



‘Imaginary Homelands’: The Importance of ‘Place’ in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*

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“It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to be self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’- Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands.”¹

In *The Remains of the Day* and *Brick Lane*, Kazuo Ishiguro and Monica Ali address the issue of national identity by portraying local communities that in some way belie the greater conflicts of Britain at large. The former works to counteract the homogenous discourse of empire being revived by the Thatcherite government at the time of its writing, while the latter strives to make sense of multiculturalism in the midst of the post-9/11 era. In both cases, the authors’ choice of setting serves to underline their ideological preoccupations.

The domestic sphere depicted by Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day* serves to mark it out as being an extension of a specifically British literary genre: that of the ‘manor house’ novel. In such works as Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, the country house is seen to act as a ‘metaphor for good society’, representing the traditions of England in a manner that is deemed to be morally sustainable.² Ishiguro’s text subverts this convention notion in two ways: by depicting the life of Darlington Hall’s servants, rather than that of those they serve and by revealing the dubious morality of the owner of the house, Lord Darlington. John J. Su’s analysis of the novel is particularly conducive to this discussion. Su aligns *The Remains of the Day* with ‘the “crisis of inheritance” narrative that reads the fate of the nation through the condition of the English country estate.’³ He places the narrative within a political context by associating Stevens’ nostalgic perspective with the rhetoric of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, who ‘invoked a moral framework of “Victorian values” in order to justify a host of economic, social and military policies.’⁴ Ishiguro himself has talked at length about the dangers of such a dialogue, asserting at the time of the book’s publication that he sought to write against the “enormous nostalgia industry” that had been manipulated into a “political tool” by his contemporaries.⁵ As such,

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-199* (London: Granta, 1992), p. 56.

² Virginia C. Kenny, *The Country-House Ethos in English Literature 1688-1750: Themes of Personal Retreat and National Expansion* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1984), p. 9.

³ John J. Su, ‘Refiguring National Character: The Remains of the British Estate Novel,’ *Modern Fiction Studies* 48.3 (2002), p. 552-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 556.

⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro, “Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro,” by Alan Vorda and Kim Herzigner, *Mississippi Review* 20 (1991), p. 139.

Su perhaps neglects the works in this area of post-colonial critics such as Homi K. Bhabha and Eric Hobsbawm, whose work he positions himself specifically against.

Hobsbawm's study of "invented traditions" supports Bhabha's view that nations construct their own 'narratives' in order to create a sense of commonality between populations consisting of immensely different personalities'⁶ Although Ishiguro has "bristled at being called a 'post-colonial'" writer, his works share many of the concerns identified by critics as countering the homogenous narratives of 'Empire'.⁷ Most significant of these is a resistance "towards 'metanarratives' that seek to explain the nature of physical and social reality."⁸ Stevens himself is seen to participate in such narratives, viewing the world as a 'wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them.'⁹ Frederick K. Holmes analyses this aspect of the novel from the perspective of its "surface realism": that is to say, Stevens' account of the world as depicted from his unreliable first-person narration.¹⁰ For David Lodge, writers of traditional realism assume that "there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history."¹¹ Holmes distinguishes post-colonial writers' accounts by stating that they are "generally aware that what constitutes reality is a matter for speculation and debate."¹² In such a way, Ishiguro's narrative framework serves to undermine the idea of the national 'metanarrative' by referencing a genre whose homogenous view of the world is shown to be logically unviable and morally false.

In order to clarify this point, I would like to transfer and extend Holmes' analysis of Ishiguro's fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans* (2000). Although radically different in its subject matter, much of the text's stylistic qualities are similar. In particular, the notion of a 'constructed' reality remains pertinent. The novel follows the attempts of Ryder, a private investigator, to locate his parents in Shanghai, where they had lived in a colonial settlement during his childhood before apparently disappearing. Ryder's career mirrors his favourite childhood game of playing the part of a detective; he appears to be still trapped in the pattern of fantasy, as it becomes obliquely apparent that he will not be able to locate his parents. His illogical belief that they may still live in their childhood residence seems at odds with the much-changed landscape that he finds in the city. Holmes views the work as a complex parody of the genre of detective fiction, widely popular in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Britain. Ishiguro's parody exaggerates the central fallacies of the genre: firstly, although they "maintain surface realism... their plots and characters have elements that violate ordinary readers' beliefs about the nature of everyday life" and secondly, their locating of the action within "communities that are essentially morally innocent."¹³ Thus, the detective and his accomplices may be seen to be morally perfect and the murderer wholly evil; the central point is that the only evil of the community is *contained* within the criminals: as Ishiguro states, "all it takes is for the detective to come from outside and unmask the

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," *The Inventions of Tradition*, eds. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 1.

