

Change of Life, Change of Tone

—Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*—

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和文要旨

カズオ・イシグロの『浮世の画家』において、社会の変化がどのようなかたちで登場人物の言葉に反映されているかを、考察する。社会に対する考え方と共に表現のスタイル自体が変わりつつある第二次世界大戦後の日本で、古い価値観を持つ主人公が自尊心を保ちつつ新しい世界を乗り切ろうとする手段を、彼の言葉の使い方に焦点をあてて分析している。

we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called in question. Let there be no mistake about it ; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come¹

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* is a novel set at a period of drastic transition in Japan. It deals with the question of changing mode of expression and different artistic styles which reflect the opposing views of culture. Taking the style of a first-person narrative, everything in

the novel is depicted from the narrator, Ono's point of view. However, within his narrative, one witnesses different attitudes towards expression, as well as the historical transition in the way verbal expression is conducted, which the text links with different artistic and social modes. It is true that Ishiguro's text is dotted with stereotypical Japanese images such as temples, mass-produced "Japanese" paintings of Geisha Girls, Fuji Mountain, and swimming carps, as well as more serious Ukiyoe-style pictures, excessive subtlety of social codes, and the cruel military police. However, the main force of Ishiguro's narrative in creating a fictional Japan lies in the way characters use their language. By focusing on the characters' language as a means to convey a changing culture and society, Ishiguro dissolves the essentialism in cultural representation. In the following, I would like to look at the way Ishiguro constructs the image of changing Japan.

An Artist of the Floating World is set entirely in Japan with all-Japanese characters. The narrator, Ono's description of a particular park or area, for instance, reveals his attachment to the city^{2, 3}

In fact, the sense of familiarity and attachment contributes effectively to the novel's dislocated structure ; It is the very society where Ono thought he achieved his worth, that has undergone a radical change, leaving defunct the values to which Ono has subscribed and which he had invested his adult life in. In the narrative, Ono needs to come to terms with this fact, and somehow adjust his perspective to cope with the change.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Japan is portrayed not as a static country with a set culture, but a changing country with plural and fluctuating values. That it deals with a phase of forced transition is apparent in the landscape of the city which Ono inhabits. The narrative opens in October, 1948, when the old pleasure district he used to frequent has become "nothing but a desert of demolished rubble." (27) Ono tells

that rather than being war damage, it has been produced by bulldozers pulling down buildings after the war.

Ono's narrative takes place during the period at which this rubble is turned into a new glass-fronted office block (206).

Like the bomb-damaged post-war scenery of the city, certain aspects of the society Ono used to know have survived, whereas other areas have been destroyed or are undergoing gradual change and redevelopment some time after the initial impact of the war. One can say that Ishiguro has chosen a setting whose physical appearance can function as a particularly apt representation of the metaphorical landscape of the changing society. Unlike the war whose victory or defeat can be declared on a certain day, social (or even physical) change does not have a clear-cut nature, even when it is brought about by a drastic event such as the end of a war.

Ono's narrative is as much about continuity as about disruption. For instance, in Ono's post-war world, his second daughter marries through *miai* (arranged marriage meeting) like her sister who married two years before the war (59). However, now Ono has to put up with a *miai* venue that is decorated "in a somewhat vulgar manner...to strike the American clientele" (116), agree on "a strategy" with his daughter to take on "the Saitos (who) were not the old-fashioned sort of family who preferred their female members to be silent and demure" (117). In the previous negotiation, he even had to tolerate a thoroughly informal approach—including the exchange of mischievous glances across the table at the *miai* itself (121) — on account of the participants' claim that it was a "love-match" (19, 115). After having accommodated "the new ways" (19), Ono finds that the male party had pulled out of the negotiation at the last moment, making full use of the traditional *miai* system where they do not have to contact the female party directly. (53) The reason for the withdrawal was never explained.

Another expatriate novel that shares Ono's attachment to the

surroundings and the keen awareness of change they undergo is V.S.Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*. "The idea of change, of the imminent dissolution of the perfection"⁴ intensifies "a poignancy of the beauty" in the narrator's eyes, which he finds in his surroundings that have given him :

This gift of the second life..., the second, happier childhood as it were, the second arrival (but with an adult's perception) at a knowledge of natural things, together with the fulfillment of the child's dream of the safe house in the wood. (EA83-4)

Naipaul, like Ishiguro, has chosen an elderly first-person male narrator, whose life has been dedicated to a creative activity, and who is concerned about the reassessment of his own past as well as the cultural or ideological trend of a whole generation. Naipaul's narrator is explicitly self-reflective, and his words are useful in identifying some of the preoccupations Ono shares with him.

