



THE SUBVERSION OF DETECTIVE GENRE CONVENTIONS IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS*

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Abstract

The research article entitled, "The Subversion of Detective Genre Conventions in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*" highlights the skill of Kazuo Ishiguro in taking up a literary genre like detective fiction and subverting its salient features in narration. Ishiguro uses some of the major historical events as the backdrop for most of his novels and in *When We Were Orphans* the early nineteenth and the first half of twentieth century Shanghai is depicted- the opium trade conducted by the British trading companies in Shanghai, the pathetic state of drug addicts in China, the Second Sino- Japanese War in 1937-38 and the effects of the Second World War. The celebrated detective Mr. Christopher Banks is the first person unreliable narrator of *When We Were Orphans*. Amidst such crucial times he goes to Shanghai to solve his parents' disappearance case. He believes that if he succeeds in solving this case, he might stop the current turmoil going on in China and all over the world. He fails to solve the case and to stop the world catastrophe. The characteristic feature of the traditional detective novel is stated to prove the inadequacy of Banks as a detective. Banks merely tries to emulate famous fictive detectives like Sherlock Holmes. At last he comes out of his fantasy world and realises that he cannot bring back his cherished past in Shanghai, which he lived with his parents and his childhood friend Akira. Banks' illusionary world shatters and he returns to England.

Keywords: Detective, Surrealistic, Realistic, Opium, Subversion, Warlord, Stereotype.

THE FULL LENGTH RESEARCH PAPER

Kazuo Ishiguro is a recipient of a Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. He is one of the most celebrated contemporary fiction authors in the English-speaking world. He is a novelist, screenplay writer, short-story writer and a lyricist. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954 and moved to England in 1960 when his father took a position at the National Institute of Oceanography. He acquired the British Citizenship in 1983. Ishiguro began his career in 1981 by publishing a collection of the short stories. His first novel entitled *A Pale View of Hills* was published in 1982. He has published seven novels, several short stories, lyrics and screenplays. Ishiguro has gathered the highest literary acclaim for his works. He has received four Man Booker Prize nominations for *An Artist of the Floating World*, *The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans*, and *Never Let Me Go* and won the Booker Prize in 1989 for his novel *The Remains of the Day*.

Kazuo Ishiguro's fifth novel *When We Were Orphans* was nominated for the Man Booker Prize Award. It received mixed reviews. *The Guardian* comments:

Ishiguro shows immense tenderness for his characters, however absurd or deluded they may be. . . . In its use of an array of techniques to illuminate psychological and political truths, *When We Were Orphans* confirms Ishiguro as one of Britain's most formally daring and challenging novelists (Jaggi).

When We Were Orphans is not considered by many scholars and critics as one of his best works. *The Guardian* writes, "Many people said that *When We Were Orphans* shouldn't win the 2000 Booker Prize. These included Ishiguro himself, whose unfazed retort to accusations of banality was: 'It's not my best book'" (Diski).

a. The Historical Backdrop of *When We Were Orphans*

When We Were Orphans has an important historical setting, which spans from the early nineteenth and the first half of twentieth century Shanghai. The blooming opium trade carried out by the British East India Company in Shanghai, the addiction caused by it in China, the Second Sino- Japanese War in 1937-38 and the effects of the Second World War are the major historical events forms the backdrop of the novel. Hence, a brief note on these historical events is essential for the in depth analysis of the novel.

China was never colonized by any European country. In the late nineteenth and the half of the twentieth century, Shanghai was the hub of European settlements. The people from different nationalities- British, French, Russians, Japanese, Germans, Dutch, etc. flocked to Shanghai and engaged in trade:

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Shanghai was a fun city and prided itself on its modernity, with multi-storey buildings . . . flickering neon lights illuminated Nanking Road, its premier shopping street lined with western-style department stores (Newark 99).

Shanghai had an International Settlement where the foreigners from different nationalities settled and the British settlers were found in the considerable number. These settlers enjoyed certain concessions while staying in Shanghai:

Although not directly part of the British Empire, the International Settlement of Shanghai was headquarters to most of Britain's business in China and, . . . her citizens enjoyed extraterritorial status, which meant they were not subject to local Chinese laws but the jurisdiction of their own consuls. As far as most Britons in China were concerned, Shanghai was part of the empire and the Shanghai Municipal police (SMP), run by Englishmen, looked after them (Newark 96).

