
Ishiguro's use of Symbols to Depict an Unreliable Narrator in '*An Artist of the Floating World*'

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"Symbolism is no mere idle fancy or corrupt degeneration: it is inherent in the very texture of human life."
- (Whitehead 5)

Abstract: Symbolism is a device that is generally used in literature to denote a deeper meaning with a superficial image or event or character. Ishiguro uses symbols to depict an unreliable narrator in his '*An Artist of the Floating World*'. An unreliable narrator tries to distort the reality by narrating false events. To put it simply, "An unreliable narrator can be defined as any narrator who misleads readers, either deliberately or unwittingly" (Seddon). Ishiguro uses symbols to explore theme of memory, self-deception, and distorting reality. Masuji Ono, the narrator of the novel, distorts his narration to attain self-worth along with hide his own guilt. This distortion of his narration is contrasted by Ishiguro by placing striking symbols with help readers realise the unreliability of Ono's narration. This research paper aims to highlight the unreliability of Ono's narration depicted by Ishiguro in the novel.

"An unreliable narrator is one whose account is suspect because he or she proves to have a limited knowledge of the events recounted either because his or her personal involvement in those events introduces bias, or because his or her values are in conflict with those of narrative itself" (Macey 387).

Keywords: Self-deception, Kazuo Ishiguro, Symbolism, Unreliable Narrator, An Artist of the Floating World, Propaganda Art, Memory.

Introduction: The novel is set in late 1940s after end of world war. Ono is a retired painter who used his artistic expression to further the propaganda of imperial regime that ruled Japan during World War II. He is trying to find a suitable groom for his daughter, Noriko. Post-war, the sentiment of younger generation of Japan has turned hostile towards those who supported the imperial regime. The role that Ono played using his artistic capabilities seems to be getting into his daughter getting married. This compels him to visit Kuroda, who was his student whom he got arrested for going against Ono's philosophy and Matsuda, a companion of Ono's who instilled the philosophy that Ono presented through his works. The novel ends with Noriko happily married to Taro and younger generation heavily accepting American culture from pop culture to architecture. Ono ends his narration with

"Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well" (Ishiguro).

The first such symbol that Ishiguro uses are 'Bridge of Hesitation'. The narration of Ono starts and ends at this bridge signalling the importance of this bridge to the events that he narrates. The bridge was named as Bridge of Hesitation because men stood there wondering whether to return home to their wives or keep drinking in adjacent pleasure district. The bridge is located near Ono's house and marks the boundary between old town that destroyed in bombing and new town that is seeing development denoting the old

imperial Japan and new Americanized Japan respectively. This Bridge of Hesitation further signal the internal conflict of Ono whereas he is torn between his Japanese nationalism that warred America and new changes of current times influenced by America. The name Bridge of Hesitation highlights the Ono's reluctance to accept change and his wrongdoings of past and their moral implication which suggest that Ono as a narrator is not trustworthy.

Ono is floating above the world on a bridge, while the old world of the pleasure district floats away and a new world, defined by the post-war focus on economic rebuilding, floats into view. The Bridge of Hesitation now reflects his own hesitation to let go of the world that is passing away (Levine)

The second prominent symbol that comes in his narration is that of the house where Ono resides. He has bought this house from Akira Sugimura. For the daughters of Sugimura, the house was to be resided by someone with a respectable stature. Ono calls this as 'an auction of pride'. The house is a symbol masterfully employed by Ishiguro to imply both Japan and Ono. Ono is trying to either mend the home or clean it throughout his narration which is representative of Ono narrating his past and present to hide away from his guilt. Noriko remarks, 'Father takes a lot of looking after now he's retired,' Noriko went on, with a mischievous grin. "You've got to keep him occupied or he starts to mope" (Ishiguro). Ono himself states how he worked on his garden throughout the past year:

"I was able to make a certain amount of progress, and by the time Setsuko came down to visit us again last month, the veranda was more or less entirely restored" (Ishiguro).

Another striking symbol that Ishiguro employs to suggest the deceptive nature of Ono is that of smell of burning smoke. For Ono, the smell of burning smoke denote trauma. His father burns down paintings of Ono when he learns that Ono wishes to pursue Painting as a profession. He also feels the same smell of burning smoke when he visits home of his student Kuroda who was arrested because he was misreported to the authorities as engaging in unpatriotic activities by none other than Ono himself. The reason for fallout between Ono and Kuroda was Kuroda shifting away from teachings of Ono just like Ono did that to his teachers. But Ono takes this as treachery and hands him over to the police. For Ono, burning smell suggests trauma. He imagines that smell whenever he finds himself amidst trauma.