For instance, Naipaul's narrator recognizes the constructed nature of any physical and cultural landscape, and its gradual and inevitable change :

It was only now, with the departure of the old couple, that I understood that the country-cottage effect of their house, and especially of their hedge and garden, had been their work, their taste, the result of their constant attentions. Very soon now, within months, the garden became ragged. The privet kept its tightness, but the rose hedge, unpruned and untrained, became wild and straggly. (EA35)

Such an awareness enables him to identify the hand of culture and history that have moulded more elaborate constructions :

Between granary and mock farmhouse,...was the church. To me in the beginning a church was a church, something built in a particular way, with windows of a particular shape : ideas given to by the Victorian Gothic churches I had seen in Trinidad. But

I had that village church before my eyes every day ; and quite soon...this new world shaping itself about me in my lucky solitude...I saw that the church was restored and architecturally was as artificial as the farmhouse. Once that was seen, it was seen ; the church radiated its own mood, the mood of its Victorian-Edwardian restorers. I saw the church not as 'church', but as part of the wealth and security of Victorian Edwardian times. (EA49)

He ponders on the way his own existence and perspective has been culturally and historically determined, and how his presence marks both the cause and the effect of the change that is happening around him. (EA19, 52, 174) Naipaul's "novel" scrutinizes the transition, in the mind of a West Indian writer, and the force of a culture on human perspective :

The noblest impulse of all — the wish to be a writer, the wish that ruled my life — was the impulse that was the most imprisoning, the most insidious, and in some ways the most corrupting, because, refined by my half-English half-education and ceasing then to be a pure impulse, it had given me a false idea of the activity of the mind. The noblest impulse, in that so colonial setting, had been the most hobbling. To be what I want to be, I had to cease to be or to grow out of what I was. To become a writer it was necessary to shed many of the early ideas that went with the ambition, and the concept my half-education had given me to the writer.

So the past for me — as colonial and writer — was full of shame and mortifications. Yet as a writer I could train myself to face them. Indeed, they became my subjects. (EA221)

Naipaul's narrator deals with a transition which, one can argue, is more substantial than the one in *An Artist of the Floating World*, as it involves

the legacy of the British Empire, with its long dismounting process. However, the way Naipaul's narrator "was hiding (his) experience from (him)self, (and) hiding (him)self from (his) experience" (EA116) through his "too literary approach" (EA262) bears some similarity to Ono's strategy to slide his focus from a particular reality to an abstract notion.

Ono neutralizes the personal responsibility by placing it in the context of recurring history. For instance, he confesses to the audience the possibility of him confusing words spoken by different persons (including himself) at different occasions (56,151) :

Many phrases and expressions which came to be most characteristic of me I actually inherited from Mori-san, and so it is quite possible that those (words that Ono has attributed to himself) were my teacher's exact words...instilled in me by the powerful impression they made on me at the time. (AF151)

What is interesting is that in Ono's mind his words and his teacher's words become interchangeable in the framework of the master-pupil relationship, despite the fact that their ideas on art and world-view were completely different. Thus, an imperialistic propaganda artist, and what Ono would have called a "decadent" artist who tried to celebrate something "intangible and transient" (150), can share the same language in Ono's narrative. This way, whatever Ono has said could have been said by others in the recurrent history, and in this sense his words are not his own. Ono often talks about the possibility of confusion in his mind, and sometimes this possibility is given more emphasis than the actual words certain character may or may not have said. Ono's employment of interchangeable speeches functions as his useful strategy. It imposes his chosen structure (such as a master-pupil relationship or a behaviour of an aspiring youth) upon his past, which conveniently puts his personal responsibility for the words, and a particular context in which they are uttered, out of sight.

One can see a good example of this strategy being exercised at Noriko's *miai*, when Ono admits to his past mistakes apparently quite explicitly.