⁷ Nico Israel, "Tropicalizing London: British Fiction and the Discipline of Postcolonialism," in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. James F. English (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 95.

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Benington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

⁹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1989), p. 115. Further quotations will be given in parenthesis.

¹⁰ Frederick M. Holmes, "Realisms, Dreams and the Unconscious in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro," in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 15.

¹¹ David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 47.

¹² Holmes, p. 11

¹³ Holmes, p. 15.

murderer and everything goes back to being rosy again.”¹⁴ Yet what is most interesting is Ishiguro’s admission that all the historical reality of *When We Were Orphans* was “garnered from books”; for Holmes, this reveals that Ishiguro is “less interested in historical realism... than he is in its potential to serve as an objective correlative for the operations of his protagonist’s psyche.”¹⁵ It is perhaps more conducive to interpret the novel in terms of Ishiguro’s preoccupation with deconstructing national myths and constructed narratives. Like the latter text, *The Remains of the Day* may be seen to have been structured on the basis an “essentially escapist” genre, the manor-house novel.¹⁶ The house depicted is similarly based on previous literary representations, highlighted by Ishiguro’s assertion that he had wanted to create “a mythical landscape” that “resembled the mythical version of England that is peddled in the nostalgia industry.”¹⁷ The protagonist’s position- and, indeed, very name- is so imbued with cultural myths that in subverting the expected formulation to such an extent, Ishiguro may be seen to be writing in order to disabuse the tradition of its innocent connotations. In revealing the evil at the foreground of the two novels, the tyrant who pays for Ryder’s education and the fascist Lord who employs Stevens, Ishiguro debunks the myths underpinning the false national assumptions at the heart of the two genres. In doing so, he supports Bhabha’s claim that literature can reveal the “‘otherness’ of national identity” in order to disrupt the establishment of a “settled and continuous national tradition.”¹⁸ Ishiguro obliterates the concept of the manor house and the class structures it engendered as being a viable “metaphor for good society.”

Yet a further factor must be introduced if the setting of *The Remains of the Day* is to be understood fully. For some critics, the structures apparent within Darlington Hall are taken to be parabolic, reflecting the decline of the British Empire. Several narrative points may be shown to support this claim: the novel ‘begins’ in July 1956, the month that the Suez Canal was privatised by Egypt, fatally damaging one of the last sources of British imperial power; large parts of the house are being ‘dust-sheeted’ (7) just as Britain is losing its remaining colonies; and the house has passed into American ownership, reflecting the shift in international power relations. As such, Stevens may be seen to be participating within the crimes of the British establishment through his employment by Lord Darlington. Indeed, he dismisses the Lord’s flirtation with fascism as ‘entirely insignificant’ (145) and the firing of Jewish maids as ‘trivial’ (146). Yet the most severe accusation that may be posited at Stevens is his inaction: he follows Darlington’s orders entirely unquestioningly. Rebecca Walkowitz tests this reading to its furthest logical limit, concluding “that self-abnegation and incuriosity lay the groundwork for genocide.”¹⁹ Taking into consideration Ishiguro’s largely sympathetic portrayal of Stevens throughout, perhaps it is more accurate to view the butler as a deluded *victim* of the imperial period, rather than as a participant of it. Meera Tamaya draws comparisons between Stevens and the colonial subject, basing her framework on the observations put forward by Albert Memmi’s seminal work *The Colonizer and The Colonized* (1965). Memmi’s assertion that the colonial servant existed “only as a function for the needs of the colonizer” chimes fittingly with Stevens’ ingrained sense of duty and self-denial.²⁰ The narrator neglects all personal concerns in order to serve his employer, abandoning his dying

¹⁴ Interview with Alan Mudge, “Ishiguro takes a Literary Approach to the Detective Novel,” Book Page, www.bookpage.com/0009bp/kazuo_ishiguro.html (10th July 2003).

