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TRANSLATION AND TRANSCULTURAL MEDIATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

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Abstract:

Kazuo Ishiguro's An Artist of the Floating World (1986) is more than a postwar Japanese narrative written in English. It is a subtle act of translation acrosslanguages, cultures, and moral sensibilities. This paper explores the novel through the lens of translation theory, arguing that Ishiguro performs a double translation: first, by transforming Japanese historical consciousness into English literary form, and second, by reinterpreting memory as a translated construct. Drawing upon the works of Walter Benjamin, Lawrence Venuti, and Susan Bassnett, this paper demonstrates how Ishiguro's narrative exemplifies literature's power to mediate between cultures without erasing their differences.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is a narrative that operates through a principle of deep and ongoing mediation. The novel is not simply a story told, but rather a story filtered, translated, and repeatedly reframed for an audience both within the text and beyond it. Through the unreliable first-person narration of Masuji Ono, an aging artist in post-war Japan, Ishiguro reveals the intricate processes by which personal and national histories are created, dismantled, and reformed in the aftermath of traumatic change. The concepts of translation and transcultural mediation are not just thematic elements in this process; they are the very mechanisms of the plot and the central metaphors through which Ishiguro explores the collision of past and present, East and West, and the fragile nature of truth itself. Ono's narrative is an ongoing, often flawed, translation of his own life, compelling the reader to become an active transcultural mediator, reconstructing a coherent reality from the fragments of a deliberately obscured past.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is a virtuoso novel which delineates the contemporary era of the imperialism that enforced Japan into World War II. Ishiguro is an international writer who deals with the universal themes in his novels. Immigrant feeling is rampant in his works. He says about himself as:

'I am a writer who wishes to write international novels. What is an 'international' novel?I believe it to be one, quite simply, that contains a vision of life that is of importance to people of varied backgrounds around the world. It may concern characters who jet across continents, but may just as easily be set firmly in one small locality.' (Procter)

His works are not only having the Japanese face and name but the universal face which is of any common person of the transnational world. *An Artist of the Floating World* portrays the menace of an artist in the aftermath of the national crisis. The protagonist of the novel Masuji Ono is an artist of Second World War

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period, who recapitulates the memories of his time and presents in the form of narrative. He is retired person who remembers his life by visiting the past. His nostalgic narrative brings forth the lives of the people during and after the Second World War. Ono deals with the challenges of the peacetime and his daughter Noriko negotiates her marriage. The forces which work during this time verifies the role of Ono as a pro-government artist and a betrayed person. The tragedy of Ono is crystal clear in the present text that is Ono's extensive digressions into the past revert to the troubles of the present. His reminiscences are mockingly equivocal, for instance: "Of course, that is all a matter of many years ago now and I cannot vouch that those were my exact words that morning." However, the truth is ultimately placed bare. Ono is enforced to look over his memories, with increasingly worthless personal recognition. "I am not one of those," he says towards the heartbreaking finale, "who are afraid to admit to the shortcomings of past achievements." (Ishiguro) This novel is the distressing fictional account of how parents kill their own children unintentionally. This novel by the Japanese-born British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro is dedicated to the father of author. This novel reexamines how the loving father becomes responsible for the death of his son. The burden of this crime on the shoulders of the father is unbearable, however being an artist he has to bear it for his whole remaining life.

At its most fundamental level, the novel is an exercise in linguistic and cultural translation for a Western readership. Ishiguro, who moved from Nagasaki to Britain at the age of five, writes in English, yet his narrative is steeped in a Japanese sensibility and setting. He does not exoticize Japan for his audience; instead, he immerses the reader in a consciousness that feels authentically Japanese, using a prose style that mirrors the indirectness, politeness, and situational hierarchy of Japanese communication. The novel is filled with untranslated Japanese terms, such as sensei (teacher/master), okusan (a polite term for another's wife), and the titular ukiyo (the floating world), which challenge a degree of cultural engagement and resist easy assimilation into a Western framework. This stylistic choice is itself a form of transcultural mediation-it respects the integrity of the source culture while trusting the reader to derive meaning from context, much like an immigrant must navigate a new culture. The reader, like Ono himself, is placed in a position of having to interpret signs and nuances, never being given the full, unmediated picture.

This mediation is most powerfully embodied in the character of Ono, who serves as the novel's profoundly unreliable translator of his own history. His narration is not a linear confession but a palimpsest, where memories are written over, edited, and revised to suit the needs of the present. Ono is engaged in a project of self-translation, attempting to convert the shameful legacy of his nationalist, militaristic art into a narrative of dignified, if misguided, patriotism. He constantly mediates between his past self-the celebrated artist of the pre-war imperialist regimeand his present self-a retired figure seeking a respectable marriage for his younger daughter, Noriko, in a new, American-influenced Japan. This mediation is fraught with evasion, half-truths, and strategic omissions. For example, his recollection of the denouncement of his pupil, Kuroda, is presented with a self-serving vagueness, obscuring his own active and destructive role in the event. He translates his betrayal into a narrative of paternal concern, telling himself and the reader that he was merely protecting Kuroda from more severe punishment.

Ono's need to mediate his past is a direct consequence of a radical cultural and political re-translation

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happening on a national scale. The Japan of the late 1940s is a nation engaged in a violent act of collective re-narration. The values of the Kokutai-the imperial mythos of a divine emperor and a uniquely destined nation-have been utterly discredited by defeat. In their place, a new set of values, largely imported and translated from American democracy and capitalism, is being hastily installed. The “new Japan” is one of businessmen, commercial negotiations, and democratic ideals, a stark contrast to the militaristic, artistically charged “old Japan” that Ono inhabited. This societal shift is exemplified in Ono’s own family: his son-in-law, Taro, is a salaryman in a new commercial firm, and his grandson, Ichiro, idolizes Popeye and Lone Ranger figures over samurai. The nation is thus caught in a painful process of transcultural mediation, attempting to graft a foreign political and social ontology onto a traumatized native stock. Ono’s personal struggle is a microcosm of this national identity crisis; he is a man whose moral currency has been demonetized, and he must learn to speak the new language of a society that now views his life’s work as not just obsolete, but criminal.

