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“That Little World Has Passed Away” “Japanized” Japan as a Metaphorical Place in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro/ Japan/ multiculturalism/ coercive mimeticism/ strategic exoticism

In 1987, when Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-born British novelist, won the Whitbread Book of the Year for his second “Japanese” novel *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), critics acclaimed his stiff but elegant prose style and Japanese imagery, derived from “an Eastern sensibility,” and the British literary world heralded the arrival of “Britain’s New Literary Lion” (Behr 53). In the contemporary trend of rapid multiculturalization and internationalization of British literature, Ishiguro’s Japanese-British hybrid background has constantly aroused curiosity in international audiences and stimulated a considerable number of studies centering on the expression of the cultural inheritance and influence of his native country. In particular, in early criticism of *An Artist of the Floating World* (hereafter *Artist*), Western readers unfamiliar with Japan tend to regard him as a kind of native informant or translator and to expect representations whose authenticity is guaranteed by the mere fact of his existence as a figure seemingly representing the whole society of Japan. Along with his first “Japanese” novel *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *Artist* was therefore referred to as an embodiment of traditional Japanese culture, similar to Japanese paintings (Annan 3), Japanese gardens (Mallett 1), and haiku (Purton 177), although Ishiguro himself has little firsthand experience of his birth country and completely denies this line of exoticist interpretation.

In contrast to the preconceptions of critics, Ishiguro’s “Japanese” novels are primarily addressed to English-speaking readers whose imaginations are informed by traditional orientalists that anticipate descriptions in accordance with

their pre-existing concepts, and in fact contain stereotypical imagery of Japan and its culture. These critics disregarded the minority writer's complicated position within the Western majority to whom he must address himself through his writings. Ethnic minorities like Ishiguro, living and working within the Western majority, are often widely expected to be representatives of cultures, people, countries, and ethnicities considered by others to be theirs; however, they may find themselves in a dilemma and experience an uneasiness when speaking within those authorized boundaries. *Artist* is written to some degree in accord with stereotypical Western images of Japan, and Ishiguro consciously and subconsciously conforms to these expectations. In this respect, the novel and its author are intricately connected to the phenomenon that Rey Chow terms the "coercive mimeticism" of ethnic minorities in a diaspora—the social force to urge non-Western ethnic subjects to reproduce specific versions of their ethnicities that have already been endorsed and approved by the Western majority (*Protestant* 107).

To explore Ishiguro's complicated position as a novelist of an ethnic minority, this paper must perform a contextual analysis of the period of 1980s Britain, with the emergence of so-called postcolonial writers whose ethnic identities are closely associated with their writings, as well as reconsidering Ishiguro's earlier reception in the West, focusing on the complex and intricate association of the material conditions of production and the consumption of minor literature in a global late-capitalist society.¹⁾ Previous research on *Artist* has devoted a great deal of attention and effort to exploring biographical aspects of Ishiguro's profile and the postwar Japanese historical circumstances addressed on the novel's surface; however, they have totally disregarded British society and the literary world of the 1980s, within which the author resided and produced his creative work, in part as a response to this society.²⁾ In contrast, this paper, through contextual analyses, will explore how Ishiguro and his novel are involved in "the global commodification of cultural difference" (Huggan vii), encouraged by publishers, bookstores, and literary critics under the dominant ideology of Thatcherism in the age of the free market, and how he strategically tackles and addresses this environment. Ishiguro is not a passive victim of contemporary patterns of ethnic consumption, but rather he strategically capitalizes on his perceived marginality and Western readers' expectations and eventually debunks them by means of a

carefully-constructed “Japanized” Japan, which serves as a floating, wondering signifier, containing Western stereotypical images.

I

The first decade of Ishiguro’s career as a novelist almost coincided with the long dominance of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative administration from 1979 to 1990. Therefore, an examination of the British social and cultural circumstances to which he responds through *Artist* will give a proper perspective for its reevaluation, even though the contemporary society in which he lives does not seem to be addressed in a straightforward way. The 1980s began following a historic election victory by the Conservative Party in 1979, who went on to dominate the decade through one political figure and one political ideology, namely Thatcher and Thatcherism, and experienced dynamic social upheaval in the political, economic, and cultural fields. During the decade the massive influx of immigrants like Ishiguro from the former colonies and other non-Western countries, ongoing from the 1950s, was considered a social problem, and Thatcher herself showed prejudice against immigrants and ethnic minorities, proclaiming that they were “swamp[ing]” traditional British values. The politics of racism in the postwar period, finding expression in such events as the passage of the British Nationality Act in 1981 and the riots of the early 1980s revealed that racist views toward non-Western immigrants were deeply ingrained in the society.