¹⁵ Holmes, p. 16.

¹⁶ Holmes, p. 15.

¹⁷ Interview with Susanne Kelman, “Ishiguro in Toronto,” *The Brick Reader*, ed. Linda Spalding and Michael Ondaatje (Toronto: Coach House, 1991) p. 73.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, “A Question of Survival: Nations and Psychic States,” *Psychoanalysis and Cultural Theory: Thresholds*, ed. James Donald (New York: St. Martin’s, 1991), p. 91, 93.

¹⁹ Rebecca Walkowitz, “Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation, and the New World Literature,” *Novel*, 40.3 (Summer 2007), p. 301.

²⁰ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 86

father (109); eschewing the sympathies of Miss Kenton (156); and abandoning personal comfort in order to maintain his sense of properness (165). He states at one point that his "vocation will not be fulfilled until I have done all I can to see *his* lordship through the great tasks *he* has set *himself*" (173, my emphasis.) Moreover, Stevens is indoctrinated with the belief that he must '*inhabit* his role, utterly and fully' (169) to the extent that, like Memmi's 'colonized,' "He is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly towards becoming an object."²¹ Tamaya's is a powerful argument; but a direct analogy is perhaps not conducive to Ishiguro's wider-ranging concerns. Rather, Steven's should be seen as an example of Bhabha's assertion that modern writers must be "alive to the *metaphoricity* of the people of imagined communities."²² Stevens acts a metaphor of the subjugated position: an example of the domestic, as well as international, victims of class-based government engendered by Empire and revived by the Thatcher regime.

Ali's use of 'place' is constructed on a similarly complex basis. Setting is important in two main ways: in the unveiling of the immigrant community of Brick Lane and in the exploration of the protagonist Nazneen's domestic enclosure. In both cases, the narrative encourages a transference between internal and external happenings and makes an implicit connection between the local and the global. Ali's structuring of the novel around the experiences of Nazneen and Hasina, two Bangladeshi sisters who have been separated by the former's migration to London, has raised debates about the 'comparativism' the novel engenders, with Ali coming under attack for re-inscribing national and religious "caricature[s]."²³ However, more recent studies have sought to transcend this factor, understanding the text not as an extension of post-colonial fiction but as an innovation in "the emergent postglobal literature" written after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001.²⁴ By focusing her attention on an immigrant Muslim family living in London, Ali writes into a context of controversy that threatens to overwhelm her whole project; yet by doing so, she may be seen to be pointing towards a mode of moving *beyond* the stereotypes prevalent in British society and replicated to some extent in her novel. Jane Hiddleston argues that the story's ideological standpoint may be ascertained by the early symbolism of the 'net curtains' of the flats in Tower Hamlets: 'the life behind was all shapes and shadows'²⁵ For Hiddleston, the characterisation within the novel is "split... between the hope for revelation on the one hand, and knowledge of the impossibility of any complete unveiling on the other."²⁶ In other words, rather than attempting to portray exactly the life of the London migrant, Ali is seeking to undermine both the prejudices that occur within certain discourses and the total rejection of these prejudices as being fictionally constructed. To extend Hiddleston's argument, it appears that Ali is seeking to confront two pedagogic narratives that emerged after 9/11: the first casting migrant communities as agitators and the second as blameless victims.

The two discourses are represented literally in the text through the confrontations between the fascist 'Lion Hearts' and the 'Bengal Tigers.' Both groups are shown to rely on metanarratives that seek to comprehend the complexities of the 'new world' by resorting to simplistic national stereotypes and ideas of cultural purity. Whilst the former distribute inflammatory leaflets amongst the community, the Bengal Tigers degenerate from being an inclusive organisation representing the immigrant community at large to one that relies on Islamofascist rhetoric that places that community in opposition with wider society. Karim

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²² Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge 1990), p. 141.