Looking at the admission closely, however, one realizes that Ono does not actually own up to his guilt in any specific way. The full extent of one particular incident for which Ono seems to have been responsible, can be conjectured from the depictions of Ono's encounter with Enchi, a protege of Kuroda, who describes Kuroda's ordeal in prison (113), and Ono's own memory of the day when he visited Kuroda's police-ransacked house after his arrest, which seems to have resulted from Ono's information (181-184). Enchi's indignant words—"We all know now who the real traitors were. And many of them are still walking free" (114)—bring closer to Ono's person, the tone of accusation he detects in Miyake or Suichi (Ono is not sure which) or by "all men of Miyake's and Suichi's generation" (61), towards those "who are too cowardly to face up to their responsibilities" for leading the country astray (56), and "carrying on with their lives, much the same as ever" (58). Awareness of such an accusation may have induced Ono to undertake the "painful" admission of guilt. What Ono actually says at the *miai*, however, is this :

There are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of 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. I admit this. You see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. (123)

Puzzled, Dr Saito tries to identify what it is that Ono is specifically unhappy about. Ono replies :

My paintings. My teachings. As you see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. All I can say is that at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken. (AF123-4)

His paintings may have been propagandist, and his teaching may have been influenced by an imperialistic view. Ono may have “had to finish because Japan lost the war (32), as his son-in-law explained to his grandson. However, there is no admission in Ono’s declaration, of any particular suffering he was instrumental in causing, such as the one of his own protégé.

Ono talks about “a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one’s life” (124). He achieves this by inflating the portrayal of his guilt to macro-perspective, and referring to his “influence” (23) which was “ultimately” responsible for the suffering of the nation. Ono conveniently omits details, because admitting to his part in Kuroda’s suffering would not only mean having to acknowledge his direct and personal responsibility, but it also reduces the grandness of his claimed “influence”.

The way Ono places his responsibility in the context of a regrettable “arrogance and possessiveness on the part of a teacher” (181), puts his deed in the same category with that of his master, Mori-san. Mori-san banished Ono from his villa on account of Ono’s new enthusiasm for imperialistic propaganda paintings.

Here, Ono concentrates on the fact of his efforts disregarding its historical significance or consequence :

We have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever

we did, we did at the time in the best of faith. Of course, we took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness ; but this is surely preferable to never putting one's convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage. When one holds convictions deeply enough, there surely comes a point when it is despicable to prevaricate further. (202)

His efforts are compared to efforts made by any determined and well-meaning persons in the past.

Ono's strategy of disregarding the historically specific circumstances, and looking at an incident in the light of its abstract meaning, is useful for him when he remembers people's praise of him. The praise and gratitude are also seen within the master-pupil framework—it is the kind of thing pupil would say when they wish to show their respect to their master. This way, the circumstances in which these words are uttered recede into background, and Ono can savour the fact that he was respected, without having to think about the particularities that surrounded this fact, or its relevance.

Ono is keen to record these praises in a direct and explicit statements. However, not many of them represent the accurate state of affairs they describe, stand the test of time, or even communicate the speaker's intention effectively. The explicit statements usually take the form of declaration, and one can say that they are a verbal commitments by characters, to keep their current positions into the future. They illustrate these characters' idea of the relationship between the present and the future, which is based on their confidence in the continuity of their positions at the time of their speeches.

What other people said about him in such a manner is important for Ono, even after the situations have changed. He recalls how he “experienced a warm glow of satisfaction” on hearing Shintaro's brother

say, “I will be grateful to you for the reminder of my life...I will never forget the man who enabled me to start on my career.” (20), or on hearing his protege’s speech, claiming that “his reputation will become all the greater, and in years to come our proudest honour will be to tell others that we were once the pupils of Masuji Ono” (25). Ono also recounts the moment when his friend, “Tortoise” said, “However much our paths may part in years to come, I’ll always remember your kindness” (70). None of these words stood the test of time : Shintaro tries to disassociate himself from Ono’s pre-war influence, Kuroda would not meet him (114) or talk to him (78), Tortoise calls him “a traitor” (165). Even if these characters meant what they said when they said them, their words eventually signify nothing but the transient nature of their loyalty, respect, or gratitude.

Ono himself used to employ such an expression as a young man. It is ironical that despite his words like “I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world” (180), he has ended up being an artist whose belief, value, and style have been as impermanent in the face of the history as the beauty of “those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light” (180), which he decided to reject.