However, as for its cultural field, the idea of cultural diversity, caused by these immigrants, appears to have been accepted and evaluated with a more tolerant, sophisticated attitude during the 1980s. In particular, in British literature, the decade, which is epitomized by Salman Rushdie’s winning the Booker Prize for *Midnight’s Children* (1981), is usually seen as a period of renaissance, where literature took a significant turn from the cozy provincialism of former generations to an internationalism boosted by a new, younger generation of writers, including Ishiguro (Japan), Hanif Kureishi (Pakistan), Ben Okri (Nigeria), and Timothy Mo (Hong Kong), all of whom have racial or ethnic backgrounds different from that of the typical white Anglo-Saxon, and who capitalize on their cultural legacies in their fiction. These so-called postcolonial writers, who along

with postcolonial criticism, flourished during the decade, shed light on issues of race and ethnicity, largely provoked by the reactionary racism of Thatcherite policies. In contrast, British literature of earlier decades such as the 1950s and 1960s, especially the novel, which was “local, quaint, and self-consciously xenophobic” (Bowers 150) and “both backward- and inward-looking” (Bergonzi 67), seemed to be at a nadir, according to most literary critics. Since the late 1970s the above-mentioned minority writers from the periphery have gradually emerged as a new cosmopolitan center, and the British novel as a consequence became internationalized and revived in the next decade. Yet, this rebirth and reactivation of the 1980s did not happen as a natural consequence of the rise of immigrants and their offspring, but was in fact accomplished by an alliance of the publishing industry and literary critics, who shared common complaints concerning the stagnant contemporary British novel. In this atmosphere of internationalism and multiculturalism, Ishiguro and other minor and postcolonial writers were sought out and propelled into the mainstream by publishers and critics desperately looking for “other Rushdies” (Ishiguro, “Interview” 134).

The most well-known and successful agent of this sea change in contemporary British literature, canonizing new authors and proclaiming the arrival of a new age, was the literary magazine *Granta*, which was reinvigorated by its chief editor Bill Buford, a literary journalist from the younger generation. In particular, issues 3 (1980) and 7 (1983), which focused respectively on “the end of the English novel” and the twenty best new “young British novelists,” the latter including Ishiguro, Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, and Shiva Naipaul, were successful at raising the profile among British readers of the transition taking place between generations of writers, declaring the end of the “English novel” and the rise of the “British novel.” In order to strengthen the novelty of the new British novel, the new generation of critics focused on younger British writers with ethnic and cultural backgrounds other than the mainstream white Anglo-Saxon and who were able to attract international readers with their “exotic” culture. Ishiguro and his “Japanese” works were promoted by these critics in terms of his ethnicity or his “samurai” descent (Behr 53; Ishiguro, “Summer” 120).³⁾ Many British and American reviewers discovered in *Artist* the traditional Japan, an exotic, preindustrial place, full of “teahouses, geishas and patterned gardens not yet destroyed by industry and Westernized thinking” (Steinberg 49-50), where

“the light is filtered through creamy paper screens, tea is served on the verandah overlooking the garden, marriages are arranged by go-betweens and women cover their mouths when they laugh” (Chisholm 162). This understanding of Japan is merely superficial and stereotyped, and moreover it casually reinforces the orientalist view of the mysterious, exotic East. In addition, Ishiguro’s formal, emotionally restrained language corresponds to pre-existing images of Japan and its culture, “characterized by formal ritual and subtle gradations of expression” (Stuewe 31), being praised as an accurate reflection of his inherent “Japanese-ness.” It is obvious that these reviewers received the “Japanese” novel from ethnographic perspectives, believing in its mythological qualities, such as aestheticism and collectivism. The earliest reception of *Artist* in the West thus confirmed Masao Miyoshi’s 1991 analysis that Japan, especially in respect to its culture, remained “utterly exotic to the First World” (245-46).

