

# Ambivalence of Cosmopolitanism: A Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's Writing\*

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**Abstract**—Although labeled as an immigrant writer, Ishiguro is not a typical one. His writing is not a repetition or successor of the diasporic literature. The various subjects and diversified locations of his works have been appropriately corresponded to his claim as “a kind of homeless writer”. He has always been locating himself in different cultures as well as engaged in a de-cultural writing, providing insights into the relationship between the subjective and the other, which shows his ambivalence dangling between different cultures. It is arguable that Ishiguro has several “deaths” before becoming a cosmopolitan. Nevertheless, the “killed” identity is inextirpable. The longing for subjectivity in his novels does not directly come from the cosmopolitan identity with whom he identified. Reading Ishiguro in the global context enables the detection of his compromise as a cosmopolitan writer constructed by a deliberate de-privileging and cultural alienation. Cosmopolitanism itself has been a paradoxical term in that its orientation points to the mutually inclusive “world” and “region”. Its implication is full of irreconcilable resistance and negotiation. The study is going to explore the ambivalence of cosmopolitanism in Ishiguro's writing, to trace the progress of the making of the novelist as a cosmopolitan as well as embracing multiple cultures but denies clear boundaries, and to widen the scope of the discussion of globalization, localization, diasporic study, or postcolonial study.

**Index Terms**—Cosmopolitanism, Kazuo Ishiguro, ambivalence, culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cosmopolitan writers, as Rebecca L. Walkowitz stresses in her “Cosmopolitan style: English modernisms, international cultures, and the twentieth-century novel”, “assemble elements from different national cultures and also assert that international encounters, create new cultures at home” (Walkowitz, 2006, p.1), as J. M. Coetzee rejects the term “South African novelist” and Kazuo Ishiguro assumes that his potential readers are Norwegians when he writes. These writers regard themselves as international novelists and devote themselves to working on people in different countries. Katherine Stanton has captured cosmopolitan writers in her *Cosmopolitan Fictions: Ethics, Politics, and Global Change in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and J.M. Coetzee* (2009). She describes contemporary cosmopolitan writing as “historicize the movements and networks of the transnational or the global, keeping their sights on the multiple histories of colonialism and imperialism” (Stanton, 2009, p.1), revealing its full implication of irreconcilable resistance and negotiation. In Bruce King's “The New Internationalism: Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro” in *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960* edited by James Acheson (1991), he points out that works of Timothy Mo, Kazuo Ishiguro and other immigrant writers have been characterized by “internationalism”, which “reflects the way modern life is characterized by the awareness of new nations, the ease of international travel and communications, the global literary mark” (King, 1991, p.193), rendering cosmopolitan features prolonged in immigrant literature.

However, under the seemingly “free, international and diverse” appearance, cosmopolitan writing is always intertwined with chaos, anxiety and ambivalence of identity. Cosmopolitan writing is not a repetition or successor of diasporic writing as it covers topics from history and religion to ecology and modern life. Most cosmopolitan writers tend to embrace multiple cultures but deny clear boundaries. Giving a talk in BBC in 2019, Homi Bhabha mentioned the double deaths of memory of forced migration. The two deaths, according to Bhabha, suggest the death of departure and arrival. In the initial death one leaves home, language, and people, while in the second death one kills one's old identity and welcomes a new one. “You have to die to yourself in order to be born again on a foreign land”, as Bhabha lays stress upon the importance of the birth of the new identity. Nevertheless, the new identity is not new in that the “killed” identity is inextirpable. It is arguable that cosmopolitan writers have several “deaths” before becoming a cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism does not signify the freedom of identity. Otherwise, cosmopolitans are traumatized. For immigrant writers, cosmopolitan writing is a new writing method of compromise as they are unwilling to wander on the edge of different cultures. Nevertheless, deliberate de-cultural writing could not digest them. Their works are always subtly intertwined with entanglement of identity.

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## II. PARADIGMS OF COSMOPOLITANISM

### A. Traditional Paradigm of Cosmopolitanism

Although cosmopolitanism emerged in the international academia in the 1990s, it has a long history which could be traced back to Ancient Greek Philosophy. “Cosmopolitanism” is made up of two words: “cosmos” comes from Greek “Κόσμος” which means universe, while polis is “Πόλις”, a city or world state. In the past decade, many scholars have begun to construct a global theoretical discourse under the background of globalization. The long-standing cosmopolitanism has risen again and assimilated many theories in response to the era, providing a theoretical discourse for globalization. Cosmopolitanism, is an ideal moral community, according to Martha Nussbaum in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (1996), “made by the humanity of all human beings, to allow no differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings” (Nussbaum, 1996, p.16). Its root idea, according to Samuel Scheffler in his “Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism” (1999), is that “each individual is a citizen of the world, and owes allegiance” (Scheffler, 1999, p.255). The basic meaning of cosmopolitanism is that all human beings, regardless of their nationality and race, belong to a large community. In this community, all people share some universal rights and ethical values beyond a specific nation or culture.

