

## Beyond the Boundaries: Indeterminacy, Ambivalence and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*

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**Abstract.** In his fourth novel, *The Unconsoled*, Kazuo Ishiguro deals with postcolonial concerns of community, homeland and host nations. The protagonist Ryder wanders through the unconnected places and situations that represents people within transnational and postnational process no more attaching to an identifiable place, situations and history. In this article I attempt to discuss Ishiguro's dilemma in national and cultural identity and citizenship from Ryder's indeterminacy and disorientation in the unnamed European city. Homi Bhabha's theories of cultural hybridity and in-betweenness, and diaspora studies will be applied to discuss Ryder's indeterminacy, Ishiguro's ambivalence and the un-locatable features in *The Unconsoled*.

### 1. Introduction

Unlike his earlier three novels which take place against a background of real history, *The Unconsoled* dislocates readers both in an unspecified time and space. Ryder is constantly on tour internationally as a concert pianist and his travels sacrifice his family life. Ryder's arrival in a town that initially appeared as foreign to him but the place and inhabitants turn out to have a much deeper relationship with him. The town expects great things of him but nothing happens as expected. He fails all the expectations of the inhabitants. He seems to suffer from amnesia, for he can neither connect his relationship with others nor can unify his personal history. His wife, Sophie, expects that their relationship will improve once she finds a new place, "a proper home" to live and "everything will go better" [1]. However, Ryder's denial and repression of the memory of his unhappy childhood home render him incapable of being part of a happy family. He escapes by always seeing public demands as more important than his family's needs. Ultimately, Ryder becomes an outsider to his own family.

This discordant, plot-entangled novel can be regarded as Ishiguro's attempt to deal with postcolonial issues of national and cultural identities, and citizenship for whoever lives with an ambivalent relationship to both his native and adoptive nations. Ryder seems to be disoriented in the unnamed strange yet familiar city. His indeterminacy of identity marks the homeless feeling of dislocated people who try to feel at home in host nations. Ryder's indeterminate identity mirrors Ishiguro's ambivalence as Asian-British. The breakdown of the national concept opens an in-between space for the diasporic to articulate and negotiate their identities; however, it also results in their disorientation owing to the lack of a sense of belonging.

### 2. Displaced people and the in-between space

#### 2.1 The collapse of boundaries

In his *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that people like immigrants or the diasporic who locate in the realm of the "beyond" articulate and negotiate their national and cultural identity in an "in-between" space [2]. They seem to have a place both in host nations and native ones, yet actually belong to neither. They suffer from the severance of social, political, or cultural practices from their native places and populations. Their ambivalence in the host nations creates in-between spaces which display and displace the Western binary logic. Because of these displaced people, the fixity

of identities becomes blurred in the beyond; consequently, homogenously national cultures, historical traditions, or ethnical national identity all need to be redefined. The displacement of national cultures and histories is therefore interrogated from the perspective of the margins. Within the framework of globalization, people's movements not only blur the boundaries between nations, but those of citizenship and personal identity as well. Accordingly, people's identities change with their dislocation or relocation. Although Kazuo Ishiguro is not the colonized and his native country Japan is never a colony, his migration from Japan to Britain has caused not only his hyphenated status as Asian-British but also his ambivalence toward his national and cultural identity which deeply inform his works with postcolonial concerns.

In *The Unconsoled*, readers have difficulty attaching Ryder's hometown to any specific country. As his name implies, Ryder "rides through his life, perpetually moving somewhere else, unable to find the stasis of home" [3]. He seems to attach to nobody and no place; he is characterized a nomadic status. Ishiguro challenges our notions of homeland, nation and territory through a spatial-temporal distortion. Zlatko Skrbis argues that "Homelands are spatial representations which are influenced by political and cultural factors, rather than a simple fact of geography. It is important to view the homeland as a constructed and imagined *topos* rather than a clearly definable entity" [4]. Ishiguro's unlocatable European city and nomadic Ryder question the construction of national identity, and "especially in the formation of the most exclusive form of membership-citizenship" [5]. A well-defined territory and strict borders construct "political spaces" for a group of people who therefore form a collective identity, or, a national identity. As a result, there is always a tension existing between the fixed national boundaries and the unstable, mobile people. Especially under the impact of the globalization, old certainties are constantly challenged and increasingly weakening.

In the past, each culture, people, and nation has been shaped homogeneously in relation to other cultures or places. However, the stable boundaries of territories, cultures, and identities are being disrupted as the horizontal and homogeneous modernist concepts of nation and culture meet the mass migrations and displacements in the second half of the twentieth century. The mass movement of people, whether they are immigrants or refugees from formerly colonized areas or war-torn states, blurs the Western concept of "Here" and "Out There." According to Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedneburg, the discipline of anthropology divides the world into "Here" and "Out There", that is, the world of the West and the world of the non-West. This differentiation forms the binary of "self" and "other" which informs the notion: "'they' were supposed to be 'there' and 'we' were supposed to be 'here'" [6]. A flood of immigrants, refugees, and foreigners are invading Here, transforming the meaning of "home" and "abroad." As an Oriental moving to Occident, Ishiguro, who identifies the migration from Japan to Britain as a great turning point in his life, becomes an obvious existence in "Here." Rigid geographical identity has to be rethought from the perspectives of diasporans' cultural and national identities.

## 2.2 Dislocation, margin and the unconsoled

In Ryder's four-day visit of this unnamed city, readers feel confused whether the town is Ryder's hometown. The inhabitants seem familiar with Ryder, who perhaps lives here with them and owns a family. The ceiling of the hotel room Ryder stares up becomes an entirely different place, which "was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the border of England and Wales" [1]. When he gets lost with Boris on their way to Sophie's apartment, his old school friend in England miraculously appears in the unnamed European city and guides him to a bus stop. An old car which belongs to Ryder's father in England is now surrealistically abandoned in the city. Readers are uncertain whether Ryder is visiting a strange country in his music tour or he is actually back to his homeland. The boundaries between homelands and foreign countries become blurred in this unspecific European city.