In concert with such critics, the British publisher foregrounded Ishiguro’s Japanese ethnicity in marketing materials, encouraging readers to believe that he has an innate “ethnic” or “racial” ability to write authentically about Japanese society and its traditional culture, through their foregrounding of his Japanese name and the East Asian appearance of his face, printed on the covers of the novel, or through illustrations featuring Japanese paper lanterns, a pine tree, and Mt. Fuji—those elements that Gérard Genette calls the “*publisher’s peritext*” (16). The exquisitely designed book covers of *Artist* are truly products of the “paperback revolution.” In the later twentieth century, shelving in many bookshops displayed some or even all new paperbacks face forward, so that book design and cover images became a major marketing influence, with many publishers putting more emphasis on book designs, adopting sensational images for their cover illustrations (Stevenson 139). The stereotypical Japanese imagery featured on the book covers of *Artist* might have attracted the British consumer’s attention and contributed to its sales. The pseudo-Japanese atmosphere embodied by the designs of book covers, although it has almost nothing to do with the story or its themes, must have invoked exoticism to some extent for readers unfamiliar with Japan; it thus serves to reinforce the readers’ expectations of this mysterious, exotic country.

Reexamination of the material conditions of production and consumption surrounding *Artist* reveals that consumerism is now actively part of our cultural

life. As Graham Huggan astutely describes, late twentieth-century exoticisms observed in the attitudes of reviewers and the marketing strategy of the publisher with regard to Ishiguro's ethnicity and his "Japanese" novel, are the products of a new, globalized market (15). In the late-capitalist mode of production, the distinction between things and people becomes blurred and ethnicities circulate as commodities available for commercial exploitation. People therefore have "*commodified lives*" like things (Chow, *Writing* 43), and ethnicity and cultural difference are voraciously capitalized by critics and publishers, looking to promote ethnic minority or postcolonial writings for their customers. Reexamination of the promotion and reception of *Artist* in the 1980s, which are obviously contaminated by exoticist thinking, reveal that the praise for the multiculturalism and internationalism of the British novel during the decade in fact conceals as much as it reveals, operating as a cover for new forms of ethnocentrism and orientalism or as an essentialist mystification of the ethnic and cultural "other."

II

As the critiques above suggest, *Artist* has attracted an interpretation in the West of an inherent "Japaneseness." This critical tendency to insist on the existence in non-Western subjects and texts of an expression and reflection of ethnic truth, as epitomized in Fredric Jameson's ethnocentric notion that all texts from the Third World are necessarily to be read as "*national allegories*" (69), is profound within current Western academic discourse. Due to this assumption, the interpretive frameworks used to discuss Ishiguro's novels have been highly restricted: national, ethnic labels such as "Japanese" and "British" conjure up interpretive fields in readers' minds, which prohibit them from imagining beyond this categorization and significantly affect their evaluation of the novel as well as its reception. However, Ishiguro occupies a unique position amongst the "post-colonial" writers who had been gradually emerging since the 1970s and proclaiming that their ethnic identities and love-hate relationships with British culture were deeply associated with the interpretation of their writings. In contrast, Ishiguro, who left Japan, his birthplace, at the age of five and was educated mostly in Britain, appears to feel some discomfort in being perceived as representing and speaking for Japan as other postcolonial writers appear to speak for other

places. He continuously insists that his ethnicity and “Japaneseness” have nothing to do with his “Japanese” novel. Being aware of his lack of knowledge of modern Japan, he declares in an interview that the Japan of *Artist* is really an invented one, “out of little scraps, out of memories, out of speculation, out of imagination” (“Interview” 341). Indeed, this Japan, which seems to be curiously unrealistic to some readers although it is purported to be set in a specific time and place and has been acclaimed for its historically grounded realism by Western critics, is neither purely fictional nor presented as real, hovering in a peculiar space somewhere in between.⁴⁾

In one sense, the fictional Japan in *Artist* is Ishiguro’s own personal, imaginary homeland, composed of a variety of “Japanese” elements, extracted from multiple sources, such as his own memory and imagination, Japanese literature, and great Japanese films of the 1950s, especially those of his favorites, Yasujiro Ozu and Mikio Naruse. After leaving Japan, the young Ishiguro continued to construct his own images of that country, using various materials, finally setting his novel in this particular idea of Japan, which he had nurtured in England for a long time. This Japan, consequently, is a curious mixture of the real and an illusory Japan, together with the Japan created in previous fictionalizations by his predecessors. According to Kyoko Hirai, who has had firsthand experience of Nagasaki, Ishiguro’s imaginary version of this city seems to be substantially based on the place of Ishiguro’s birth and his real-life experiences during childhood (53-54). Yet, it is more important that in *Artist* the novelist, writing the previous novel set in Nagasaki, departs from his birthplace and sets the story in an anonymous Japanese city having traits and place names found everywhere in Japan, blending the real with the fictional and emphasizing the abstract entity of the fictional city. He uses names of actual locations existing in Japan, such as “the Arakawa district” (61), while also creating such fictional places as “the Shimizu department store” (51), inserting them seamlessly into the text. Because of the elements intricately intertwined from both fact and fiction, it is almost impossible to detect to what extent his Japan is real or not, and the text hovers in a peculiar space between “straight realism and that kind of out-and-out fabulism” (Ishiguro, “Interview” 141).