Above examples show the unreliableness of words resulting from changed circumstances. In the situation the characters find themselves, change is necessary to a certain extent, because they are inevitably affected by a change before and after the war. As one can see in the example of “Hirayama boy”—a minor character with a learning difficulty who sings imperialistic songs and shouts nationalistic slogans—the same song or words can mean completely different thing before and after the war : the songs and slogans that used to earn “Hirayama boy” some money and praises before the war are now causing him to be the victim of beat-ups. Inability to change can lead to victimization.⁵

Other conspicuous features of Ono's words are their ambiguity and uncertainty induced by the intervention of the narrator's mind. As the novel is written from only one rather limited point of view, the reader is unable to assess the validity (if there is any such thing in fiction) of Ono's words. However, his narrative unwittingly includes other points of view, which put a question mark to Ono's narrative position.

For instance, "the rather high esteem" (19) he claims he enjoyed is based on flattering words of his ex-pupil, Shintaro. Ono says that he felt "a certain feeling of achievement" in bringing himself to "such a position" where he "had almost unthinkingly started a young man (Shintaro's brother) on a good career". (21) However, the job is later described by Kuroda, as "a mere whitecollar appointment" (24). Shintaro's "unchanged" respect and flattery, which so pleased Ono, has turned out to be, in Ono's words, "just his way of gaining an advantage over people and getting things to go his way" (125). The only other description of the "influence" Ono unthinkingly exercised, was as "the...member of the Cultural Committee of the Interior Department...an official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities" (182), when Ono's information led to the arrest and imprisonment of Kuroda. Above post is the only public capacity he actually names to have fulfilled—a thoroughly disgraceful position from the point of view of the post-war cultural climate, which rather emphasizes his mediocrity as an artist.

More dramatically, Ono's claim of his social importance can be brought down by some of Setsuko's words. For instance, Setsuko suggests that Dr. Saito only knew of Ono as one of the neighbours, "but was unaware that (he) was connected with the art world at all" (190) until the marriage negotiation began between the two families. This is a serious allegation, as it casts doubts on Ono's pre-war status as an influential artist. "November, 1949" section begins and ends with Ono's indignation with the suggestion

and his explanation to counter such an idea (131-132, 189-190, 193-194). However, Ono's explanation not only brings in more doubts, but also questions the way Ono remembered the first encounter with Dr. Saito :

'So you are Mr Ono,' he (Dr. Saito) remarked.
 "Well now, this is a real honour. A real honour to have someone of your stature here in our neighbourhood. I am myself, you see, involved in the world of fine art. My name is Saito, from the Imperial City University."

'Dr Saito? Why, this is a great privilege. I have heard much about you, sir.'

I believe we went on talking for several moments there outside my gateway, and I am sure I am not mistaken in recalling that Dr Saito, on that same occasion, made several more references to my work and career. And before he went on his way down the hill, I remember his repeating words to the effect of :
 'A great honour to have an artist of your stature in our neighbourhood, Mr Ono.' (AF131)

Words like "I am sure I am not mistaken" emphasize Ono's eagerness to affirm the accuracy of his memory rather than the accuracy itself, thus somewhat weakens the credibility of his statement. And the expression, "words to the effect of," implies the processed nature of his memory which takes the form of an interpretation of the event rather than the record of the event itself.

Neither the first part of Dr Saito's words above, nor his son, Taro's response below actually supply any specific evidence to confirm Ono's claim that Dr Saito had known about Ono's career. It is Ono's interpretation that forces them to be read that way :

'You know, it's odd when one thinks about it.
 Your father and I must have been acquainted for over sixteen years, and yet it's only over this past year

we've become such good friends.'

'Indeed,' said my son-in-law, 'but I suppose it's often that way. One always has so many neighbours one does no more than exchange good mornings with. A great pity when you think about it.'

'But then of course,' I said, 'as regards Dr Saito and myself, it wasn't simply that we were neighbours. Connected as we both were with the art world, we knew of each other by reputation. All the more pity then that your father and I didn't make more effort to be friends from the beginning. Don't you think so, Taro?'

As I said this, I gave a quick glance towards Setsuko to make sure she was listening.

'A great pity indeed,' Taro said. 'But at least you had the chance to become friends in the end.'

'But what I mean, Taro, is that it's all the more pity since we knew each of other's reputations in the art world all that time.'

