DECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S "WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS"

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Abstract: The present paper looks at ways in which identity is deconstructed in "When We Were Orphans". Banks, the main character, is a detective who fails at finding his parents and, at the same time, at metaphorically establishing order in his world. More than that, as an orphan, Banks fails at defining himself through his past and his nationality which he perceives to be connected. He is also an unreliable narrator whose memory is the only access to his story which is set in the larger context of a troubled history.

Index terms - Identity, Detective, Orphan, His Story, History

Shortlisted for the 2000 Man Booker Prize, "When We Were Orphans"[1] is possibly one of Kazuo Ishiguro's least discussed novels. After an experimental break with "The Unconsoled" [2], Ishiguro returns to a familiar scene for readers of his earlier work. Identity, self-awareness, the burden of duty, memory and nostalgia are revisited in "When We Were Orphans".

Set in the inter-war period, the novel is profoundly postmodern, for it can be read as an attempt to define personal identity by rearranging bits and pieces of history and national identity. "When We Were Orphans"undermines the "grand narrative" [3] by dismantling history as a macro-narrative and focusing on the perspective of Banks, the main character. Unsurprisingly placed between East and West, Banks starts as the English boy born at the beginning of the 20th century in Shanghai's International Settlement. His best friend was the Japanese boy Akira with whom he used to enact complex detective dramas. Although now a grown man, he never really grows out of this detective persona, identifying himself with this role, just like Stevens in "The Remains of the Day"[4]was the embodiment of the butler or Ryder in "The Unconsoled" - the failed messiah of a displaced community.

What sets off his vocation is the traumatic disappearance of his parents at the age of nine. The orphan Banks is sent to his "home", i.e. England, where he attends the best schools and is supported by his aunt. Although the reader cannot quite fully trust Banks as a narrator, it is quite apparent that Banks never fits in and, just like Stevens, is prone to emotional restraint. His relationship with Sarah Hemmings is always in the shadow of his obsession with his duties, just like Stevens could never quite get beyond his dignified butler role to express his feelings to Miss Kenton. In the end, much like all Ishiguro's characters, Banks fails, seeks consolation and concludes in a pseudo-optimistic tone.

In an interview with Suzie Mackenzie [5], Ishiguro says that "When We Were Orphans"started with two ideas. The first is that of the metaphor of orphans, "which refers to that moment in our lives when we come out of the sheltered bubble of childhood and discover that the world is not the cosy place that we had previously been taught to believe. […] Even when we become adults, something of this disappointment, I think, remains." The other metaphor is that of detection. What a detective does is to basically to restore the order of a trouble world by using his brain and skills, by doing, in the end, his duty. The deeper psychological reality that Ishiguro addresses through this metaphor is people's need to believe that the world can be repaired, that there are solutions in the context following World War I and preceding World War II. "I had the image of such a detective let loose in the modern world, still with the idea that he can counter evil by these methods. And how absurd it would look going round with a magnifying glass trying to stop the second world war. And the comic possibilities of that" [6], Ishiguro continues in the same interview.

The detective meant to undo the orphan spell becomes even more significant in the larger context of national identity. By trying to work his detective magic and narrating this process, Banks is re-defining his identity against the wider background of national identity. At a certain point in the book the child Banks asks his uncle: "How do you suppose one might become more English?" [7] The man replies that "mongrels" like Banks, growing up in the midst of many cultures, may be lucky enough to exist outside traditional affiliations, and even may bring an end to war. Then he corrects himself: "People need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race. Otherwise who knows what might happen? This civilization of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse. And everything scatters, as you put it" [8]. Banks concludes the dialogue by asking his uncle if he could "copy" him, that is assume his identity by assuming the national identity that his uncle seems to be more at home with.

National and personal identity appear as deeply interrelated. It is not possible to conceive one without the other and this interdependence is fertile ground for further psychological insights. Banks's story, his story is suddenly more relevant in the context of history. By using a multicultural setting, Ishiguro sets the scene for exploring the individual caught between two worlds: a real and an ideal one. The transition between the two is made by using nostalgia as a longing for a better world. "Nothing wrong with nostalgia" says Ishiguro. "It is a much-maligned emotion. The English don't like it, under-rate it, because it harks back to empire days and to guilt about the empire. But nostalgia is the emotional equivalent of idealism. You use memory to go back to a place better than the one you find yourself in. I am trying to give nostalgia a better name." [9] Nostalgia for a history that we did or did not experience or nostalgia for our own individual past that could or could not have been different are all instruments that Ishiguro uses to investigate his character's identity.