This hodgepodge of “Japaneseness” of his fictional Japan implies that Ishiguro is more interested in an imagined territory as a metaphorical space rather

than the historical and cultural accuracies of his representations of Japan. In a conversation with Japanese novelist Kenzaburo Oe, Ishiguro acknowledges himself as a writer without a home, not only in a geographic sense but also a historic one: "My very lack of authority and lack of knowledge about Japan, I think, forced me into a position of using my imagination, and also of thinking of myself as a kind of homeless writer. I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either" (115). Although on its surface *Artist* purports to be set in a specific time and place, namely postwar Japan from 1948 to 1950, it in fact contains anachronistic references. For example, there is a reference to a "monster film" (78), featuring a "giant lizard" (82), which seems to allude to the famous Japanese monster film, *Godzilla* (1954); however, the narrative present is 1948, creating a chronological paradox between the Japan of his version and the historical fact. Even more obvious anachronisms can be found in other scenes: Ono's grandson Ichiro mimics heroes from two American TV programs, *Lone Ranger* (30) and *Popeye the Sailorman* (152); however, these were only broadcast in Japan in the late 1950s. Such references to both Japanese and American cultural icons, although they might damage the plausibility of another fiction in their anachronism, actually reflect Ishiguro's real experiences in the late 1950s, when he was the same age as Ichiro, demonstrating that this fictional Japan is in one sense extremely private and personal. At the same time, Ishiguro inserts cultural references to the late 1950s into the context of early postwar Japan to dramatize the rapid Americanization and massive social upheaval, emphasizing the wide generation gap between the narrator and his grandson. Ichiro, a representative of the new postwar generation, no longer admires Japanese heroes such as "The Ninja of the Wind" and "Lord Yoshitsune" (30), who Ono thinks are better for Japanese children, instead preferring American heroes, even trying to learn English. This curious articulation between early postwar Japan and the late-1950s Japan of Ishiguro's memory implies a fundamental attitude toward the use of historical settings. The Japan he constructed with patchy elements can be read as an embodiment of the generality of Japan, not as a historically and geographically specific, tangible space but rather as an imaginative and heterogeneous *topos* that places more emphasis on metaphorical meanings of place and stimulates the imaginative interpretations of his international readers.

Indeed, Ishiguro claims in an interview that he tried to compose *Artist* as unrealistically as possible in order to inform his readers that he never intended to render an authentically represented history of Japan ("Pale" 92). In order to underline the constructedness and fictionality of his Japan he strategically employs stereotyped Western images. From his earliest work, "A Family Supper" (1980), he has consciously inserted a stereotyped Western notion of the suicidal tendency of the Japanese not only to draw on but ultimately to debunk readers' expectations and their stereotyped, prejudiced assumptions. As in the short story and his first "Japanese" novel *A Pale View of Hills*, *Artist* contains stereotyped Western notions of Japan, such as those of the suicidal tendency and Japan's hierarchical society, which are closely related to its plots and themes; however, in *Artist* the text is full of Japanese imagery, with its repeated kimonos, Japanese gardens, lanterns, geishas, and flower arrangements, which have almost nothing to do with the development of the story but help to create a pseudo-Japanese atmosphere. In particular, Ono's career shift, from the decadent artist to the propaganda poster artist exactly embodies the contradictory dichotomy American cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict found in Japanese culture between elegance and aggressiveness or, in her words, between the chrysanthemum and the sword (2). The problem with cultural stereotypes is that they fix individuals or groups in one place, presuming to understand them on the basis of prior knowledge that is at best defective; however, true accounts cannot always break down the persisting cultural stereotypes. As Roland Barthes suggested, "the best weapon against myth" is "to mythify it in its turn" and "to produce an *artificial myth*" (161). Although it is true that his "Japanese" novel contains stereotypical images that may conform to the expectations of his readers, Ishiguro delicately and strategically constructs a "Japanized" Japan to combat stereotyping and the mystification of the exotic, mysterious country, inscribing anachronistic references and stereotypical Japanese imagery. For many years, national labels such as "Japanese," or "British" have served as signs of differences and affected interpretations of Ishiguro's works; however, he indicates, by using a Japanese setting as a floating, wandering signifier containing nothing more than stereotypes, that these labels of "cultural differences" based on an imaginative geography are just empty signifiers and are not useful for understanding his novel, at the same time he alerts the readers to the fact that the very notion of cultural difference conceals

what is at root a racial conception of Japan.

