

The Role of Japanese Women and Mother-Daughter Relationship in Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills

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Abstract

The novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese-born British novelist have a wide international readership and are remarkable for their international themes. The novel A Pale View of Hills examines the role of women in Japanese society that tremendously changed after Japan's surrender to America in the Second World War. It centres on a female narrator who lives a frustrated life before and after the war. Many local and cultural traces reveal the cultural shift in Japanese life. The country, Japan, experiences a cultural shift from its traditional Japanese values to modern values. This cultural shifts affect the characters Etsuko and Sachiko in the novel, and, instead of boasting about the values and worth of the long-cherished tradition of Japan, they begin to embrace modern culture with scientific gadgets with their lifestyles in a western touch. Moreover, the mother-daughter relationship dealt with, is a failure in Etsuko's life, particularly in the case of her elder daughter Keiko, but a success in Niki, her younger daughter. This paper deals with the role of the Japanese women in the novel, A Pale View of Hills. Being dissatisfied she leave the country and settle in England. It leads to the suicide of her elder daughter thus creating a guilty feeling and a bad rapport between the mother and the daughter.

KEYWORDS-Gender roles, samurai, seppuku, hara-kiri, racial discrimination, antisocial, traditional Japanese culture, westernization.

The Japanese-born British writer, Kazuo Ishiguro has been honoured with the Nobel Prize for literature for the year 2017. Born in Nagasaki in 1954, Ishiguro left Japan at the age of five and moved to England, where he turned to be a British citizen and earned many prestigious awards and honours across the nations. His works have been translated into more than fifty languages. The novel A Pale View of Hills is narrated by a middle aged Japanese widow, by the name Etsuko, living in an English country house in England. During a visit from her younger daughter Niki, the protagonist looks back on her postwar Japan. She leaves her first husband Jiro-San and moves to England to live with her second husband, Mr. Sheringham who is an Englishman. After the death of Mr. Sheringham and Keiko daughter through her first husband. She finds her house to be a large one to stay in. The departure of her younger daughter also makes her lonely. During the last day of Niki's five-day visit, Etsuko reveals that she is planning to move to a small house finding the present house a bit larger. The narrative moves back and forth between the past memories of Etsuko in Japan and the present life in England.

The Japanese have their own family systems purely based on the gender roles that help the smooth running of a family. In *A Pale View of Hills* Ishiguro brings the disturbance in gender role that affects the smooth functioning of the ongoing life of Etsuko with Jiro. Etsuko's marriage to Jiro has been an unhappy one. He bullies his wife and treats her like a servant serving tea. Etsuko's hatred towards Japan and her unwillingness to remember her past show her failed married life with Jiro. Etsuko's marriage to Jiro is not a love marriage. The reason behind it is Etsuko's loss of all her family members during the Second World War. It was Ogata-San, Jiro's father, who took Etsuko who was in despair and introduced her to Jiro. The relationship ended up in marriage. Etsuko does not love Jiro because she still has in her heart Nakamura, her lover who was killed in the war. Jiro has completely denied her living as an independent woman and according to Nancy Brown Diggs, the typical Japanese man is "a stalwart silent samurai. He bears everything without complaint and never reveals his personal thoughts and feelings, especially to his wife" (43-44). Moreover, Etsuko also remembers her friend Sachiko, with whom she befriends during her days in Nagasaki.

Obedience to husband's order in connubial relationship has so embittered Etsuko that she does not accept the set of ideas about gender roles in society. As Chu-chueh Cheng suggests, "Japanese women of Etsuko's generation wish for something other than the material comfort that American products give; they seek the freedom and opportunities that America promises" (164). Etsuko and Sachiko represent a liberated women pushing against the limits which the Japanese society imposes on them as Japanese women. Sachiko is less constrained by the domesticity than her previous generations and has greater freedom to pursue independent roles in public life. She wishes to reject the ways through which she has come and embraces modern choices. Her father is a highly respected man and his foreign connection even "resulted in my [Sachiko's] marriage proposal being withdrawn" (PVH 109). This tendency of embracing modern way of living is revealed through her desire to go to America

Japanese women are attracted towards westernization. Sachiko decides to escape to America with her paramour Frank, thinking that life in America is better when compared to Japan. After her husband's demise, the child, Mariko is under single parenting and the whole responsibility lies on the shoulder of Sachiko that she comes to the act of assertion that Japan is no place for women. Throughout the novel, she struggles to elope with her paramour, who is not a worthy person. She thinks that she can fulfil her desires only in America. For her, "America is a far better place for a young girl to grow up. Out there, she could become a business girl. Or she would study painting at college and become an artist. All these things are much easier in America." And she maintains, "Japan is no place for a girl. What can she [Mariko] forward to here [Japan]?" (170).

On the contrary, Etsuko, who adopts a typical traditional Japanese pattern of living is caught between her desire for fulfilment and independence as a woman. As a wife and mother, her responsibilities oscillate between traditional and modern environment. In Japan, motherhood means "hardship" and "a mother is expected to suffer" (Diggs 52). This attitude is first revealed when Etsuko finds the response of her friend's child Mariko "arousing in me [Etsuko] every kind of misgiving about motherhood" (17). Etsuko is perturbed as Sachiko does not care for her daughter and leaves her unattended even during night. In one way or other, Etsuko has spoiled the lives of both her daughters.