'Yes, a great pity indeed. One would think the knowledge that a neighbour was also a distinguished colleague would lead to more intimate relations. But then I suppose, what with busy schedules and the next thing, this is too often not the case.'

I glanced with some satisfaction towards Setsuko, but my daughter showed no sign at all of registering the significance of Taro's words. It is possible, of course, that she was not really attending ; my guess, though, is that Setsuko had indeed understood, but was too proud to return my glance, confronted as she was with proof that she had been quite mistaken in making her insinuations that morning in Kawabe Park. (189-90)

Apart from the way Ono interpretes Taro's words to his own advantage,

the exchange is also interesting in its representation of a polite conversation which proceeds without either parties directly mentioning anything explicit. The fact that Taro's words do not positively confirm Ono's argument, can be read as a polite form of discrediting, which supports Setsuko's argument. However, Taro does not explicitly discredit anything, thus one's interpretation on the matter has to remain in the realm of speculation. Moreover, as one can see from Setsuko's words which reads, "it would appear from what Taro-san has said" (193), her idea is also just a surmise, based on her interpretation of Taro's words. As there is no description of Taro's words, one cannot assess the validity of her interpretation. Even if Setsuko's interpretation happens to be more accurate than Ono's, this does not clear the situation, as it only brings indirect solution. After all, it is Taro's words—Taro's idea and interpretation—that both of them base their interpretation on, when the real issue is about Taro's father, Dr Saito's awareness of Ono. As I have discussed above, Dr Saito's position is inconclusive in itself despite Ono's forced interpretation. However, at the end of "November, 1949" section, one sees how Ono's interpretation consolidates its grasp on his memory :

There was never any doubt in my mind. I have, for instance, the most vivid recollection of that sunny day some sixteen years ago when Dr Saito first addressed me as I stood adjusting the fence outside my new house. 'A great honour to have an artist of your stature in our neighbourhood,' he had said, recognizing my name on the gate post. I remember that meeting quite clearly, and there can be no doubt that Setsuko is mistaken. (194)

The first few pages of "November, 1949" section also contains one of Setsuko's point of view. It is not just Ono's pre-war status that is called

into question, but his perception of the events which take place around the time of his narration, and his assessment of them. Setsuko says :

Forgive me, but it is perhaps important to see things in a proper perspective. Father painted some splendid picture, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters...Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong....Indeed, it is some mystery to me why Father's career should have been of any particular relevance to the negotiations. The Saitos, it would seem, were certainly not concerned and, as we have said, they were very puzzled by Father's behaviour at the *miai*. (193)

The behaviour she is referring to above, is one of the high dramatic moments in the text, which I have already discussed above, when, according to Ono, Noriko's *miai*, which "had hung in the balance until that moment" had "turned from being an awkward, potentially disastrous one into a successful evening" (124), because of Ono's outburst in which he admitted his mistakes in the past (123). There seems to be a major discrepancy between Ono's narrative and other characters' perceptions of the incident, as what Ono sees as an important moment is registered only as a puzzlement by the others present at the *miai*. Here, however, Setsuko's view is based on Noriko's words and her letter, as she was not present at *miai* herself. Thus, Saito's said puzzlement is only Setsuko's understanding of Noriko's report about her impression of the Saitos.

There is, however, a direct collision of views between Ono and Setsuko on the events that involve both of them.

As Ono himself acknowledges, his outburst at *miai* is a climax of a build-up process which has been triggered off by Setsuko's advice

(191). In the first section of the novel, Ono describes how Setsuko has suggested him to “take certain precautionary steps. To ensure misunderstandings do not arise...About the past” (49), and secure the success of Noriko’s *miai*. He visited Matsuda and Kuroda because of Setsuko’s suggestion (85). And yet, Setsuko says that she does not “recall offering any advice last year.” (191).

There may be several different ways to read this discrepancy. One can take Setsuko’s words and conclude that Setsuko has indeed never offered any such advice. This reading puts Ono’s memory and his narrative into a grave question to the point of the collapse of Ono’s entire narrative.

Secondly, one can say that Setsuko may have actually said these words as Ono describes, but has forgotten about them, because they were not so important for her. This position is more interesting, as it suggests the existence of different emphasis and priority for memory in the perspectives of Ono and Setsuko. This position emphasizes Ono’s preoccupation with the drastic post-war change of social values, and the concern for the inevitable reassessment of his own past. Ono’s preoccupation and discomfort can be detected in his repeated description of views held by the younger generation.