Ishiguro employs stereotypes not only as a shorthand to create a pseudo-Japanese atmosphere, but to inscribe the very context in which Japanese characters, such as the novelist himself, engage in the production of stereotypes and consciously perform themselves in accordance with what Western people believe is “Japanese.” For instance, Ono complains that his younger daughter’s *miai* (marriage negotiation) is going to be held at the Kasuga Park Hotel, because the hotel, although it has been for many years “amongst the most pleasant of the Western-style hotels in the city” (116), these days has “a certain vulgar air” (105), as “the management has taken to decorating the rooms in a somewhat vulgar manner—intended, no doubt, to strike the American clientele with whom the place is popular as being charmingly ‘Japanese’” (116). In this scene, Ono critically and scornfully observes the mammonism and internalization of stereotypes of his contemporaries, while, however, ignoring the fact that he was also once involved in the production of visual stereotypes at Master Takeda’s sweatshop. At the beginning of his career as a painter, he produced pictures for export portraying Japanese paraphernalia such as “geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples,” things which “look ‘Japanese’ to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out” (69). These pictures thematize stereotyped Western images of Japan that persisted for a century from the era of Japonism in the late nineteenth-century, and are evoked by the similar imagery adopted for Ishiguro’s book cover by his publisher. Prioritizing commercial interests, Japanese willingly self-orientalize and conform to Western stereotypical images of “Japaneseness.” In that respect, orientalism cannot be treated as a mere Western illusion, imposed on the East by the West, as in the concept developed by Edward Said, but is an intricate cross-cultural phenomenon. The East has now come to use Western stereotypes in an underhanded, strategic way, after learning and mimicking the very strategies of Western dominance through orientalism. By inserting the scenes of the manufacture of stereotyped images, Ishiguro cleverly implies that this novel is actually composed by one who well knows the very expectations and anticipations of Western readers and can use them strategically. Just as Ono’s paintings for export use pseudo-Japanese imagery and merely look “Japanese” only to foreigners, the “Japanized” Japan in *Artist*, comprising Japanese elements and stereotypes, is merely a superficial backdrop and embodies constructed pseudo-Japan-

neseness.

Ishiguro's self-conscious use of anachronism and cultural stereotypes in *Artist* can be considered what Huggan calls "strategic exoticism" through which ethnic minority and postcolonial writers intend "as much to challenge as to profit from consumer needs" (xi). In this attitude, whereby someone markets his ethnicity and marginality to Western audiences hungry for exoticism, defying as well as debunking their expectations, is a symptom of the phenomenon of the exoticization of "other" in late capitalism. Although Ishiguro's self-performance of his "Japaneseness" to Western eyes in a sense recreates colonial patterns of cultural exploitation and othering, as is seen in the reaction of his publisher and contemporary reviewers, it really arises in strong association with what Chow defines as "coercive mimeticism," a process in which the people who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected to "resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them" and "to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imagings of them as ethnics" (*Protestant* 107). Ishiguro and his novel are inextricably tied up with these social forces, which grow along with global migration and the commodification of cultural difference and marginality in late-capitalist society. On the one hand, Ishiguro strategically challenges the Western exotic construction of Japanese society and culture with a carefully constructed "Japanized" Japan, while on the other he subconsciously orients himself to ethnic mimetism or self-performance of his marginality in front of English-speaking readers.

Ishiguro's mimetic performance of his "Japaneseness" is most obvious in the use of "pseudotranslation[al]" language, which means that he intentionally avoids fluency in English and Western colloquialisms to suggest that the narrator is imagined as speaking in Japanese ("Interview" 345). As the title of the novel, "floating world" suggests, the character of the narrator's English seems unlike contemporary English, evoking English translations of works of Japanese literature, such as those by Yasunari Kawabata and Yukio Mishima. Especially when portraying conversations between Japanese characters, Ishiguro deliberately foreignizes English dialogue, making speech patterns whose formality and antiquity suggest that behind the English conversation there is a hidden, Japanese one. For example, the character that most clearly embodies the stereotype

of Japanese politeness in the novel is Ono's elder daughter Setsuko; she often says "forgive me" to her father when she is attempting to say something that he may find offensive:

"Forgive me, but I [Setsuko] 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." (85)

