

Research Article

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Of Cowardice, Responsibility and Nationalism in Post-war Japan: Re-mapping the Postmodern Ex-centric in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Abstract

The 'ex-centric' is derived from *ek*, which means out, and *kentron*, which means centre. The term is Greek in origin and signifies not having the earth as its centre of an orbit. Since the 17th century, it has been used to describe behaviour that deviates from conventional accepted styles. This concept interrogates facts of one world — the status quo — the world as it is and recreates it based on the mini-narratives. This paper examines the spaces that legitimise discourses of difference, focusing on marginalised or ex-centric characters within dominant ideologies as portrayed in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), set in post-war Japan. The paper critiques the shifting dynamics of centre-margin societal patterns vis-à-vis art and artists in post-war Japan. Art, as a mode of expression, illuminates societal values

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and encourages people globally, yet its definition changes over time as many critics come up with multiple perspectives. Art in past decades had different implications than current scenarios. This paper critically appropriates art and its relationship with the individual in the postmodern era, interrogating the concept of centre and margin. Additionally, it examines the role of artists during wartime, focusing on the portrayal of the Japanese Empire in contemporary paintings. Ultimately, the study examines how the concept of the center is defined, shaped, and perpetuated through philosophical, empirical, and ideological frameworks.

Keywords: Artists, Ex-Centric, Japan, Postmodern, War, Centre, Margin, Narrative, Nationalism

Introduction

Throughout the classical and mediaeval periods, the concept of the centre — whether economic, ideological, religious, political, sociological, or psychological — was associated with gods, priests, kings and heroes of mythological stories. This association constructed various hierarchical spheres among people concerned with the centre and margin. These hierarchies, based on religion, caste, race, economics, profession, and sexuality, served to establish orders within society, privileging some while marginalising others. Such socially constructed hierarchies benefit those associated with the centre while oppressing the other. It creates inequality and maintains dissonance in societies wherein the idea of fraternity and brotherhood collapse. However, it is difficult for privileged social groups to retain power and dominate indefinitely. The rupture of the centre becomes inevitable when power structures in systems like monarchy, aristocracy, patriarchy, and misogyny are challenged and questioned. These acts of the subtle mode of resistance empower marginalised groups to acquire prominence within the social hierarchy.

A Brief History of the Copernicus Revolution

The traditional way of understanding the universe has limitations — in all its forms — that have been the notion of the centre since the Ptolemaic conception of the universe. This view persisted until 1543 when Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus proposed a revised model that placed the sun — rather than the earth — at the centre of the universe. The sun replaces the “earth as the centre of planetary motions”, and the earth loses “its unique astronomical status, becoming one of a number of moving planets” (Kuhn 1). Copernicus shifts people’s perspective on astronomy by redefining the earth’s position in the universe. This change in paradigm not only transformed scientific temperament but also challenged dominant religious beliefs regarding the earth’s position in the universe. With this significant transition in the human understanding of cosmic order, people start losing faith in religion and the authority of the church. By calling the religiously ordained centre into question, Copernicus’ perspective emphasises reason and scientific temperament, marking a pivotal transition in the human understanding of cosmic order.

Centre and Margin

The centre holds the power to structure and govern the periphery. The centre without a periphery is like a king without subordinates and people. The centre relies on the periphery for

its meaning, which changes frequently. It shifts all forms of radical thoughts, which are “mortgaged to the very historical categories they seek to transcend” (Moi 86). If the centre is viewed as a construct, a fictional idea, and an unchangeable reality, as Susan Griffin writes, “Everywhere the old either-or begins to break down” (659). The binary relationship between centre and periphery is discursively produced, often through literary representation. In colonial contexts, this dynamic manifests as oppressor and oppressed, where the centre wields power, and the margin is relegated to victimhood. All these terms, such as centre, periphery, margin, off-centre, and ex-centric, are not natural; they are discursively produced. Those on the margins often challenge the centre, attempting to destabilise it within the discursive framework. Marginality is not a natural state but a product of power and political discourse. The first significant paradigm shift in this binary occurred when Copernicus disagreed with religious beliefs concerned with the earth’s position in the universe. This shift offered the possibility of questioning the existing beliefs, knowledge systems, and centres of power, paving the way for alternative perspectives.