When leaving Shanghai for England, which is supposed to be Banks's home now, the colonel on the ship tries to cheer him up, to which the boy reacts: "It was this last remark, this notion that I was 'going home', which caused my emotions to get the better of me for – I am certain of this – the first and last time of the voyage. Even then, my tears were more of anger than sorrow. For I had deeply resented the colonel's words. As I saw it, I was bound for a strange land, where I did not know a soul, while the city steadily receding before me contained all I knew. Above all, my parents were still there, somewhere beyond that harbour, beyond the imposing skyline of the Bund, and wiping my eyes, I had cast my gaze towards the shore one last time, wondering if even now I might catch sight of my mother – or even my father – running to the quay, waving and shouting for me to return. But I was conscious even then that such a hope was no more than a childish indulgence. And as I watched the city that had been my home grow less and less distinct, I remember turning to the colonel with a cheerful look and saying: 'We should be reaching the sea fairly soon, don't you think so, sir?'" [10]

The absence of parents gives even greater emphasis to the identity search. Being an orphan reflects, in the end, the incapacity to trace back one's origins, one's past and in the end one's identity. As children, Banks and his Japanese friend Akira, talk about not being "enough English" or "enough Japanese" and how this may have caused their parents to distance themselves from them. It is quite irrelevant that the entire episode could be just one of Akira's imaginings. But just as Banks being unreliable as a narrator does not take away from the reality of his inner travels, it is precisely the subjective nature of these unreliable characters/ narrators that presents interest while trying to make sense of their identities. What matters in this particular interaction is how the children relate national identity to their personal matters, namely their relationship with their parents: "'I know why they stop. I know why.' Then turning to me, he said: 'Christopher. You not Englishman.' When I asked him to explain this, he once more looked at the ceiling and went quiet. I too rolled on my back and followed his example of staring at the fan. He was lying a little way across the room from me, and when he spoke again, I remember his voice sounded oddly disembodied. 'It same for me', he said. 'Mother and Father, they stop talk. Because I not enough Japanese.' As I may have said it already, I tended to regard Akira as a worldly authority on many aspects of life, and so I listened to him that day with great care. My parents stopped talking to one another, he told me, whenever they became deeply unhappy with my behaviour – and in my case, this was on account of my not behaving sufficiently like an Englishman. If I thought about it, he said, I would be able to link each of my parents' silences to some instance of my failing in this way. For his part, he always knew when he had let down his Japanese blood, and it never came as a surprise to him to discover that his parents had ceased talking to one another" [11].

Apart from building on the above mentioned unreliability of characters by using the children's distorted yet honest perceptions, Ishiguro takes this entire search for identity even further by having Akira and Banks not want to go back to their native countries. Akira and Banks seem to have made up their minds about the place they belong to: "'Old chap!' he said. 'We live here together, always!' 'That's right', I said. 'We live in Shanghai for ever.' 'Old chap! Always!'" [12]

As an adult, Banks retreats so much to his inner world that his story is almost set in stark contrast with history. He builds his entire life around the idea of going back to the sacred place of his childhood and reconstructing it by finding his kidnapped parents. As World War II looms, he hardly cares about anything apart from his own issues. He expects everybody to help him solve his case, i.e. his personal case, and forget about the critical political situation. His heated exchange with the police lieutenant reveals his self-centredness, his unawareness of more stringent political matters and inability to place himself in the wider net of the world. In the end, just like Stevens from "The Remains of the Day", he refuses to take responsibility for his position in that particular historical context and thus allows power relationships that are not beneficial to the world as a whole: "I know full well what you've been thinking all this time, Lieutenant! I could see it in your eyes. You believe this is all my fault, all this, all of it, all this terrible suffering, this destruction here, I could see it

in your face when we were walking through it all just now. But that's because you know nothing, practically nothing, sir, concerning this matter. You may well know a thing or two about fighting, but let me tell you it's quite another thing to solve a complicated case of this kind. You obviously haven't the slightest idea what's involved. Such things take time, sir! A case like this one, it requires great delicacy. I suppose you imagine you can just rush at it with bayonets and rifles, do you? It's taken time, I accept that, but that's in the very nature of a case like this. But I don't know why I bother to say all this. What would you understand about it, a simple soldier?" [13]

Banks is undermined not only by being turned into this sort of Quixotic detective, more or less alone in his failing struggle to reset order in his chaotic world, but also by being unreliable as a narrator. The identity of the main character is perceived as made up, re-constructed through the lens of the narrator's fragmented memory, which is the only way to access his past identity. The scenarios he builds, the illusion of being an omnipotent detective capable of putting an end to all evil, the sense of duty, his childhood memories, the anxiety that he may not be a good enough Englishman, the guilt for his parents' disappearance – all these bits and pieces make up Banks's identity. By recalling his past, Banks attempts to gain control over this identity. However, it is too fragile, artificially built on binary oppositions (good/ evil, childhood/ maturity, past/ present) for it to be authentic. It becomes impossible to simply delete the evil and to restore order, Banks fails to achieve his purpose, to get out of his shell, his idealism and naivete. He lives in a bubble and even when he tries to get out, he is so overwhelmed with nostalgia that he almost comes across as a ridiculous character.

Just like Stevens or Ryder, Banks fails at what he is. Identity is a powerful metaphor which, if deconstructed, can bring down an entire world with it. For it is not just Stevens, Ryder or Banks that fail in Ishiguro's novels. Ultimately, Ishiguro questions the whole idea of society needing redemption in "The Unconsoled" and the entire notion of Englishness in Stevens's and Banks's case.

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