Setsuko addresses Ono as "Father" in the third person and repeatedly says "forgive me" before stating something he may find disagreeable, so that English-speaking readers would perceive a strained relationship between them. However, Ishiguro just mimics Japanese speech conventions that fathers and mothers are usually addressed in the third person, and the Japanese expression that may be represented here as Setsuko's words "forgive me" does not necessarily imply an actual apology. As Japanese critic Motoko Sugano accurately points out, the formal and stilted dialogue of the novel is actually derived through a pseudo-translation from Japanese (44). Although Ishiguro's mimicry of Japanese speech attracts many English-speaking readers with its foreignized language and creates a sense of reality, it is a shallow, surface realism, sticking to established images of Japan and its conventions (Sugano 44-45). Indeed, *Artist* has been praised by many reviewers in the West for Ishiguro's "deceptively simple prose" (Chisholm 162) and "elegant bareness" (Annan 3); however, these are compliments on the surface rather than the depths. Attentive readers must look beneath the surface of narrated events and observe more carefully what is not narrated and concealed rather than what is narrated and proclaimed by the first-person "unreliable" narrator.

III

What Ishiguro has tried to present to his readers by his sacrifice of fact concerning Japanese history and culture is Ono's deep psychological turmoil, concealed by the superficial, false calmness of the narrator's voice. In fact, Ishiguro's elaborate, complicated characterization of his arrogant, headstrong protagonist, who now feels a sense of responsibility for his past deeds in both the private and public spheres, has been judged plausible and realistic by most readers; this is a major reason why his novels have generally been thought to exemplify psychological realism. Although earlier reviewers were allured by the exotic setting, Ishiguro never portrays the Japanese narrator as an enigmatic, incomprehensible “other” to Western readers, instead inviting them directly within the narrator's mind and consciousness. The postwar Japanese setting, where numerous radical transformations of social systems, ideas, values, and family relationships were being experienced, is selected just because it is useful for describing effectively the inner torment of the individual, left behind the times and isolated not only from his family and former acquaintances but from the entire recovering society of early postwar Japan. By treating the setting of postwar Japan as a kind of metaphor for the transience of our “floating world,” constantly in flux, British readers of the 1980s, at a time when their society was experiencing radical upheaval, were able to identify with characters in this geographically and temporally distant place.

The novel is composed of four parts, named “October, 1948,” “April, 1949,” “November, 1949,” and “June, 1950” and the “floating” nature of the world is represented through the descriptions of an ever-changing cityscape that parallels the change of the narrator's psychological status. In the first part, standing on “the Bridge of Hesitation,” Ono looks back toward “the remains of our old pleasure district” where there is “nothing but a desert of demolished rubble,” immediately following the war (26-27). As the word “our” implies, the narrator is emotionally attached to this nightlife district, where once the Migi-Hidari was whose existence embodied his past status as an influential painter. In the face of the wasteland he nostalgically reminisces about the good old days: once invariably crowded with pleasure-seekers and pedestrians and he and his pupils passion-

ately argued about art. The juxtaposition of two scenes, before and after the war, foregrounds the narrator's nostalgic feelings toward the things he has already lost as well as his present position as a disgraced artist. In the next part, Ono again stands on the bridge and surveys the reconstruction of his old pleasure district, progressing steadily every day: "Outside Mrs Kawakami's, where once throngs of pleasure-seekers had squeezed past one another, a wide concrete road is being built, and along both sides of it, the foundations for rows of large office buildings" (99-100). Seeing the changing cityscape, he gradually realizes that "[l]ike many things now, it is perhaps as well that that little world has passed away and will not be returning" but he is disinclined to accept "it has gone for ever" (127). Finally, in the concluding part, he witnesses that social reconstruction has been attained, and Mrs Kawakami's bar—the last establishment remained in the old pleasure district—is now replaced by "a glass-fronted office building, four storeys high" (205). In the last scene he sits on a bench that "occupies a spot very close to where our old table in the Migi-Hidari would have been situated" (205), and observes young office workers, conversing and laughing cheerfully. Ono, who now lives alone in his large house and has lost his old comrade Matsuda to death, senses the passing of generations and wishes success to his younger contemporaries with bravado: being isolated from "the activity around" him, the narrator tells himself that "[o]ne can only wish these young people well" (205-06). This sequence of a continuously changing cityscape that reflects the recovery process of Japan symbolically dramatizes the passing of societies and generations as well as the floating nature of our world.