"There's a smell of burning around the house," I remarked. "Burning?" My mother was silent for a while, then she said: "No. I don't think so. It must be your imagination, Masuji" (Ishiguro).

"I also thought there was a smell of burning in the air, but when I glanced into the ashpot, there were no signs of its having been used" (Ishiguro).

Ono claims to smell burning smoke but his own eyes and the statement of his mother suggests otherwise. He sees what his mind wants him to see highlighting the confirmation bias that riddles Ono.

How often – I continue reflecting – is it that we see what we want to see, rather than what is really before our eyes. In the trade we call this confirmation bias, and our brains are riddled with it. We take a position on something and thereafter only see whatever confirms that position, ignoring all evidence to the contrary (Dolan).

The 'floating world' itself is a symbol employed by Ishiguro to highlight the illusionary nature of Ono's narration. The floating world refers to the pleasure districts of Japan. It highlights their transient and momentary nature, offering escape and indulgence. This want of escape is showcased in Gisaburo, who was an actor, in Ono's narration. Gisaburo was a lonely man and to escape this loneliness, he spent his time in these pleasure districts seeking company of women.

Those women would tell him all the things he wanted to hear, and for the night anyway, he'd be able to believe them. Once the morning came, of course, he was too intelligent a man to go on believing such things. But Gisaburo didn't value those nights any the less for that. The best things, he always used to say, are put together of a night and vanish with the morning. What people call the floating world, Ono, was a world Gisaburo knew how to value. (Ishiguro)

Just like Gisaburo, Ono is trying to escape his own trauma and guilt. His floating world is his narration where he mends and mope the events of his past as per his liking. And as Gisaburo valued his own floating world, throughout his narration, Ono tries to justify his own actions and the actions of those who held similar views and participated in the war. "But those who fought and worked loyally for our country during the war cannot be called war criminals" (Ishiguro).

Ono narrates tale of Mori-san, his teacher and how his most beloved student Sasaki betrayed him to justify his actions against Kuroda. He narrates how Sasaki diverted from teachings of Mori-san and how he reacted citing it as betrayal as a teacher invests a lot in his students to justify his injustice towards Kuroda. He uses Mori-san as a parallel to himself to justify his own guilt whereas he terms his own betrayal as 'brave and original' with importance to the real world.

Ono also compares his efforts of propaganda art with that of Akira Sugimura. Sugimura was a well-known personal in his times. Ono's house was built by Sugimura which was sold to Ono by his daughters. Akira Sugimura poured in all his wealth to develop the city into a cultural hub. He modified Kawabe park and tried to build cultural centres only to lose all his wealth and in this effort bringing fall of his family. Ono parallels himself with Akira to equate his own failures with somewhat selfless failures of Akira Sugimura. The failures of Sugimura are only narrated so as to justify his own worth to the audience. He states

"It is my belief, furthermore, that Sugimura did not die an unhappy man. For his failure was quite unlike the undignified failures of most ordinary lives, and a man like Sugimura would have known this. If one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, there is a consolation – indeed, a deep satisfaction – to be gained from this observation when looking back over one's life" (Ishiguro).

Conclusion: Ishiguro himself said in an interview, "As a writer, I'm more interested in what people tell themselves happened rather than what actually happened" (Ishiguro). Ishiguro masterfully uses the places, feelings and persons in Ono's narration to employ symbolism to unearth the unreliability of the narrator. Ono pretends to tell his audience what has happened but instead, he is convincing himself that what he narrates has actually happened. The symbols like Bridge of Hesitation, burning smell, floating world, his house, Mori-san and Akira Sugimura denote the internal conflict that lies within Ono's mind which prompts him to lie to himself resulting in an unreliable narration. "We lie to ourselves to protect our self-images, which allows us to act immorally while maintaining a clear conscience" (Robson).

"Kazuo Ishiguro uses symbolism effectively to shape and reinforce multiple themes, the power of memory, time, and human dignity... The author's use of symbolism effectively explains each theme and uses multiple motifs to reinforce these themes." (West).

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