In this context, Linda Hutcheon emphasises that postmodernism “acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (42). Hutcheon’s perspective illustrates the postmodern approach to knowledge, particularly in relation to marginalised groups. Similarly, Jean-Francois Lyotard calls the postmodern condition a state of “incredulity toward metanarratives” (24). Metanarratives (also known as Grand narratives) undertake to explain everything and “serve to give cultural practices some form of legitimation and authority” (Butler 13). However, forming a singular metanarrative in any discourse is impossible because one cannot have a unified story that legitimises all moral, political, and scientific claims. An American literary critic, Barbara Johnson explores the discourse of difference by critiquing Zora Neale Hurston’s strategies for addressing complex topics. Johnson argues that Hurston’s writings deal with “multiple agendas and heterogeneous implied readers” (278). These differences, present among readers and authors, contribute to creating mini-narratives — localised explanations of small practices and events. Multicultural societies illustrate the diversity of human culture within a community, challenging any corollary of a singular notion of discourse. Postmodernism does not seek to dismantle constructs like culture, race, gender, and ethnicity; instead, it interrogates their totalisation, resisting the imposition of absolute meanings. By doing so, postmodernism creates a unique space that legitimises the discourse of difference — local or mini-narratives — alternative ways of viewing or understanding the world.

Voices from the Margin in *An Artist of the Floating World*

The artist in the title of the novel represents the narrator, Masuji Ono, a former propagandist painter during World War II in Japan. Reflecting on his past, Ono now arranges the marriage of his younger daughter, Noriko. Once respected as an imperial propagandist artist, Ono is now a disgraced collaborator whose paintings once inspired young men to join the army. His elder daughter, Setsuko, who is married to Suichi and has a son, Ichiro, warns him to take “precautionary steps” during Noriko’s marriage negotiation (50). Ono’s former students, Kuroda and Shintaro, also struggle with their past involvement in the Empire of Japan. Over time, Ono comes to realise that his past is not something he should feel proud of. The “floating world” in the title refers to the “pleasurable things that disappear with the

morning light" (180), symbolising the fleeting nature of his former life and the impermanence of the ideals he once upheld.

However, a new cultural zeitgeist emerges in Japan after the end of the Japanese Empire via the collapse of the Imperial Army. Once perceived as a totalised metanarrative, World War II becomes ex-centric or marginalised, no longer deriving meaning from the dominant ruling class but from mini-narratives. Throughout the novel, Ono, as a central figure in World War II, is blamed by the young generation in ways he does not fully understand. Despite this, he is pleased to have been part of the Japanese Empire, even as he acknowledges its brutality towards others. In the pre-World War II era, Ono fails to look beyond his immediate concrete reality and cannot grasp the broader implications of his actions. Ishiguro, in an interview with Mason, states:

The very things [artists] thought they could be proud of have now become things they have to be ashamed of. I'm drawn to that period in Japanese history because that's what happened to a whole generation of people. They lived in a moral climate that right up until the end of the war said that the most praiseworthy thing, they could do was to use their talents to further the nationalist cause in Japan, only to find after the war that this had been a terrible mistake. (339)

Ono belongs to a group of generations that was in power during wartime, a period that legitimised hegemonic practices. As a result, these practices exploited subordinate states of the Empire by "succeeding in making its ideological views so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression" (Abrams and Harpham 208). This leads to chaos, violence, destruction, and misery. Neo-Marxist intellectual thinker Antonio Gramsci suggests the concept of cultural hegemony, in which the ruling class produces "dominant ideas to control people's actions and maintain the status quo without overt coercion in capitalist societies" (Nakahara 2).

Later, Louis Althusser expands this idea, arguing that "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses" (245). In this sense, Jiro Miyake withdraws Noriko's marriage proposal and tells Ono that these artists are the "men who led the country astray, sir. Surely, it's only right they should acknowledge their responsibility. It's a cowardice that these men refuse to admit to their mistakes. And when those mistakes were made on their behalf of the whole country, why then it must be the greatest cowardice of all" (56). The statement indicates that Japanese artists mislead the country and its people through an ideology that created a hegemonic structure. Stuart Hall further sheds light on nationalism and national identity as ideologies. He defines ideology as "mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups" interpret and understand the idea of nation and society (29). In this context, Miyake contends that these artists used national identity as an ideology to propagate war. Nationalism — as an identity in imperial Japan — played a vital role in supporting Japan's colonial expansion. Therefore, the artist's role was to present Japanese imperialism as a form of unique identity. Although this national identity resulted in the catastrophic failure of Japanese imperialism, many of these artists, even in the post-World War II era, continue to deny their past mistakes.