With minimal local references, Ishiguro uses his fictional backdrop as a metaphorical place to dramatize the themes of *Artist* and encourages readers to perceive the Japanese landscape as a kind of metaphor, mirroring and imaging the narrator's current condition as well as a reflection of his mind and consciousness. The most notable example of this metaphorical capacity of place is "the Bridge of Hesitation," mentioned at the beginning and the end of the narrative. The word "hesitation," as Brian Shaffer appropriately points out, characterizes Ono's present mental state, hesitating between "owning up to his past mistakes and covering them up" (Shaffer 42), although the "unreliable" narrator insists that he is not hesitating (99). To underline the metaphorical meaning of the bridge, Ishiguro translates the meaning of the elements of its Japanese name into

English, which he does not do for other place names in the city, such as “the Kayabashi bridge” (60). Ono, standing on the bridge, is a “conscience-troubled” man who hesitates between moral responsibility and self-justification and “survey[s]” not only the external changes—his “surroundings and the changes taking place” around him—but introspectively observes the unseen changes in his status as an artist, and of his relationships with his family and old acquaintances and the social atmosphere (99). The bridge is a kind of in-between space, between the pleasure district and a residential street, the past and the present, confession and concealment, and so it suggests that the narrator, who often stands on the bridge and muses about his past, is actually struggling to reconcile his past with his present and caught up in this peculiar in-between space. In fact, Ono’s younger daughter implies his present psychological status of hovering in-between, saying that he mopes around the house all day (13, 39, 105). Ishiguro, while he inserts numerous topographical items in Japan, such as “the Yokote district” (53) and “the Tamagawa temple” (72), to evoke pseudo-Japanese atmosphere, in fact presents *Artist* set in “Japanized” Japan as a type of symbolist novel disguised as a realistic one, or in his words, the novel hovering between “straight realism and that kind of out-and-out fabulism” (“Interview” 141).

Although Ishiguro depicts the narrator’s mind and guilty consciousness as real and plausible, he appears to ultimately emphasize the impossibility of accessing any “absolute truth.” Like Ishiguro’s other novels, *Artist*, recounted by an unreliable first-person narrator, refuses to provide any authoritative versions of facts, as it is based on the idea of multiple realities and presupposes the existence of a number of different “experiential realities.” Instead of rendering an objective truth perceived by a godlike omniscient narrator, Ishiguro employs an unreliable narrator and suggests that Ono’s narrative, permeated with uncertainty and instability, is merely a single version of other possible realities. The narrator’s repeated articulations of qualification and self-doubt, such as “I believe I said,” or “I cannot recall precisely,” implies that the story is sometimes distorted by a highly subjective consciousness and a fading memory. Throughout the text Ishiguro underlines Ono’s subjectivity in order to destabilize Ono’s position as a reliable narrator and emphasize fundamental uncertainty. The most abstruse problem derived from the textual ambiguity is the total subversion that occurs near the end of the story. This unsettling and ambiguous conclusion has baffled

numerous critics and leaves fundamental doubts concerning Ono's actual status as a painter. From Ono's perspective, he must face up to and apologize unreservedly for his past mistakes, because he once was an influential, well-known artist who played a part in misleading the country into a devastating catastrophe. At his younger daughter's *miai*, he finally admits his responsibility for "the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours" (123), and, after this confession of his responsibility he seems to be satisfied with his own painful but courageous behavior. In the penultimate chapter, however, Ishiguro dismantles this thought that Ono was so influential to the public at large that he should apologize in public or kill himself, like fictitious renowned composer Yukio Naguchi, by inserting others' evaluations of his prewar impact on the public. After the *miai*, his elder daughter Setsuko denies Ono's high self-esteem, saying "Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter" (192-93). Moreover, she denies her own words, which urged Ono to "take certain precautionary steps" with regard to the marriage negotiations (49): "Forgive me, Father, but I don't recall offering any advice last year" (191). These words of Setsuko raise a fundamental indeterminacy and an unsolvable mystery about Ono's actual status as an artist during the prewar decades: was he really influential among the public or, as Setsuko implies, was he neither more nor less than an ordinary man whose contribution to the society was restricted to a small provincial city? Some critics have offered interpretations to resolve this contradiction (Lewis 54); however, the final view depends on each reader's own interpretation. The anticlimactic and unsettling ending of the novel, while it often frustrates readers eager to arrive at a coherent interpretation and to understand the historical actuality of Japan, serves to prevent exoticist, anthropologist readings and easy consumption, encouraged by a powerful alliance between the global literary market and literary critics. *Artist*, with Ono's unreliable, unsettling narrative, must have meaning attached to it in the course of each reader's interpretation, and its permeating ambiguity and unspoken blank spaces encourage readers to recreate their own stories through their readings. Each reader reacts to and interprets this ambiguity differently, so that this story takes as many forms as it has readers. In this sense, the text is not closed and self-sufficient, but is rather open to readers' creative interpretations.