These people engaged in the trade and commerce of various legal, illegal and immoral businesses. The opium importation from India to China was one of the most prominent amongst them. In *When We Were Orphans* Christopher Banks's father worked for Morganbrook and Byatt which is a leading importer of Indian opium to China. Newark gives an account of such companies carrying out opium trade in Shanghai, "In 1833, the British government and that the East India Company's monopoly of trade with China, allowing any

Englishman to trade with the Heavenly Kingdom. One of the new companies was Jardine Matheson & Co.” (17).

Newark also says that “The British Empire made a vast sum of money from the exportation of opium from India to China- and it wasn’t for medical use, but intended to feed the habits of millions of addicts” (16). It is an astonishing fact that in *When We Were Orphans* Bank’s mother propagated against the immoral opium trade, while his father worked for the opium trading company. Many British citizens, missionaries, social workers opposed Britain’s dealing in the opium business and condemned it for the harmful addiction it caused in China, “*The Times* thundered on the opium trade foisted in China. Its editorial argued that Britain should wash its hands of the business- ‘that we should cease to mixed up in it, to faster it, or to make it a source of Indian revenue’” (Newark 18).

Many debates were conducted in the Parliament of Britain for and against the British involvement in the opium trade in China. Finally, the decision was made to end the British involvement in the opium trade on moral grounds, “On 1 January 1908, the British and Chinese governments signed a treaty agreeing to substantially reduced the Indian export of opium to China over the next ten years until it ended completely” (Newark 28).

But, the opium importation was carried out by the Chinese warlords or gangsters like Wang Ku mentioned in *When We Were Orphans*. The trade simply changed the hands from British to Chinese gangsters and now more addicts were found in China than ever before. As per the Chinese Mandarin Maxim, “It is not the man who eats the opium, but the opium that eats the man” (qtd. in Newark 9). In *When We Were Orphans* Banks return to Shanghai to solve the case of his parents’ disappearance in 1937, during the Second Sino-Japanese War. In 1930s the communists in China fought with the ruling party of Chiang kai-shek to tackle the grave problems of the opium addiction and Japanese invasion. Newark gives a detailed portrait of China in this time:

Initially, distracted by his fight against the communist, Chiang kai- shek did little to register the Japanese advance, but in 1936 the nationalists and communists came together to form a united front against their common enemy. Shortly afterwards, there Japanese embarked on a full-blown invasion of the rest of China. Their well- equipped modern armies swiftly overwhelmed Chinese resistance and captured most of the northern and central regions of the country by 1938, including Shanghai (108-09).

b. An Overview of *When We Were Orphans*

Christopher Banks is a celebrated detective who is narrating his story in *When We Were Orphans*. *When We Were Orphans* is narrated in the first person unreliable narration, “A first-person narrator engaged in a complex process of retrospection, Christopher Banks demonstrates a combination of conviction, uncertainty, and unreliability as he seeks to understand his world, himself, and his past” (Machinal 79). Christopher was brought up in Shanghai’s International settlement till he was ten years old. His father worked in Morganbrook and Byatt, which imported Indian opium to China. Bank’s beautiful mother, Diana was an ardent campaigner of Britain’s trading policy of importing the opium and causing addiction in Chinese, which made them incapable of governing themselves. Uncle Philip was a fellow campaigner of Diana and a family-friend. He had been a father figure to Banks. Akira was Bank’s best-friend and neighbor in The International Settlement. Both the boys played together and promised that they will stay together in Shanghai forever. Banks’ father disappears and after a couple of weeks his mother disappears.

Banks was shifted to England to stays with his aunt in Shropshire. He gets good education and becomes a celebrated detective. He desires a woman named Sarah Hemmings, but never forms any meaningful relationship with her. He adopts an orphan girl Jennifer. In 1937 he goes to Shanghai to take up the case, which he considered as the most important case of his life. One of the prominent features of Kazuo Ishiguro is his skill of subverting well known genre in his fictional works. He modifies the rules of popular genres, for instance- *When We Were Orphans* starts on a realistic tone and by the middle of the novel it turns into the surrealist. *When We Were Orphans* has seven chapters, the first three chapters starts off with the realistic tone and from the fourth chapter the surrealist qualities starts to entre in the realistic genre, “From here the novel takes an unusual turn. What was merely off-kilter up to this point becomes increasingly surrealist and implausible as the novel begins to violate the realist protocols it has so far appeared to endorse” (Sim 68).