The third possibility is a little more complicated. In Ono’s outburst at the *miai*, he describes his position with the kind of language which would be more suitable for the work and influence of Yukio Naguchi, a composer of many imperialistic songs, who, according to Ono, committed suicide recently. At the background of Setsuko’s words in the quotation above, is the concern of her and other members of the family over Ono’s identifying himself with the composer. In the social climate where apology by suicide is perceived by some as “a great thing” (55), Setsuko has a vested interest in discrediting Ono’s pre-war influence so that he will not have to feel responsible for what he did during the war and commit a suicide. Thus,

Setsuko's words cannot be simply judged at a face value. Both Ono and Setsuko have their agenda in their speeches, and the matter becomes more indefinite, as their words are placed at the period when the modes of expression itself is undergoing a significant change of rules.

In Ono's description of the pre-war society, what other people indirectly say about one (especially in private to a detective) is more important than what one directly says to anyone. Thus, he thinks that he has acquired a grand house "for a nominal sum" (7) by submitting himself to "a closer investigation of (his) background and credentials" (9). Such an "investigation" entails making "enquiries" by using private detectives, which, as Ono points out, is "much the same as being involved in a marriage negotiation" (9). In any case, the two is connected, because as Ono's wife has said, one needs to buy a house "in keeping with (one's) status...for the sake of...children's marriage prospects." (8)

His present worry is exactly this marriage prospect. The unexpected withdrawal of the Miyakes from the marriage negotiation is clouding over everyone's mind at the Onos, and Ono is irritated by what he regards to be the implicit suggestion put forward by both of her daughter, Noriko and Setsuko, that Ono should know the reason for the Miyakes' withdrawal (18, 53).

Such a situation arises because one cannot ask the Miyakes anything directly, even when one has a chance to talk to them in person (52). Things becomes even more delicate when two fathers (Ono and Dr. Saito) meet by chance during the negotiation. All they can do is to praise "the merits of 'our mutual friend, Mr Kyo'—the go-between in the proposal" (80).

So, when the consequence of an investigation turns out to be well, one feels vindicated without knowing what exactly it is that the other party approves of. However, if the result is disappointing, one is left with an

endless speculation : Various aspects of one's past and present are scrutinized, and every kind of interpretations are employed to explain the disappointing situation, which shakes the foundation of one's status and identity.

Even within one's own family, face to face conversation is conducted in an indirect fashion, especially between Ono and Setsuko. The problem of communication arises when the underlying structure which supported a particular form of expression is undergoing a period of transition. Thus, in a traditional, indirect and polite form of language she is used to, Setsuko is forced to communicate things which had not been necessary in the past. And Ono has to try and interpret the message sent out by Setsuko in her indirect way of expression, without knowing what the new rule is. Setsuko's sentences are often not finished, and she is always ready to agree with her father. Any words that may cause a slightest of offence—and this includes expressing her thoughts and asking an explicit question—to her father are preceded by an apology :

‘Forgive me, but from what Noriko said just a moment ago, I naturally supposed things were more or less...’ She trailed off, than said again: ‘Forgive me.’ But she said it in such a way that a question was left hanging in the air. (16)

‘Forgive me, ...But did we ever hear any further as to why the proposal fell through last year? It was so unexpected.’

‘I have no idea. It hardly matters now, does it?’

‘Of course not, forgive me.’...

‘It remains equally a mystery to me. If I knew, I wouldn't keep it from you and Suichi.’

‘Of course, Please excuse me, I didn't mean to imply...’ Again, she trailed off awkwardly. (18)

‘Forgive me, but it would appear from what Taro-san has said that Dr Saito was never so familiar with Father’s career...’

‘You’re quite wrong, Setsuko,’ I said with a laugh. ‘Dr Saito and I have known about each other for many years. We often used to stop in the street and exchange news about the art world.’