Cosmopolitanism is an interdisciplinary concept in philosophical, political, sociological and literary studies. Many theorists have revitalized it and offered different versions of cosmopolitanisms since 1990s. The study on cosmopolitanism mainly focuses on next four aspects. The first is the exploration of cosmopolitanism as a pursuit of moral justice beyond nationalism and patriotism, compared with universalism. Martha Nussbaum has generally discussed the relationship between patriotism and cosmopolitanism in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (1996). She argues: “With our connections to the rest of the world growing stronger, we should distrust conventional patriotism as a parochial ideal, and instead see ourselves first of all as ‘citizens of the world’” (Nussbaum, 1996, p.157). As a liberal feminist, her cosmopolitan view as human obligations, beyond cultures, shapes the way we think of public issues. In 2003, Derrida informs cosmopolitanism by drawing on examples of treatment of minority groups in Europe in his *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. In *Justice Without Borders: Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism and Patriotism* (2004), Kok-Chor Tan argues that cosmopolitan justice can accommodate nationalist and patriotic commitments, setting limits without denying their moral significance. Craig Calhoun in his “Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism” (2008) articulates the value of the world as a whole, as well as arguing that if the vogue for cosmopolitanism neglects the need to more local belonging and a fashion for universalism misleads us about the inequalities built into universalist projects.

The second is connecting cosmopolitanism with globalization, global governance and the extension of democracy beyond national limits. As David Held elaborates a vision towards a multipolar world and concerns with a global order on violence, law and environment in his *Cosmopolitanism: Ideal and Realities* (2010).

The third is seeing cosmopolitanism as a multinational way of deconstructing the central. As in Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande’s *Cosmopolitan Europe* (2007). Ulrich Beck advocates a cosmopolitan Europe in a integration as well as diversity. Beck has also mentioned the concept of “cosmopolitization” in his *Der Kosmopolitische Blick Order: Krieg ist Frieden* (2008). He emphasizes that cosmopolitization is a by-product of global capitalism. It represents a global inequality, which is different from cosmopolitanism who is attempting to convey that “we are all connected”.

The fourth is the cosmopolitanism in a state of migration, exile and diaspora under the background of colonialism, imperialism and postcolonialism, as a mode of identity and belonging. Tim Brennan has adopted a literary perspective in *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997), turning a critical eye to colonial progress and cultural studies. He criticizes the ignorance of the local effects of globalization, laying an emphasis on diversity and hybridity on the basis of shared cosmopolitan ethic. Robert Spencer has connected literary reading with cosmopolitan awareness in his *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (2011). Some postcolonial theorists and writers including V. S. Naipaul and Homi Bhabha have given their own versions of cosmopolitanism. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha has named it as vernacular cosmopolitanism, represented by the natural anarchistic Trinidadians in metropolios in V. S. Naipaul’s books. Julia Kristova, in a different context, calls it a wounded cosmopolitanism. The essence of Homi Bhabha’s cosmopolitanism lies in the “vernacular”, recognizing some specific groups defending their vernacular cultures like Trinidadians and Cantonese.

In addition, some scholars have also probed into cosmopolitanism from the above four aspects like Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins’s *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (1998), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006) and Robert Fine’s *Cosmopolitanism* (2007), signaling particularized cosmopolitanism, concerning the future of Europe, the rights of human beings and the political pursuits beyond national limits.

### B. Critical Paradigm of Cosmopolitanism

Recent years have witnessed a re-examination on the traditional paradigm of cosmopolitanism. Some scholars have put forward critical cosmopolitanism in the wave of neoliberalism, shifting their emphasis to its unwelcome side effect as Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2008), *Born Translated* (2015), and Aamir R. Mufti’s *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2016). In 2016, Vladimir Biti claimed that cosmopolitanism is derived from the personal or national traumatic experience in his *Tracing Global Democracy*:

*Literature, Theory and the Politics of Trauma*. Meanwhile, by studying cosmopolitanism in Georgian literature, Irma Ratiani argues that cosmopolitan writers have been lingering between the world and home, after suffering from personal and national trauma. Their endeavour to connect cosmopolitanism and trauma initiates a new paradigm of cosmopolitanism, which will be used widely in the future.

