POSTCOLONIAL READING OF KAZUO ISHIGURO’S A PALE VIEW OF HILLS

Laili Dian Rahmawati Wahyu Nurkhasanah
E-mail: laili.drwn@gmail.com
State University of Malang

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel A Pale View of Hills using Post-colonialist perspective through the portrayal of the Etsuko, the main protagonist in the story. The finding shows that the novel produces ambivalent meanings: as the main character suffers from alienation and homeward bound, the text also promotes submission to Western hegemony. Thus, at the same time the novel challenges Western idealization, it itself surrenders to it, making the text a perfect subject of (post-)colonial ideology.

Keywords: western idealization, alienation, mimicry, resistance

A Pale View of Hills is Kazuo Ishiguro’s first novel that was also included among the “notable books of 1982” by American Library Association. The novel was awarded the Winifred Holtby Prize from the Royal Society of Literature in 1983 for the best expression of a sense of place.

Jakubowska (2005) states that the numerous themes such as “self-deception”, “distancing of families”, “disappointment in relationships”, “the tension of not fitting in”, and “devalued ideals” within the novel can only be understood and conquered via the unspoken word.

Kazuo Ishiguro himself has never been a minor figure in the contemporary literary world. The novelist is an Anglo-Japanese author who receives criticism due to his background as a migrant British. Some scholars agree to let Ishiguro being included as ‘postcolonial writer’ while others reject it.

Ma (1999) describes that such categorization cannot be separated with the novelist’s concern about “intangible subject-position of minorities in the West”. Ishiguro often deals with the immersion in a culturally dominant culture. Cheng (2006), however, mentions that Ishiguro is “distinct from most postcolonial writers in his unique position within the empire-colony dualism”. And it is this dualism which leads to the pro and contra of the novelist own position. But, to greater extent, the debate even verifies his works as significant to be analyzed and discussed.

A Pale View of Hills tells the story of Etsuko who had her own dream to gain happiness by internalizing Western values in her mind. She ventured herself marrying foreign male and moving overseas. Nevertheless, it is revealed that her hopes were crushed and burnt once after she arrived in England.
She even experienced the alienation and homeward bound towards Japan. Spark (2011) reads such condition as “one of exile, placing her within the great body of the displaced of modern society.” However, Etsuko also embodies a constant struggle between bigger domains, the East and the West. Thus, the purpose of this study is to question and explore such embodiment through Etsuko’s narrative actions.

**METHOD**

Post-colonialism is relatively a fluid scope of study. Though it is somewhat problematical to determine its limitation, Bressler (1999) states that this field of study “usually excludes literature that represents either British or American viewpoints, and concentrates on writings from colonized cultures ... that were once dominated by but outside of the white, male European cultural, political, and philosophical tradition.”

In this method, everything always comes in pairs, such as old and new, man and woman, oppressor and oppressed, self and other, good and bad, Orient and Occident, and so forth. Binary opposition is a paradox covering the hierarchical and patriarchical structure in culture. This idea is supported by Hall (2005) who claims that such cultural hierarchies as “necessarily arbitrary—as an attempt, transcoded from one domain to another, to fix, stabilize and regulate a ‘culture’ in hierarchical ascending order, using all the metaphorical force of the ‘above’ and the ‘below’.”

And those metaphors are real, indeed. With the Japan’s surrender in World War II, the West, especially Britain and U.S., becomes the ‘winner’ and Japan the ‘loser’. Needless to say, these two terms are paradoxically hierarchical. The winning team is associated with anything better, and the losing one is everything inferior, sub-ordinated, bad.

As a consequence, the inevitable process of mimicry begins surfacing. Some of the Japanese started to internalize in their mind that everything about Western is fascinating. At the same time, they began to identify their traditional value as something shameful, outdated, and not good. Said (1994) says that this depiction of self as ‘other’ is reached through the dominant’s representation of the non-westerners, as the minority. Thus, it leads people to become the part of powerful nation, regardless that this said nation is actually their own conqueror.
FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study addresses several important issues in the narratives, which are the Western idealization, the alienation, the mimicry and the problems of submission and resistance as they are portrayed through Etsuko’s story, the main character of the novel.

Longing for ‘Better West’ in ‘Chaotic East’

The postwar Japanese young generations depicted the West as something better than the East. While the older generation, like Ogata-san and Mrs. Fujiwara, continued holding the traditional values tightly, the younger generations got their own different ideals of values. Etsuko, Jiro, Sachiko, and Shigeo all shared similar perception towards their own values, disqualified them. For these young people, both America and England, representing the West in general, became their new internalized dream following the Post World War II.

Ogata-san, in agreement to Mrs. Fujiwara’s statement, argued: “Indeed, how right you are. Young women these days are all so headstrong. And forever talking about washing-machines and American dresses. Etsuko here’s no different.” (Ishiguro, 151-52). This statement clearly described Etsuko, as well as the other younger generation, as a woman who had American mindset. Washing-machines and fashions, as the products of Western industrial revolution had been clearly contrasted with kimonos and yukatas.