During the Meiji Restoration (1868-1889), Emperor Meiji established the Imperial Japanese Army, marking a period of rapid industrialisation and militarisation that made Japan

the fastest modernising country of its time. As a result of the Meiji Restoration, Japan emerged as a great power. However, the Imperial Japanese Army destroyed the constitutional monarchy and created 126 independent mixed brigades. As independent, these brigades invaded Manchuria on 18 September 1931, ahead of their planned invasion on 28 September. It is essential to understand the military's role in legitimising the practice of imperial Japan. The Imperial Japanese Army believes in (ultra)nationalism and is extremely violent. It enlisted artists such as Ono and Matsuda to help propagate the cause of the Japanese Empire. These artists used their talents to inspire (ultra)nationalism, patriotism, militarism, and imperialism among young men, urging them to support the military in Japan's colonial expansion. Many innocent people, including that of Ono's son Kenji, were lost in the war. In this regard, Ono's son-in-law, Suichi, says, "[F]or stupid causes, though [young men] were never to know that" (58). The notion of nationalism in imperial Japan was ideologically constructed to take young men like Kenji to promote racial superiority and ethical purity. This ultimately resulted in a disastrous war driven by nationalism. Artists like Ono and Matsuda helped the Imperial Japanese Army to practise their brutal militaristic ideology through national identity. Therefore, understanding the situation of artists before and during World War II is essential to grasp the broader context of this period.

Artists in imperial Japan became a means of influencing values related to expansion and racial superiority. They employed unique techniques to inspire young men to participate in World War II. Ono reflects on his role, saying, "[T]here are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours....what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people" (123). This quote reflects Ono's shift from his pre-war mindset to a post-war realisation. He realises the true nature of his national identity in imperial Japan. Artists like Ono and Matsuda became propagandists of Japanese imperialism, glorifying courage through their art to promote ideological and racial superiority. Although Ono seems unaware of the Japanese imperial agenda, he gradually became an imperial propagandist artist during World War II. Throughout the novel, Ono struggles with his former self, and in the post-war period, his identity as a nationalist carries negative connotations. Totalitarian views of (ultra)nationalism, which he once campaigned for, fail to bring harmony. The totalitarian ideology — once defining the world for Ono — now serves as a reminder of his past complicity. The Japanese imperial army created a world wherein artists were compelled to follow the nationalist agenda. In the post-World War II era, these artists lose their social reputation. This shift also impacts Ono's daughter, Noriko, whose marriage prospects are influenced by his pre-war identity. Setsuko tells her father, Ono, that he considers his pre-war identity:

"I merely wished to say that it is perhaps wise if Father would take certain precautionary steps. To ensure misunderstandings do not arise. After all, Noriko is almost twenty-six now. We cannot afford many more disappointments such as last year's."

"Misunderstandings about what, Setsuko?"

"About the past. But please, I'm sure I'm speaking quite needlessly. Father has no doubt thought already of all these things and will do whatever is necessary." (49)

The centre no longer has ideologically dominant authority but instead lost the legitimacy of power in post-World War II. This shift is evident in the transformation of characters like Ono and Matsuda, whose identities are reshaped in the postmodern state. Setsuko realises the

problem with Ono's pre-war national identity, which complicates Noriko's marriage prospects. The legacy of pre-war imperialist identities and (ultra)nationalism in post-war Japan carries negative connotations, leading to the concept of the ex-centric.