If territory serves as a factor to link nation with homeland in which people invest their psychological and emotional attachments, the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of

migratory spaces change the definitions of nation and homeland. In other words, the dislocation and relocation of migrants, exiles, and refugees compel people to rethink the meanings of nation, citizenship, and homeland. Ishiguro further interrogates national and cultural identity after blurring the boundaries between homelands and host nations. Through Ryder's "feeling at home" in the unnamed European city, Ishiguro depicts Bhabha's "in-betweenness" of those who immigrate to new countries. Ryder's feeling of foreignness to the unnamed city is what he initially impresses readers; however, with the unfolding of his memory, we found Ryder used to be the inhabitant of the city living with Sophie and Boris. Ishiguro portrays the real relationship between immigrants and the host nations through Ryder's interaction with the inhabitants who constantly ask Ryder to solve his or her problem. Ryder never says "No" to these expectations, and has to put off his piano practice constantly before the performance. He feels anxiety because he thinks his parents is coming to his recital and he does not want to disappoint them. The inhabitants' expectations symbolize the host nations' requirements which compel the immigrants to reach the social norms; namely, "to assimilate and to accept all prevailing social, political and economic norms, to fully integrate into the host societies" [6]. Consequently, Ryder's sense of foreignness in the city suggests not only the senses of homelessness and rootlessness to the immigrants but also the immigrants' inner struggle in self-identity between host nations and homelands.

Whether it is a voluntary or forced immigration, the stories of these wandering people tell their diasporic experience. Diaspora, historically related to the displacement of people from ancient to modern times, refers to diverse groups of displaced people and communities moving across the globe today. Braziel and Mannur suggest that diaspora means "a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories or countries" [7]. Diasporic people traverse not only the boundaries of nations but also the rigidities of identity. Marked by ambivalence, diasporic people are compelled to assimilate and integrate into the social, political, and cultural forms of host nations. On the other hand, they struggle to "maintain their distinctive identities and connections with their homelands and other dispersed groups from the same nations" [8]. They make their efforts to immerse themselves, to "feel at home" in the host countries; however, their ambivalence about their national identity and royalty gives rise to both nations unable to truly accept them as their own people. The displacement causes them to feel homeless and lack a sense of belonging. The wandering pianist Ryder is ultimately viewed as an outsider by his wife Sophie, which implies the displaced person who finds no place to call his own home and shares no collective memory with his people.

An ambivalent triangular relationship exists among migrant groups, host nations, and native nations. Generally, people's national identity is based on their psychological or emotional attachments to territories which are therefore recognized as homelands. When they immigrate to other countries and try to keep a feeling at home in host nations as in native nations, they belong to both nations, yet simultaneously belong to neither. The boundaries collapse while people move across the globe which makes national identity unstable. Homeland also becomes an ambivalent concept. *The Unconsoled* presents a world which no longer relates to any specific place, situation or history. Ryder wanders through various situations and places, and his identity or self remains indeterminate. Readers hardly can ascertain where Ryder belongs to and what his identity is.

Through the surreal world in *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro suggests the notion of exile, the absence of home, and the rupture between collective identity of the original culture and an individual subject. He mentioned in an interview, "I had no obvious social role, because I wasn't a very English Englishman, and I wasn't a very Japanese Japanese either. And so I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be my history" [9]. Although he kept learning Japanese language and culture in Britain, the return to Japan never happened, Ishiguro gradually immersed himself into British life and accepted British education and culture. Nevertheless, as an immigrant, his Asian heritage is always a burden when he articulates his personal and national identity. It is difficult for him to unify his memory of the native nation's history into the host nation's. He is ambivalent in his identity; neither can be a real Japanese nor a

British. There is a rupture in his memory to both nations' collective histories. The memory rupture, displayed through Ryder's amnesia, symbolizes the fragmentation and displacement of Ishiguro's personal history and the native history in the host nation.

### 3. Conclusion

Bhabha argues that the modern nation has been written by those who occupy the margins such as colonials, postcolonials, migrants, and minorities. He claims "wandering peoples who will not be contained within the *Heim* of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of the shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation" [2]. The shifting boundary creates a "process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*" [2], Bhabha compels people to rethink the relationship between national narratives and the nation which was born of the people sharing an imagined community. Further, Bhabha's "double writing" from the margins shows that dissonant voices of the postcolonial space are now "supplementary" to the metropolitan center. The unisonant boundaries of the nation now contain different voices of the diasporic people in the national space. Kazuo Ishiguro's hyphenated status as Asian-British places him within the shifting boundary and turns it as a site to voice his ambivalent relationship between his host nation and native nation.

In a multicultural atmosphere and a celebration of cultural diversity during 1980s and 1990s, Ishiguro's bilingual cultural background enables him to occupy a place in British writing and therefore becomes an international writer. His migration to and growing in Britain give him the resources to probe into human's connection with the world. The loss of sharing homeland history with his people, and the sharing of host nation history contribute to Ishiguro's ambivalent status to both nations' histories and senses of homelessness and rootlessness. Since without a history to call his own, he re-creates a new personal identity in the interstices of history as Ryder tries to identify himself through a successful piano performance. Ryder's amnesia also represents the struggle of displaced people, who are disconnected from the collective histories of homelands and of host nations but keep their gaze only looking forward instead backward. Ishiguro, standing in the in-between space, turns his writing into a site to construct himself a social status and to articulate his ambivalent personal and national identity in his imaginary homeland and host nation.

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