²³ Germaine Greer, 'Reality bites,' *Guardian*, 24 July 2006. www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books

²⁴ Alfred J. López, "Everybody else just living their lives": 9/11, race and the new postglobal literature," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 42:4 (2008), p. 527

²⁵ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2007 edition), p. 17.

²⁶ Jane Hiddleston, "Shapes and Shadows: (Un)veiling the Immigrant in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40:57 (2005), p. 59.

transforms from being a highly Westernised character in the early portion of the novel to one dependent on the advice of a fundamentalist imam, swapping his ‘jeans, shirts and trainers’ for a ‘panjabi-pyjama and a skullcap’ (376). Music, which had been at the heart of the group’s polyphonic, carnivalist atmosphere, is decreed “un-Islamic” by the ‘Spiritual Leader’: “That’s what the Taliban did” protests a disillusioned follower (413). It had previously been a symbol of the faction’s multiculturalism: their band “like to mix it up” playing “bhangramuffin... Bitta raga, infusion... Jungle roots” (286). The conflict ends in fact-based race riots that serve only to deepen both groups’ problems as the streets surrounding Brick Lane erupt in violence: ‘*What the hell you shitting on our doorsteps for? Go to Oxford Street! Go to Piccadilly Circus! Go to Hell!*’ (474). As in Ishiguro’s text, narratives based on national and religious ideologies are exposed as artificial and dangerous constructs; by situating her novel in this very specific area of east London, Ali shows such metanarratives as emanating from within the communities it most affects.

In this sense, Ali’s novel “may be understood as a response to an overly schematic sense of the international divide.”²⁷ She has previously cited the influence of Nail Kabeer’s *The Power to Choose*, which sought to change stereotypes about Bangladeshi women by presenting their first-person accounts from a wide-range of sources (485). Kabeer claims that, in that country, “women appeared to have abandoned old norms in response to new opportunities” whereas, in Britain, “Bangladeshi women were largely found working from home, in apparent conformity with purdah norms.”²⁸ In *Brick Lane*, although Ali fictionalises the first half of Kabeer’s statement, she contradicts the second: Hasina’s life in Bangladesh is one of repeated suffering resulting largely from her repression by a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, in other parts of the novel Ali may be seen to be explicitly attempting to close that ‘international divide.’ In an early act of rebellion, Nazneen leaves the immediate district of Tower Hamlets and finds herself in London’s financial district. Ali highlights the ‘otherness’ of this area through Nazneen’s metaphorical mappings: a car horn is like ‘an ancient muezzin, ululating painfully’; crossing the road ‘without being hit by a car was like walking out in a monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops’; a revolving door is like a ‘glass fan’; and an office building seems to ‘crush the clouds’ (54, 56). Yet despite initially floundering when finding herself lost, Nazneen adapts rapidly: ‘*to get home again I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!*’ (62) Nazneen’s sense of triumph arises from a brief feeling of independence; rather than further emphasising her confused otherness, Ali shows that she is *capable* of conducting her own agency. What prevents her from doing so is another example of a metanarrative: the idea that “[w]hat could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed everything had to be borne” (16). The sentiment derives from the story of ‘How You Were Left to Your Fate’ and is the guiding principle of Nazneen’s life (15). Chanu, aided by his wife’s sense of duty, is shown to re-inscribe this idea, preventing her from learning English and even at one point, suggesting that she stop seeing Razia, her only companion (37). That Nazneen ignores this latter order is indicative of a fundamental principle of the novel: that local community is essential for isolated peoples.

Ali develops this idea early in the text, Nazneen identifying a ‘tattoo lady’ to whom she waves but never talks; the woman later dies, to Razia’s consternation: “How did nobody notice?” (17) Françoise Kral’s pinpoints this aspect expertly. Her analysis focuses on “the consequences of the new world geography on the psyche of migrants,” examining the changing ideas of the local and global community.²⁹ In a reading analogous to Arjun

²⁷ John Marx, “The Feminization of Globalization,” *Cultural Critique* 63 (2006), p. 11.

²⁸ Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, (London: Verson, 2000), p. viii.

²⁹ Françoise Kral, “Shaky ground and new territorialities in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri,” *Journal of Post Colonial Writing*, 43:1, p. 65.

Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, Kral contends that many of *Brick Lane*'s characters are restricted by a "double bind resulting from a situation of 'double belonging.'" ³⁰ As a result, they seek to find security through other sources: Chanu with his "grand plans" (31) and mythologizing of his native country, Karim with his embracing of fundamentalist Islam. Nazneen herself is shown to submit to this latter trait, reading the Qur'an because although she 'did not know what the words meant... the rhythm of them soothed her' (21). Kral identifies Chanu's unused computer, "the image of the Web turned into a cobweb," initially utilised by both Chanu and Karim to view images of Bangladesh, as showing that "transnational communities cannot outplay local connections."³¹ Kral's only failing is that she does not follow this idea through to its fullest significance. Nazneen is indeed caught in a "double bind." Her *idea* of England is symbolised by a cracked mug 'bearing a picture of a thatch-roofed cottage... Nazneen had never seen this England'; it is a world that seems too different to assimilate into (377). She thus feels herself 'trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity' (76). At this moment, she allows herself to remember Bangladesh and 'smelled the jasmine... heard the chickens... felt the sunlight that warmed her cheeks' (ibid.) Yet this idealised image of the country is dispelled by Hasina's letters, which assure her that she cannot return 'home.' As such, it is only through engagement with the local community that Nazneen can find escape. Her affair with Karim assures her of the changing dynamics of England, whilst her friendship with Razia introduces her to the world of industry. Her transformation is such that at the end of the novel she has developed a distinct form of independence, raising the children alone and starting a business with Razia. Yet this adaption is far from being unqualified; she becomes, in López's terms, 'one of the millions of marginalized urban workers who function outside the global economy.'³² As such, she relies on the support of her community to survive.

Perhaps the clearest indication of this is manifested through the repeated trope of "ice e-skating" (36). In Nazneen's first viewing, she is 'held' by the exoticism of the scene: the skaters move as if by 'an invisible force,' their actions guided by 'some magic.' More pertinently, the participants seem to possess the very qualities that are absent from her life: the woman's skirt is impossible short, their movements 'urgent, intense, a declaration.' As the routine finishes, for Nazneen, 'you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slides over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her' (ibid.) This imagery manifests itself throughout the novel, as she 'flick[s] through the channels, looking for ice e-skating' (41). The trope is reminiscent of the figuring of ice in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, used to represent the world outside of Marquez's imagined peninsula.³³ Its significance here is similarly as a sign of freedom as, at the end of the novel, Nazneen finally has the chance to experience ice-skating for herself. Yet Ali qualifies this sense of emancipation with Razia's final line: "This is England... You can do whatever you like" (492). The apparently optimistic statement prompts the reader's recollection of the numerous challenges Nazneen has faced in order to reach this, still tenuous, sense of belonging. More specifically, the scene is an evocation of community; even at this final point of transition, Nazneen is accompanied by Razia, without whom her 'liberation' could not have taken place. Moreover, it is with Razia and two other neighbours, Jorina and Hanufa, that Nazneen starts her business. Thus, Ali's novel supports the view that communities and 'places, in the sense of geographical *loci*, continue to play an essential role

³⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66, 72.

³² López, p. 526.

³³ The novel starts, "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Picador, 1967), p. 1.

in the way that people define their identity.³⁴ Only with the companionship of the local neighbourhood can Nazneen attempt to confront the global community.

Writing in 1994, Bhabha asserted that the “concepts of homogenous national culture- the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions- *as the grounds of cultural comparativism*, are in a profound process of redefinition.”³⁵ Ishiguro foregrounds and Ali extends this concept. The settings within which they choose to explore their ideas of national and cultural identity reveal much about the changing landscapes of the post-colonial world. In *Brick Lane*, many of the hierarchal structures evoked by Ishiguro in *The Remains of the Day* remain definitively prevalent; yet the political and social context in which they are engendered is shown to have shifted considerably. In this sense, Rushdie’s concept of the post-colonial writer’s refined ability to understand and adapt to cultural change may be proved to be true: Ali and Ishiguro, in their nuanced ideological perceptions, are truly “artists of the floating world.”

³⁴ Kral, p. 66.

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

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