To be ex-centric — on the edge, at the margin, inside yet outside — is to have a different perspective. This shift in the paradigm of perspective leads to the recognition of differences in postmodern discourses. Ishiguro presents Japanese identity as inalienable. He creates a cosmopolitan world where identity transcends national or geographical boundaries. He portrays Ono's identity as rooted in nationalism, suggesting that "national identities are invented not only to maintain a boundary from the outside but also to erect boundaries in the face of new, perhaps internal estrangement" (Walkowitz 1058). Ono encounters unpleasant feelings when Matsuda, a former colleague of his, says, "I realise there are now those who would condemn the likes of you [Ono] and me for the very things we were once proud to have achieved.... You think perhaps I will praise you for things perhaps best forgotten" (94). This quote depicts the estranged relationship between Ono and Matsuda in pre-war Japan, highlighting the terrible and horrific nature of imperial Japan's identity. Following Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War, Matsuda refrains from praising Ono for his wartime contribution. The United States-led demilitarisation and democratisation of Japan led to the country acquiring a "new identity as a *pacifist* country and sought economic partnership with neighbouring countries under American hegemony" (qtd. in Nakahara 3). Japan's defeat marks the end of its imperialist era and the beginning of its democratic transformation, with anti-war public sentiments reshaping national identity and giving rise to a new ideological framework.

However, in the post-WWII era, people became sceptical and suspicious about the legitimacy of metanarratives, totalising explanation, and objective truth after witnessing the horrors of World War II that resulted in the genocide of European Jews as well as non-Jews and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These catastrophic incidents marked the end of the war and led to Japan's emergence as a democratic nation. Japanese culture changed acutely in post-World War II as it absorbed influence from the United States ideology, impacting Japanese identity in its core concept of progress. This shift also led to stereotypes concerning generations due to changes in societal values, norms, culture, and political ideology. Ichiro, a grandson of Ono, says, "[Suichi] says you used to be a famous artist. But you had to finish....you had to finish. Because Japan lost the war" (32). The statement illustrates Ono's identity as a propagandist painter. Following the shift in ideology after World War II, Ono hides his paintings. He loses both his national identity as a painter and his integrity as a human being after the fall of imperial Japan.

Furthermore, it suggests that Ono, once a figure of power at the centre, is now marginalised and disgraced after World War II. Young men criticise him for his association with Japanese imperialism. In this sense, Ono reflects, "These days I see it all around me; something has changed in the characters of the younger generation in a way I do not fully understand, and certain aspects of this change are undeniably disturbing" (59). The conflict between generations is very evident in the post-World War II era. In Ono's case, the centre — once the source of meaning and power — has lost its legitimacy. The ex-centric produces a space where those once in power are forced to recall their past actions, which, in Ono's case, horrifies him as innocent lives were lost. Yet, there is a sense of hope for future generations, as Taro Saito, Noriko's husband, "[T]he Americans have an immense amount to

teach us. Just in these few years, for instance, we Japanese have already come a long way in understanding such things as *democracy* and *individual rights*” (185; my emphasis). This quote reflects the American intervention in Japan. Post-war Japan’s foreign policy focused on economic recovery, and the young generation’s optimism about the future signals the emergence of a new identity.

Moreover, Japan emerged as a progressive country after World War II. Ono realises that “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” (206). This note of hope is significant in understanding that some cultures and societies continue to create a sense of fraternity. Postmodernism does not form metanarratives in dealing with the modern subject but presents alternative narratives that resist being merged into a single notion of things. It suggests that one cultural perspective cannot justify the order or function of things. In the postmodern state, various cultures amalgamate, creating a melting pot of different values, customs, beliefs, and rituals. However, the concept of the ex-centre presents alternative stories from the margins of the dominant ruling-class narrative. These alternative narratives — such as woman vs. patriarchy, proletarian vs. bourgeois, and others — present multiple points of view. There is a shift in both perspective and narrative form. Thus, postmodernism discursively reconstructs narrative structure, bringing marginalised voices to the forefront.

Conclusion

Though there have been marginalised sections in history, it is clear that dominant metanarratives are not the best example to give culture some form of legitimisation and authority in a way that explains everything in the world. These grand narratives are increasingly challenged by mini-narratives that do not adhere to a single culture. As a result, a space is created that legitimises the discourse of difference in the postmodern world. This shift is evident in the way marginalised groups — once silenced by dominant ideologies — are not given a voice in the democratic landscape. Moreover, the grand narrative eventually comes down to a point where it cannot hold structure due to resistance. Thus, the centre becomes marginalised — not by an inversion of values, but by critique. Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World* deals with the metanarratives of imperial Japan through the lens of artists and their propagandist works. Ono, once a respected imperial propagandist artist, is now viewed as a traitor by the younger generation in the post-World War II. This way of narrating power destabilises the centre/margin space, paving the way for a more humanistic and democratic future.

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