### III. KAZUO ISHIGURO'S COSMOPOLITAN WRITING

Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel Laureate in Literature, is one of the “Three Immigrant Giants” in contemporary British literature along with Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul. Although labeled as an immigrant writer, Ishiguro is not a typical one. His works are different from those of Rushdie, Naipaul and most immigrant writers whose preoccupation is with ethnic identity and postcolonial predicament featured with distinct regions. His writing is not a repetition or successor of the diasporic literature. He became a British citizen in 1982, but he declared himself as “a kind of homeless writer”, showing the feature of ambivalence dangling between different cultures. He has always denied there is anything specifically Japanese about his works or his familiarity with Japanese writing. After his two Japanese-set novels *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which brought him great success as well as the growing attention of his Japanese identity, Ishiguro, opposed to the encyclopedic interpretation, has shifted his direction and creatively undergoes a cosmopolitan writing. The various subjects and diversified locations of his *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and *The Buried Giant* (2015) have been appropriately corresponded to his claim as “nothing Japanese”. Meanwhile, Ishiguro considers himself a European novelist instead of a British novelist. In an interview in 1989, when discussing his upbringing, Ishiguro stated, “I’m not entirely like English people because I’ve been brought up by Japanese parents in a Japanese-speaking home. My parents felt responsible for keeping me in touch with Japanese values. I do have a distinct background. I think differently, my perspectives are slightly different.” He talks about his own identity as “Temperament, personality, or outlook don’t divide quite like that. The bits don’t separate clearly. You end up a funny homogeneous mixture. This is something that will become more common in the latter part of the century -- people with mixed cultural backgrounds, and mixed racial backgrounds. That’s the way the world is going.”

Ishiguro first gains critical attentions in the 1980s but most of the studies confine themselves to the discussion of his Japanese identity as a “mysterious Orient”. The stereotyped interpretation has been continued until the early 1990s when he deliberately avoided Japanese factors in his future works. The 1990s witnessed a more objective criticism about Ishiguro. Scholars research from the biographical study as well as his writing subjects. Barry Lewis’s *Kazuo Ishiguro* (2000) is the first monograph on Ishiguro’s works which covers from his early novels to his short stories, films and television works, exploring the issues of family, dignity and identity extensively. At the same time, Brian W. Shaffer’s *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (2008), along with *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro* (2008) under Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong’s editorship probe into Ishiguro’s works and life. Sim Wai-chew’s *Kazuo Ishiguro (Routledge Guides to Literature)* in 2010 systematically assembled a collection of research on Ishiguro. Current study has entered into a new level beyond the early introduction and guidance. Monographs, doctoral dissertations and articles have concentrated on diversified themes involved in his works range from morality to ethic; from memory to trauma, as Yugin Teo’s *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory* (2014) and Mei Li’s *A Trauma Narrative in Crisis Era: A Study of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels* (2017). The fields of research have been expanded to new historicism, post anthropology, cross-space writing, transnational writing and world literature. For example, Zhu Ping’s *A Community Study of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels* (2016) explores postmodern predicament and the construction of community. Other studies regarding theories are from the perspectives of psychology, narratology, postmodern theory, ecological criticism, postcolonialism, etc.

Despite all the achievements on transnational writing and world literature, there is also scholarly attention paid to cosmopolitanism in Ishiguro’s works. In 2001, in “Very Busy Just Now: Globalization and Harriedness in Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*”, Bruce Robin points out that Ishiguro’s reserved attitude towards professionalism “leads the butler to serve Lord Darlington’s ends so blindly, is simultaneously a case against cosmopolitanism” (Robin, 2001, p.426). In 2002, Wai-chew Sim, in his doctoral thesis *Globalisation and dislocation in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro*, probes into the cosmopolitan identity of Ishiguro and his characters, suggesting that the cosmopolitan cultural production needs to “attend to the systemically and effects of international capital if its oppositional impetus is not to be emasculated” (Sim, 2002, p.vii), paying more attention to the location of international capitals in cosmopolitan writing. In 2008, Rebecca L. Walkowitz in her *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* considers the politics of modernist style as critically scrutinizes “cosmopolitan style” through narrative strategies in the works of Ishiguro, Conrad, Rudish, etc. She makes a strong claim that “there is no critical cosmopolitanism without modernist practices” (Walkowitz, 2008, p.18). In 2010, Chu-chueh Cheng has also employed this concept in his “Cosmopolitan Alterity: America as the Mutual Alien of Britain and Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Novels” but to articulate the entanglement of identity of America in Ishiguro’s novels. In 2015, Noémie Nélis in his “Kazuo Ishiguro’s gentle transgression of tradition, myths and stereotypes --Towards a reading of the contemporary in *The Remains of the Day*” focuses on Ishiguro’s “transgression” of Englishness and the butler’s identity as a form of critical cosmopolitanism, suggesting a questioned movement between the local and the global. In 2019, Katherine Stanton has designated a literary genre as cosmopolitan in her *Cosmopolitan Fictions: Ethics, Politics, and Global Change in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje, Jamaica Kincaid, and J.M. Coetzee*. She has chosen Ishiguro’s works as his “hesitation to be read within national

canons” (Stanton, 2019, p.2), taking the investigation into the ethics and politics of complex belonging and foreign feeling in Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*. Among all these significant studies, cosmopolitanism simply catches the critics’ eyes without a further concern.