Banks displaying or reliving his childhood fantasy of detective play-acting is displayed. He visits his old house in the International Settlement, which was now owned by a Chinese family. He starts making plans about renovating the house and to make it comfortable for his mother, father and Jennifer. From all his research he narrows down that his parents were held captive in a house in Chapei, a war-ridden area for more than eighteen years. This notion is quite ridiculous. But, yet he firmly believes in it and somehow he is successful in convincing some of the people in Shanghai that the world catastrophe i.e. the upcoming World War II will end if he succeeded in solving this case. Banks with great difficulties makes his way in Chapei with a Japanese soldier, who he considers as Akira and reaches the house where he considered his parents were held captive. He fails to find his parents and his childhood fantasy shatters. Banks was caught by the Japanese army and there he learns that the soldier he considered as Akira was a traitor. Banks was sent back to the British consulate.

Banks was taken to meet the Yellow Snake. The Yellow Snake was Uncle Philip, a communist informer of Chiang kai-shek, "This is where the plot presents its most ironic twists to the formula, for it is the criminal-figure who solves the mystery, and the detective who leaves the scene, shattered" (Sonmez 86). Uncle Philip reveals that Bank's father eloped with his mistress and his mother insulted a drug warlord Wang Ku. Wang Ku found her spirit enchanting and wished to make her his concubine. A deal was made that Diana will comply for Wang Ku's wishes if Banks was sent to England and his education and shelter is provided by Wang Ku. Uncle Philip says what good the profession of detective is for anyone:

How you were able to become a celebrated detective? A detective! What good is that to anyone? Stolen jewels, aristocrats murdered for their inheritance. Do you suppose that's all there is to contend with? Your mother, she wanted you to live in your ancient enchanted world for ever. But it's impossible. In the end it has to shatter. It's a miracle it survived so long for you ... (Ishiguro 294).

Banks leaves the scene shattered. It is the criminal who solves the case and not the celebrated detective. On 14th November 1958 Banks reminds his trip to Hong Kong, which he took five years earlier. He went there to meet his mother in mental asylum. Diana was unable to recognize him but when he utters his childhood pet name 'Puffin' she smile and talk about her son affectionately. Banks realize that his mother always loved him. She had never expected him to rescue her. Banks is now in his late 50s and considers London as his home. At last Banks realises his circumstances free of all his fantasies, "For Christopher this world has panache, now that it is seen for what it is, and now that he can no longer be a heroic detective" (Sonmez 87).

c. Subversion of Detective Novel in *When We Were Orphans*

The detective fiction is defined by C. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* as "a novel or short story in which a crime, usually a murder – the identity of the perpetrator unknown – is solved by a detective through a logical assembling and interpretation of palpable evidence, known as clues" (133-34). Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle were the early and well established writers of the detective fiction. *When We Were Orphans* is not a detective novel in a true sense although its leading protagonist is a celebrated detective, for it displays none of the detective genre characteristic features. To affirm this claim it is essential to get acquainted with a few general notions about the detective fictions. As per Helene Machinal, "Classic or traditional detective novels typically work to re-establish a collective social order that has been threatened by a criminal of other subversive agent" (84). According to Machinal the second prominent feature of the detective fiction is:

In classic detective fiction, form and convention preclude any direct access to the detective's thoughts, his hunches or limitations of a solution to the mystery. First-person narrative might spoil the suspense of a tale that depends for its success not only upon the ultimate revelation of 'who did it' but also the exhibition that point of the exceptional intellectual skills of the detective. Access to the deductive processes of the sleuth in real time, sharing his suspicions, hunches, and manoeuvres as they happen, would dissolve the force of the *finale* (83).