In that respect, the novel seems to aspire to true multiculturalism, accomplished through creative and imaginative responses and interpretation by international readers from various backgrounds.

Along with the massive influx of immigrants since the 1950s, British society in the 1980s experienced severe prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities. In the literary world, however, these minority or cosmopolitan figures, such as Ishiguro, who appeared exotic to his society at large, were warmly welcomed in the metropolitan center as catalysts to reactivate the stagnant British novel. Although these phenomena, from the disparate realms of culture and politics or society appear to contradict each other, they are actually two sides of the same coin. Whereas imagined geographies in the political and economic dimensions cause conflicts and inequality between nations or ethnicities, in the cultural dimension they serve to maintain the idea of “cultural difference” and to effectively cover up Western ethnocentrism and orientalism. In this context, Ishiguro’s second “Japanese” novel has been praised for its “authentic Japaneseness,” which has a nature totally different from that of “Englishness” and “Britishness”; however, the author never portrays the Japanese narrator and his characters as enigmatic different others to the Western audiences. He instead brings them directly into the narrator’s consciousness, rendering the universal human condition. The narrative techniques employed in *Artist*, such as the fictional “Japanized” Japan and the elements of indeterminacy, are strategies to prevent the apparently-exotic “Japanese” narrative from being easily consumed by exoticizing readers. In the current global commodification of cultural difference and ethnicity, Ishiguro orchestrates his novel to effectively challenge as well as strategically capitalize on Western exoticism toward his ethnicity and staged “Japaneseness,” despite his entanglement in powerful social forces.

[Notes]

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- 1) In this paper, following Deleuze and Guattari’s definition, I mean “minor” literature to signify literature written by minorities but in the major language of a dom-

inant culture.

- 2) One exception is research conducted by Japanese scholar Kyoko Hirai. She suggests that the rapid transformation of postwar Japan described in *Artist* reflects British society in the 1980s, where people experienced significant changes and radical social transformations (50-51).
- 3) In an introduction to Ishiguro's short story "The Summer after the War" (1983), *Granta* describes him as a British novelist "of samurai descent" (120).
- 4) Some Japanese critics attribute Ishiguro's inaccurate descriptions of Japan in *Artist* to his ignorance and inexperience. See, for example, Arai 33 and Saito 177-81.

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SUMMARY

“That Little World Has Passed Away”
“Japanized” Japan as a Metaphorical Place in Kazuo Ishiguro’s
An Artist of the Floating World

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This study primarily aims to reconsider and reevaluate Kazuo Ishiguro’s second “Japanese” novel *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), focusing on his complicated position as an ethnic minority novelist among the Western majority, the intricate association of the material conditions of production, and the consumption of minor literature in a global late-capitalist society. *An Artist of the Floating World* has received critical acclaims for Ishiguro’s stiff but elegant prose style and for its portrayal of Japan’s imagery, those which have been seen as embodiments of his authentically inherent “Japaneseness.” Despite these critics’ expectations, the fictional Japan is a carefully constructed “Japanized” Japan, containing minimum specific local references but many Western stereotypical images of Japan and its culture. Regarding such aspects, Ishiguro and his “Japanese” novel are intricately connected to the phenomenon that Rey Chow terms the “coercive mimeticism”—the social force to urge non-Western subjects to reproduce specific versions of their ethnicities that have already been endorsed and approved by the Western majority.

To appropriately reevaluate this “Japanese” novel, this study will perform a contextual analysis of 1980s Britain, when literature took a significant turn to new multiculturalism along with so-called “postcolonial” writers gradually emerging from the periphery. Among the “postcolonial” writers, Ishiguro occupies a unique position, insisting that his ethnicity is not remotely related to his “Japanese” novel. In fact, he strategically capitalizes on and finally dismantles the stereotypical conception of Japan, inserting anachronistic references and stereotypes and foregrounding metaphorical capacities of his own version of Japan rather than its historically and culturally accurate representations. In the current global commodification of cultural difference, Ishiguro organizes his “Japanese” novel permeated with stereotypical images and ambiguity to effectively challenge Western exoticism toward his staged “Japaneseness.”