Etsuko creates a bad impression in Niki about marriage that she refuses to marry, thinking that it may affect her freedom. Towards the end of the novel, Etsuko enquires Niki whether she has any plan to get married. Niki's notion of marriage is further extended as she is not willing to strike away "somewhere with a husband and a load of screaming kids" (180). Further, Niki assures Etsuko that she did the right thing at the right time by leaving Japan without wasting her life. However, she hesitates to accommodate Etsuko by sharing her room in London with her because she has a boyfriend. She leaves her mother to live a solitary life.

It is noteworthy that the Japanese women are not attracted not only by western culture but also by the English language. Sachiko is fond of English and enjoys learning it. But the Japanese are too racial. It is evident in Sachiko's life that Sachiko's father brings a book, an English version of A Christmas Carol, from America for her. After her marriage, her husband forbades her from learning English. He is "very strict and patriotic" (110). He is never the most considerate of men "but he belonged to a highly distinguished family and he appears to her parents as a "good match" (110).

Jiro is always obstinate, he communicates much less, even with his father Ogata. But Etsuko feels free to communicate with Ogata and she enjoys every bit of Ogata's violin playing, even though it seems "hideous" (56). But, the memories of Ogata's family accepts the same hideous musical recital of Etsuko in the dead of night. She used to wake up the all members of the house when she lived with them before her marriage with Jiro. This deed of hers creates a guilty feeling in her and she thinks the entire family might have considered her as a "mad girl" (58). Ogata is happy because even after the shock, Etsuko is fast recovering from the horror of war. Not only Etsuko, but those who are alive after the war are fast recovering. The communication between Etsuko and Jiro is so much less that most of the time Jiro talks to Etsuko only through glances. In one instance, while two colleagues of Jiro come to visit him, Ogata and Jiro are playing chess, and Etsuko is sewing. Jiro immediately glances at her, so she drops her sewing and opens the door. Then she is ordered to prepare tea for the gentlemen. Throughout their conversation Etsuko remains silent, only serving tea and refilling their teacups like a servant.

The complexity of the novel is that certain things like the reason for Etsuko's leaving Jiro and her meeting with her second husband, Mr. Sheringham are not mentioned. Only vivid a picture of these things is present. So, compared with British, Asians have a greater predilection for suicide. Mr. Sheringham who belongs to English race, is notable to accept suicide, and such a tendency of self-destruction is not accepted in the Western countries which consider suicide as a sin. Contrary to those countries in Japan, suicide is considered as a "mark of pride and virtue" because of the old "samurai [Japanese warriors] tradition of seppuku [belly cutting] or hara-kiri [a form of ritual suicide by disembowelment]" (Lewis 28). Etsuko experiences such a suicide in her life, in the death of her elder daughter.

Etsuko and Niki experience unabated guilt for Keiko's suicide that both of them feel Keiko's ghost hovering over Etsuko's English country house. Etsuko's guilt however precedes her life in Japan as well as her life in England, where she becomes antisocial. Etsuko's second husband always blames Keiko that she has inherited her "personality

from her father,” and according to Etsuko, both her daughters are similar during their respective early stages. Both of them had “fierce temper, both were possessive, if they became upset, they would not like other children, forget their anger quickly, but would remain moody for most of the day” (94). Later, when she compares them she is unable to find any difference. They are the same in every deed. Niki is an affectionate child and has grown up as a confident young woman. On the contrary, because of the negligence of Etsuko and the bullying of Mr. Sheringham, Keiko has become antisocial.

According to Niki, Mr. Sheringham, being a stepfather, should treat Keiko better. But she faces not only racial discrimination from the side of Sheringham, but also Etsuko’s negligence very badly. She never cares for Keiko. She takes her daughter to England but there she does not give her proper care which leads to self-destruction. Towards the end of her stay, with Etsuko, Keiko’s behaviour is very rude. Whenever Etsuko glimpses inside her room she perceives countless glossy magazines lying on the floor surrounded by heaps of clothes. Etsuko has to coax her to put her laundry and return her clothes washed. Later, they start to adjust with her ways and whenever Keiko ventures down it leads to fighting with Niki or Mr. Sheringham. But her life in Manchester is different because she spends her days all alone and there is nobody to take care of her.

Simultaneously, whatever happens to Sachiko and her daughter does not encourage or discourage Etsuko. She remains neutral and uses whatever experiences she has had so far to narrate her story. This is how Ishiguro uses “this highly Etsuko-ed version of this other person’s story; and at the most intense point, I [Ishiguro] wanted to suggest that Etsuko had dropped this cover. It just slips out: she’s no longer bothering to put it in third person” (Ishiguro 5). Towards the end of the novel, it is surprising to note that the whole narration is narrated in first person “I “suddenly changes to the second person “we”. Therefore, the reader is able to understand that Sachiko is Etsuko herself and all her desires are centred on Etsuko alone. The two characters are one and the same.

Etsuko and Sachiko both wish for freedom. However, while Sachiko is presented in such a way that she is able to achieve her freedom from home and more than that she does not have a husband and is free from family responsibilities, Etsuko is concerned with her family responsibilities and she is portrayed by Ishiguro as a traditional Japanese wife who is very sincere and dedicated to her husband, Jiro and an affectionate daughter-in-law to Ogata-San, Jiro’s father. Etsuko’s married life with Jiro is an unhappy one and he induces her to attract foreign men. That may be the reason for her leaving Japan. Even after leaving Japan and moving to England, she is unable to achieve happiness in her life. Instead the move leaves only haunting memories of Keiko’s suicide. Throughout her life she is not able to maintain good relationship with her daughter.

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