‘No doubt then I am mistaken. Forgive me. But it is nevertheless important to stress that no one has ever considered Father’s past something to view with recrimination. One hopes then that Father will cease to think of himself in terms of men like that unfortunate composer.’ (193)

Setsuko’s unobtrusive language does not cause an immediate or direct reaction from Ono, as her ready agreement removes the need for any further discussion. Nevertheless, her suggestive phrases gradually work their way through Ono’s mind, and in the moment of quiet contemplation, Ono finds himself unexpectedly “irritated” by (what he thinks to be) her presumptuous suggestions (50-51, 132, 189). One can argue that Ono’s irritation has been brought about as much by his own interpretation of the incident as by Setsuko’s words, because, as one can observe from the following quotation, Setsuko does not say anything definite. This scene, where the issue of ‘precautionary step’ is discussed by Ono and Setsuko, is a classic example of the way polite indirect speech is exercised :

‘Precautionary steps? Naturally, we’ll go carefully. But what precisely did you have in mind?’

‘Forgive me, I was referring particularly to the investigation...Forgive me, I am no doubt expressing myself unclearly. I was, in fact, referring to *their* investigations...Father must forgive me. As you know, I’ve never had a gift for conversation...You must

forgive me, Father. In my place, Suichi would express things better. But of course, he isn't here. 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....

'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)

Despite Ono's questions to pin down the exact meaning of Setsuko's words, they remain elusive. Such a conversational practice relies heavily on participants' ability to interpret the elusive words, and the process of interpretation is inevitably affected by what is already in the participants' minds.

It is in Ono's recollection of the incident that her words are connected with Suichi's suspicion about the real reason for the Miyake's withdrawal (18), his "bitterness" towards Ono's generation (50), which, he feels, has influenced Noriko's attitude (51). This makes him irritated because her words have come to represent, in his mind, their "suspicious thoughts" against him (50).

In Ono's narrative, Setsuko's words are also linked with her words at another occasion, when Setsuko actually offers a suggestion :

'Forgive me, but I wonder if it may not be wise if Father were to visit Mr Kuroda soon.'

'Visit him?'

'Mr Kuroda. And perhaps certain other such acquaintances from the past.'

'I'm not sure I follow what you're saying, Setsuko.'

'Forgive me, I simply meant to suggest that Father

may wish to speak to certain acquaintances from his past. That is to say, before the Saitos' detective does. After all, we do not wish any unnecessary misunderstandings to rise.' (AF85)

The similarity of Setsuko's words on these two occasions brings "precautionary steps" and the above suggestion together. As Ono is himself aware, he sometimes confuses people's words from different occasions with similar situations (56, 151), and the coincidence above can be read as the description of Ono's memory rather than the facts.

What is interesting is that by the time we reach the "November 1949" section, where Setsuko denies that she has given any advice, "precautionary steps" have changed to something else again :

"Precautionary steps"... you remember that, Setsuko? As you see, I didn't ignore your advice... I'm quite prepared now to acknowledge there are certain aspects to my career I have no cause to be proud of. Indeed, I acknowledged as much during the negotiations, just as you suggested.' (191)

By following Ono's narrative, the reader can see how a certain succession of events — such as meeting Matsuda, Enchi, or seeing Dr Saito's younger son, Mitsuo at the *miai*— and his interpretation of the events, led him to take this particular position. However, the process takes place in Ono's mind, and it is no wonder if Setsuko does not recognize Ono's performance at the *miai* as anything to do with her.

An indirect conversation depends heavily on participants' mutual understanding of the topic, of the kind of things the other person is likely to say, and the way certain things are said and unsaid. When there is a drastic social change such as the one brought about by the war,

communication between individuals becomes difficult, because social consensus has to be reorganized extensively. For instance, Ono's assumption of what a boy of seven or eight is likely to want or do clashes with the boy's parents' idea, and Ono's grandson, Ichiro, ends up consoling his grandfather for not being able to have his way. Behind Suichi's (and Setsuko's) preference for the American heroes such as Lone Ranger to Lord Yoshitsune or Miyamoto Musashi as role models for children (36), is his perception of the history and ideology which was completely alien a few years before. Ono is not even sure what Setsuko is and is not capable of saying these days, nor whether his interpretation of her words are correct :

'There is no doubt Father devoted the most careful thought to my brother's upbringing. Nevertheless, in the light of what came to pass, we can perhaps see that on one or two points at least, Mother may in fact have had the more correct ideas.'