#### IV. AMBIVALENCE OF COSMOPOLITANISM

The development and debate of cosmopolitanism has been traced by quite a few theorists in the multiple ways. Despite these supportive and controversial voices, cosmopolitanism itself has been a paradoxical term in that its orientation points to the mutually inclusive “world” and “region”. To study a particular context from the perspective of cosmopolitanism, it is possible to combine the above different studies, on one hand find the specific concept within the texts, and on the other hand observe the paradoxical voices.

As a cosmopolitan writer, Ishiguro’s ambivalence could find its expression in his writing. He has been deliberately locating himself in different cultures as well as engaged in a de-cultural writing. By locating the story in the context of the post-war Japan in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro consciously alienates himself from the Japanese identity. By locating the story in the context in Britain between the two world wars in *The Remains of the Day*, he tries to deconstruct Englishness as a witness whose identity is uncertain. By locating the story in the context of an imaginary community with clones in *Never Let Me Go*, in which the clones are supposed to be the marginalized group, Ishiguro has provided insights into the relationship between the subjective and the other. In his earlier Japanese-related novels, Ishiguro corrects his perception of the myth of belonging, connects the history of Japan and the world, and puts himself in the gap of these narratives, so as to emphasize the re-imagination from historical perspective, submit to regional history, surrender the anxiety of national and social identity, then gradually alienate his Japanese identity. His works are always about his imaginary home, which includes the perpetrators and victims influenced by the shadow and residue of World War II as Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* and the failure of a Japanese militarist in *An Artist of the Floating World*. He adopts a narrative beyond nationalism, which elaborates the shame and guilty of oriental temperament.

Ishiguro has also marked his contexts with irreconcilable resistance, especially popular ones, thus as pretext, rendering the paradoxical cosmopolitanism, much more than mere location, exotic themes or foreign characters. In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro deconstructs Britain after World War I, using the symbols of traditional British culture such as “housekeeper” and manor to express the traumatic feeling of British people after World War II, the change of European pattern, the split Empire and the loss of cultural authority. Ishiguro runs through the whole process to redefine Britishness and dispel the central narrative from the perspective of a non-intrusive spectator, without any critical color. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro speaks for the “marginal” group, paying attention to the survival and creation desire of minority groups, and puts forward ethical issues and emotional demands closely related to cultural differences and social discrimination -- acceptance and exclusion as well as dignity and humiliation. Through returning to individual narration, Ishiguro expresses his appeal across the nation and community.

As a cosmopolitan writer, Ishiguro’s claim of “homelessness” stems from his deliberately “killing” of multiple identities. His narration across regional and national boundaries has the distinctive features of cosmopolitanism. Meanwhile, his de-cultural writing reflects his ambivalence as a cosmopolitan.

#### V. CONCLUSION

From the era of globalization to post-neoliberalism, especially when COVID-19 is now the world’s destiny, the regional and world structure is under transformation and has been effected by neoliberal culture. With the weakening of international organizations, non-traditional issues such as resources, ecology, race, infectious diseases, refugees and religious beliefs emerge in an endless stream. It is urgent to build a collective world discourse under such circumstances. The study of cosmopolitanism is closely related to the interdependent views of international power, common interests, sustainable development and global governance contained in the global value of community. Studying cosmopolitanism examines the coexistence and mutual integration of regions, nations and cultures. Its development will gradually realize the transition from centralism to pluralism.

As an ambivalent cosmopolitan, Ishiguro’s longing for subjectivity does not directly come from the cosmopolitan identity with whom he identified but a compromise as they are unwilling to wander on the edge of different cultures. This makes the idea of cosmopolitan in Ishiguro’s novel an ambiguous one. Cosmopolitan identity is far more than a hybridity of different identities. Reading Ishiguro in the global context enables the detection of his negotiation and resistance as a cosmopolitan writer, as well as his creating method of deliberate de-privileging and cultural alienation, thus to further extent the application fields of the present research of cosmopolitanism and also to widen the scope of the discussion of globalization, localization, diasporic study, or postcolonial study.

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