When We Were Orphans is narrated in the first person unreliable narration. The narrator Banks is a celebrated detective, but when the reader gets access to his internal thoughts and emotions, the effect of detective genre is deployable. When Banks narrates, we get an impression that is he living in his own imaginary world. He impersonates as the famous detectives, the one usually found in the well-known detective thrillers, "Christopher Banks is a character who constructs himself as, in accordance with, a work of Fiction, conceiving his life's work within the logic of that fictional role. Banks is an actor who 'wrongly' interprets the reality around him in terms of a specific, conventional dramatic fiction in which he plays a central role" (Machinal 88).

Sonmaz comments, “His identification with a fictional detective affects not only how Christopher describes and remembers things, but also his life choices” (82). For instance as Machinal mentions:

In the opening section allusions to the canonical texts of Arthur Conan Doyle are legion; indeed Banks begins to write, according to the date on the opening page (24 July 1930), shortly after Conan Doyle's death (7 July 1930). Address, *décor*, and geography of Banks lodging, 14b Bedford Gardens, closely recall 221b Baker Street and the nineteenth-century London of Sherlock Holmes (80).

In the detective novels, we see that the detective solving the case with his extraordinary logical reasoning. He is brave and intelligent like Sherlock Holmes. In *When We Were Orphans* Ishiguro mentions the ‘Mannerling case’ (19), ‘the Roger Parker murder’ (29), ‘the mystery of Charles Emery’s death’ (31), all these cases are named without mentioning any details. An eminent critic Sim states, “We never get to see Banks exhibiting ratiocinative brilliance or engaging in intricate spadework” (77). Another critic Helene Machinal comments on Banks:

His celebrated cases, the detail of his work, which conventionally provide the central determination, that thematic purpose, of the genre, remains stubbornly incidental to his story. ... Indeed it becomes clear that Banks’s role as a detective is precisely, a *performance*, the adoption of an identity derived from a fictional source (84-85).

In the detective novels at the end the detective solves the case, the culprit is punished and the peace and order is restored. But in *When We Were Orphans* it is the villain, who pulls the detective out of his fantasy world and makes him realise the truth of his parents’ case. Sim comments that “Unlike conventional ‘detective’ works, *When We Were Orphans* refuses to restore order and sanity in its closure” (77).

One more prominent feature in the classic detective novel is the evil force is identifiable and punished. “But, in Ishiguro's novel, there is no actual crime scene to investigate, and subsequently, no possibility of a solution” (Sonmez 84). Banks’s father eloped and his mother signed a deal with the drug warlord Wang Ku in return of her submission to him, he had to provide for Bank’s education in England. Banks was in illusion that if he solves his parents’ disappearance case he can stop the Second World War, which shattered and finally at the end he came into terms with reality. He realized it is too late that he can never have a life he once had in Shanghai, he had lost his parents and Akira forever. Now he had to live in England and it is the only home he has at the present and Jennifer is the only relative he can rely on.

Conclusion: In this research article a critical analysis of the main character, a celebrated detective Mr. Christopher Banks is carried out. Banks being a detective displays the distorted logics, when solving the case of his parents’ disappearance. He projects his childhood fantasies into reality and tries to copy the popular classic detectives while solving his parents’ case. It is clearly defined how Banks fails miserably in his pursuit of emulating stereotypical classical detectives of the English literature in this research article. Banks’ distorted mentality was the result of the tough political and social conditions he encountered in his early childhood in Shanghai. The Historical conditions of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is provided to get a clear picture of how these political and social circumstances affected Banks life and his career choices. The disappearance of his parents in Shanghai led him to shift to England, which was an alien country to him. Banks was unable to blend in the English society, which causes him further distress. Although he became a celebrated detective with his perseverance, he failed to come in terms with the difficult past he had faced and was forever stuck in his childhood. He constantly wishes to live in the past and dreams to bringing the past back. Banks learns in a hard way that the past will never come back and all his hopes shatter. He come in term with the reality at last and lives an unfulfilled life. *When We Were Orphans* is a strange mixture of a realistic, surrealistic and detective genre. In this research article, it is elaborated that *When We Were Orphans* cannot be called as a detective novel in any sense. *When We Were Orphans* is the least popular work of Kazuo Ishiguro and comparatively less critical work is carried out on it. This is a small attempt in the genre study of *When We Were Orphans*.

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