However, Etsuko seemed to have her own reasons. After the nuclear devastation, the younger generation of Japan had been forced to live in “charred ruins” (Ishiguro, 11). She and the rest of atomic bombing survivors had to live in post-apocalyptic situation, “at the end of the war we were all living in tunnels and derelict buildings and there was nothing but rubble,” and thus “everyone who lived in Tokyo saw unpleasant things” (Ishiguro, 73).

Little wonder that Sachiko, and many other younger generations, suddenly embraced the ‘American dreams’ and believed that “life’s much better for a woman in America” (46). The war may destroy Japan at that time, but not the tradition the Japanese women had to hold, being dutiful to the household.

These women have to do domestic managements in their house and are not allowed to do things other than the house managing. The boredom thus drives Sachiko to think that she will get a prosperous life once she makes it to her favorite country, “I’d go to America one day, that I’d go there and become a film actress” (109). She also said
that in America, women could become actress and business women (46), two of which are totally impossible in Japan.

The clash between two generations in Japan can be read as conflicts between the tradition-value holders and the modern-value taker. Enomoto, in Heiremans (2008), also says that such conflicts can even be seen from the smallest circle of society, the family. And the debate between Ogata-san and Jiro clearly portrays it:

A wife these days feels no sense of loyalty towards the household. She just does what she pleases, votes for a different party if the whim takes her. That’s so typical of the way things have gone in Japan. All in the name of democracy people abandon obligations.” (Ishiguro, 65).

The father simply delivers his complain to the youngsters as they become more and more disloyal to the Japanese ideology. Yet, Jiro manages to argue, “But surely the Americans didn’t bring all bad” (Ishiguro, 65). The son, when disagrees his father about democracy had destroyed the educational system in Japan, even blurts out blaming the traditions, “But surely there were some faults in the old system, in schools as much as anywhere” (Ishiguro, 66).

Little wonder that such debate could easily lead to one party being all the more threatened. And as the losing party, that party is clear: the elder one. When Ogata wants to confront Shigeo Matsuda, Jiro’s best friend and one of his own ex-students who wrote an article about democracy in New Education Digest, the father character had to use some force in order to show his own insecurity feelings to the new idea, “I’m going to suggest to Jiro he writes to his friend. Shigeo should apologize. Or else I’ll have to insist Jiro disassociates himself from that young man.” (35)

Indeed, in the view of the elders, they always struggled for the nation’s good, “We cared deeply for the country and worked hard to ensure the correct values were preserved and handed on.” (147). At the opposing end, and just like Cohen (2006) says, the youngsters represent the “more Westernized Japanese ...[who are] adaptable and open to new cultural experiences.”

The aforementioned matters highlight how people, especially the young generation of the post World War II, feel inferior to the winner of the war. They act in a different manner from their elder generations by challenging their traditional Japanese values and replacing them with the Western ones. On the other hand, the older people in Japan hold the traditional value very tightly. Thus, there occur some conflicts within the two generations.
**Women Marriage Migrants: Identity Transformation**

While there is an ongoing conflict between younger and older generations, most of the female characters in *A Pale View of Hills* are depicted as experiencing extreme change of values.

After the war, Etsuko and Sachiko have been pushed to the limit when they struggle to detach from their own culture, abandon their homeland, and long to come to the Western land. Thus, rather than ‘staying away’ from their oppressor’s homelands, Etsuko and Sachiko choose the opposite, ‘staying in’ those regions. This moving means that Etsuko must divorce her Japanese husband and marry foreigner. And yet, even such a drastic consequence becomes a clear option for Etsuko as she sees his own Japanese husband lacks the qualities the foreigner has.

Kelsky (2002) confirms such perspective by saying that Japanese women depict Japanese husbands as “oppressive” while the foreigners as both “egalitarian” and “sensitive”. The marital migration is thus a way for the women to pursue their hopes in getting (e)quality they unable to get from Japanese men.

Sachiko, who was once wealthy, lost her family during the World War. All of a sudden, she became a pauper widower with a child. In that difficult time, her lover, an American soldier named Frank, gave his words about taking Sachiko and Mariko leaving for America. And indeed, as it is with everybody else, in the light of poverty, the slightest glint of hope, no matter blurry, shines the brightest.

Such the above fact depicts the way Sachiko felt to her foreign lover. She was excited and accepted his invitation happily. Though Sachiko declared her action was merely for the sake of her own daughter, it hid nothing of her own selfish ambition as her daughter was actually objecting the idea of moving to Amerika. Neglecting her daughter’s desire to live with her family in Tokyo, Sachiko took her living and moved to America, her own dream-land.

Similar to Sachiko, Etsuko struggled to untie her connections with Japan. When she delivered her first baby, she named it after her mother-in-law, Keiko, which is just a common tradition in Japan. However, she had different consideration when naming her second daughter: she made it sound as a Western name, though somewhat maintained the Japanese root, Niki. Tamura (1997, in Takeda and Matthews, 2009) calls this consideration as part of the assimilation process. And the process has two-fold targets: first, as an effort to be accepted and regarded as a part of the majority and second, as an effort to forget the past.
Etsuko introduced only a little of Japan to her second daughter. As a Japanese mother, she familiarized her daughter with neither the mother language nor the customs. She let Niki live the Westerners’ way of life and she appreciated all of Niki’s choices for her life, regardless of how contrast or inappropriate that choice in the manner of Japanese traditions.