The central metaphor for this cultural translation is, fittingly, art itself. Ono’s artistic journey traces the trajectory of pre-war Japanese culture and its fraught relationship with both tradition and the West. He begins his apprenticeship with Master Takeda, producing commercially successful images of “ghosts and maidens”-clichéd exports of an exoticized Japan for the foreign market. This is a debased form of cultural translation, pandering to Western stereotypes. He then moves to the villa of Master Seiji Moriyama, the definitive artist of the “floating world.” This world-the nocturnal, aestheticized realm of pleasure, geishas, and transient beauty-represents a purer, but deeply insular, Japanese tradition. It is an art of evanescence, celebrating the moment before decay, unconcerned with politics or the outside world. For a time, Ono translates this world onto his canvases with skill and devotion.

However, Ono's crisis, and the crisis of his generation, happens when he realizes that the aesthetic he once valued is no longer enough. He undergoes a political change, turning away from the "floating world" as a way to escape from national duty. He now wants to create an art that supports the nation, a “new Japan” full of power and destiny. His paintings, like “Eyes to the Horizon,” are clear forms of propaganda, meant to encourage sacrifice and national pride. This shift is a big mistake. He changes the purpose of art from a way to show beauty and the fleeting nature of life into a tool that pushes certain ideas. In the years after the war, this same art becomes proof that he was part of something wrong. The destruction of his paintings-by American bombs, by his own hand, or by the government-is the final judgment on this failed effort. The art that was supposed to help the country now has to be destroyed, and the artist must now accept his past actions as a mistake, even if his intentions were good.

The structure of the novel supports this idea of translation well, especially through the central theme of arranging Noriko's marriage.The investigations by the Saito family is a formal, ceremonial way of moving between social roles. Ono's past is not just something personal-it’s a story that others examine, interpret, and judge for its ability to challenge the new social order. The first attempt fails, and Ono is forced to think that his reputation might be the reason. This pushes him to visit his old friend Matsuda and his former pupil Kuroda, which are really about gathering and controlling the many stories people have about his past. His conversations are very indirect, and what is left unsaid is often more important than what is spoken.

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When he sees Matsuda, they both assure each other that they acted with good faith, translating their earlier patriotic feelings into the words'"sincerity" and "commitment." This is a shared effort to create a story that can survive the new era.

One of the most touching and painful acts of translation happens across generations.Ono's daughters, Setsuko and Noriko, and his grandson, Ichiro, represent the new Japan, and their understanding of the past is very different from his. Setsuko, the older one, is the most direct mediator. She subtly warns Ono that his influence might be a problem and suggests he make "certain gestures" to help Noriko's marriage. She acts as a cultural bridge, translating the unspoken rules and judgments of the new society for her father, who is not well-equipped to understand them. Her words are polite and indirect, but the meaning is clear. She is translating between her father's old moral values and the practical rules of the present.

Noriko is more direct and shows the new, more confident spirit of post-war youth.She openly laughs at the old ways, showing no interest in keeping the past alive. She refers to the "new ways" with a casual acceptance that highlights Ono's distance. She does not want to make peace with the past; she is eager to leave it behind. This generation gap is especially clear with Ichiro. His world is filled with American heroes like John Wayne and the Lone Ranger-symbols of independence and violence that replace Japanese cultural models. When Ono tries to tell Ichiro a story about a "bad man" to teach a moral lesson, the boy is disappointed it isn't about gangsters. Ono's way of telling stories is no longer relevant. He can no longer connect with his own grandson. The attempt to bridge cultural gaps has completely failed, and the gap is filled by the myths of the winning country.

In the end, Ono's journey is a slow and painful, only partly successful attempt to find a truthful translation of his life.

He moves from denial and self-justification to a slow, reluctant acceptance of what he did. The turning point is in his imagined or real speech at the second miai with the Saito family. He admits that his work from before the war was "undesirable" and that he and others like him must "apologize for the past." This is a big moment. It is an act of self-translation that aligns his personal history with the new truth of the time. He stops using pride to explain his actions and starts seeing them through the lens of their consequences.

However, Ishiguro, in his usual way, leaves this moment uncertain.Is this apology completely real, or is it just a calculated move, the "gesture" his daughter suggested, designed to get the marriage approved? The novel suggests it is likely a mix of both. Ono has absorbed the language of the new Japan so well that he can perform its rituals of apology, but whether he has truly understood the meaning of his actions remains unclear. His final thoughts, where he comforts himself by saying his efforts, like his grandson's bridge-building, were aimed at creating a "fine and beautiful" Japan, show that he still wants to find some dignity in the ruins. The translation is complete, but the true self remains only partly translated, a reminder of the human ability to deceive even when apologizing.The themes of translation and transcultural mediation permeate every level of the text: from the linguistic choices that position the Western reader as an interpreter, to the national trauma of adopting a new political identity, to the intimate, painful negotiations within a single family. Ono's floating world was not just the pleasure district of his youth; it is the ephemeral and unstable nature of truth, reputation, and the self. In the end, Ishiguro argues that we are all artists of this floating world, endlessly translating the shadows of our past into stories we can live with in the present.

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