they are likely to live by a mix of cultural (hidden) rules from both societies [...]. (2010: 22-23)

His attitude does not seem to change, precisely because he is a blend of the two cultures and because his mental programming had taken place in China. For this purpose he can be considered a cosmopolitan individual, truly ahead of the times described in the text. His life choices take him away from what might be considered a common family in the 1930s and make him a single parent, father to a refugee he adopts and raises as his own. He is labelled as bizarre by Englishmen and Chinamen alike, and spends his entire adult life chasing an imaginary reality of his parents' family-life.

6. Final remarks

The novel in focus uses cultural stereotypes and images that, following the theoretical principles put forth by Leerssen, Pageaux and Hofstede, may be perceived as dichotomic. From what was shown above, *When We Were Orphans* is yet another instance where Ishiguro makes use of the poetics of national identity from subtle references to his Japanese descent, to more clear stereotypes of his adoptive culture, or even gender-related images distinguishable regardless of nationality.

Notes

[1] The present paper uses the Romanian edition of Pageaux's book, published by Polirom in the translation of Lidia Bodea.

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