Thus, the novel clearly suggests that for both Etsuko and Sachiko, marrying Westeners is seen as a kind of salvation, first from poverty and then for better future. It also becomes an entry point of their joining with the West, the Superior, the one party which could defeat their own nation.

**Etsuko’s Crushed Dreams and Hopes in Britain**

Although Etsuko mentioned earlier that she did not want to be reminded of the past, what she did is exactly the other way around. She kept narrating the events in her earlier stages of life, when she pregnant for Keiko. The chaotic Japan became, unmistakably, one of Etsuko’s reasons to move overseas. However, these memories also became evident of her incapability to disengage with her own past.

As Etsuko declares how few the memories she had about Japan, yet, almost all of her story dealt with the events which took place before she came to Britain. This also means that Etsuko experienced a kind of displacement, as she kept rejecting her past identities and memories in Japan, she was also haunted by such recollections.

And yet, her new home proved to offer nothing sort of consolation either. In the story, Etsuko, slowly but surely, turned to be a stranger in her new country, thanked to her being a different race from the rest of the society. Indeed, coming to Britain did not automatically turn her into one of the Whites. Instead, she was alienated. Her condition got worse when Keiko chose to end her own life. Even with this tragic event, Etsuko encountered bitterer stereotype about her being present in England:

“Keiko...was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room.” (Ishiguro, 10)

Indeed, such a report is quite offensive. As Etsuko herself commented, as if no further explanations are needed; the fact that her daughter was Japanese was all that the Westeners need to understand the suicide’s reason. And as she refers herself with ‘our race, Etsuko does make a distinct separation from the rest of the society: she is, in fact, a stranger.
As the story develops, it is obvious that Etsuko felt sorry of her daughter’s suicide. She cannot forgive herself of being ignorance towards Keiko. As it was already mentioned previously, Keiko did not want to move to Britain, yet, Etsuko forced her to come along, “But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn’t be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same.” (Ishiguro, 176). This confession leads to the conclusion that in the end, Etsuko gets nothing of what she once dreamt for in her life.

**A Pale View of Hills as Two Sides of a Coin**

The novel can be read in two different kinds of textual strategies. Following Etsuko, the story tends to support Western hegemony as it makes clear juxtaposition between the west and the Rest, or in this case, the Japanese. However, and at the same time, such a clear depiction of failure from the story of Etsuko may invoke another kind of reading. It seems to warn its readers that none of such Western idealization could take place, especially in good results. Seeing from this point, the text seems to deliver its own voice of resistance to the dominant ideology.

The effect of the so called Western hegemony could be examined thoroughly from the very first page of the novel. After the nuclear bombings the trauma affects the victims both mentally and physically. The Japanese people seemed to receive the surrender in two opposite directions: the elders try to re-enact and re-collect what was left from the ruins, while the youngster simply choose to move from such ruins by opening themselves to the new culture, internalizing Western values such as democracy and liberalism within their mind.

As the youths attempt to mimic the Western attitude, what they keep in their mind is that it is better to become similar to the Whites rather than being the same as the Japanese. Thus, these war victims re-negotiate their own identity including challenging the traditional culture, comparing their old ones with the Western values, observing matters in Western point of view, and or aiming for acknowledgement from the White.

For many younger characters in the novel, Western countries definitely look more appealing and promising. These youngsters, in their openness, untie themselves from the traditional biding and thus, in some way, the text shares the idea of surrendering to Western hegemony.

At the other side of the scale, though, the result from such leaving the old and embracing the new ideals is quite devastating for the younger generation themselves, as
this has been clearly depicted from Etsuko’s narrative. She was deserted in an in-between situation which makes her partially accepted in Britain, yet no longer being recognized, or wanting to be recognized, by her old customs.

With this, the novel seems to suggest the destructive effects of Western supremacy. Bringing the message that all that glitters does not mean gold, the text proves everything Western does not always mean good. It thus challenges the Western hegemony and all the promises the ideology has to offer. These two readings give A Pale View of Hills its present ambivalent position. Just like the existence of two sides of coin, the text both confirms and resists Western ideology.

CONCLUSION

The novel A Pale View of Hills is a two-fold text. Through the depiction of its main characters, the narrative suggests two different ideas all at the same time. In one side, Etsuko is portrayed as eager character who longs for a better life in the West. Too strong the desire indeed that Etsuko is more than ready to leave everything Japan behind her, including her first husband. However, and at the other side, such eagerness comes with high price as she has actually exchange her past ruined life in Japan with equally empty and tragic new life in Britain. It is this character’s portrayal that gives the text its double voices, one that seems to support and at the same time underplay Western ideology.

REFERENCES