To be fair, it is possible she did not say anything quite so unpleasant. Indeed, it is possible I misinterpreted entirely what she actually said, ... Besides, I would not have thought Setsuko capable of introducing gratuitously such a note to the conversation. Then again, when I consider the sort of insinuations Setsuko had been making ... I suppose I have to admit the possibility that she did say something along such lines. (158)

Ono is aware of the spread, particularly after the war, of a more direct way of speech. In Ono's narrative, there are some very outspoken characters who do not hesitate to speak out even when it is awkward to do so. They tend to belong to the younger generation, who do not seem to subscribe to the traditional code of practice of showing reverence to one's elders, or obeying one's parents. One can draw a dividing line between

Setsuko and Noriko, or between Enchi and Kuroda to mark the difference in their modes of expression. For instance, Setsuko is clearly “uncomfortable” (13) with Noriko’s words about their father which she speaks in his presence :

“I’m relieved you’ve come at last, Setsuko. You’ll take Father off my hands a little...Father takes a lot of looking after now he’s retired,... You’ve got to keep him occupied or he starts to mope.” (13)

And she can only respond to Ono’s suggestion of “a family outing” (36) to see a master film, with words like, “That would be most enjoyable. Except perhaps Noriko may also have some plans for tomorrow” (36), or “it’s very kind of Father...But I understand Mrs Watanabe is expecting us. Perhaps we should leave the cinema until the day after.” (37) While Noriko can say, “Nonsense,...Everything’s arranged. We’re going to (the deer park, and) call in on Mrs Watanabe on the way back...Don’t be ridiculous, Father. We’d arranged Mrs Watanabe’s long ago. Besides, it’s ridiculous to take Ichiro to see a film like that.” (37, 38)

Ono seems to take these words without being too offended, and this may suggest, as Noriko has said, a change of attitude on Ono’s part, as much as on hers :

‘She (Setsuko) remembers you (Ono) from when you were a tyrant and ordered us all around. You’re much more gentle these days, isn’t that so?...You don’t seem to believe me, Setsuko. Father’s very different now. There’s no need to be afraid of him any more. (13)

Young Enchi’s words are even more remarkable because he is addressing them to a person who is not only older than him, but also a complete

stranger :

Frankly, sir, I am amazed at your nerve...He (Kuroda) will not wish to see you...It is clearly you who are ignorant of the full details. Or else how would you dare come here like this? (113)

These words are in contrast with Kuroda's own words in his letter :

I have no reason to believe a meeting between us would produce anything of value...I thank you for your courtesy in calling the other day, but I feel I should not trouble you further to fulfill such obligations. (114)

Ono can read Kuroda's tone despite the polite surface of the letter, calling it a "cold and offensively brief reply." (114). However, he does not seem to (or pretends not to) understand the reason why Kuroda should reply in such a way.

Although the difference in the mode of expression is primarily a difference between generations, Ishiguro includes characters from the older generation who seems to approve direct and explicit form of expression. Dr Saito, for instance, supports the demonstrations which are being staged in the city, even though there are sometimes casualties. Interestingly, Mastuda, whose political view should be completely opposite to that of Dr. Saito, is also an outspoken character.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro creates the image of the changing Japan through the way characters use different modes of expression. By showing the complexity and plurality of a fluctuating culture at a turbulent time of social change, Ishiguro offers a sense of unstatic "Japaneseness."

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- 1 Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture" 182-3.
 - 2 Ono narrates that he grew up "in Tsuruoka Village, a half-day's train journey" (AF41) from the city. However, apart from his description of his childhood and the years he spent at Mori-san's villa in Wakaba prefecture, Ono's narrative is set in "the city" (he does not give its name), and it is about the past and present events in his life there.
 - 3 Kazuo Ishiguro. *An Artist of the Floating World*, (Faber & Faber, 1987) 61, 62, 70, 134, 175. all the page numbers henceforward refer to this edition.
 - 4 V.S.Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival* (London : Viking, 1987) 87. All page numbers with EA refer to this edition.
 - 5 Many critics have taken the view that "Hirayama Boy" symbolically represents the state of Ono, as someone who cannot adjust to the change of values after the war. See for instance, Brian W. shaffer, *understanding Kazuo Ishiguro* (University of south carolina Press, 1998) 48 ; Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2000) 50. However, I would like to argue that Ono is far shrewder than Hirayama Boy. Ono's employment of various strategies allows him to survive the post-war era by salvaging his dignity.