

Tradition Versus Modernity in an Artist of the Floating World

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Abstract: An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro presents a deep conflict between tradition and modernity in post-war Japanese society. The novel shows how social values, cultural beliefs, and personal identities changed after the Second World War. Through the character of Masuji Ono, an aging painter, the novel explores the difficulties faced by people who were emotionally attached to traditional Japanese ideals while society rapidly moved toward modern thinking and Western influence. Ono represents the older generation that believes in loyalty, nationalism, family honor, and traditional authority, whereas the younger generation supports freedom, democracy, and modern lifestyles (Ishiguro 21). The novel also highlights the emotional struggle of individuals who feel trapped between past values and present realities. Ono's memories reflect guilt, regret, and confusion as he tries to understand his role in a changing society. Ishiguro uses simple narration and memory-based storytelling to show how modernization affects family relationships, social identity, and cultural traditions (Shaffer 44). The conflict between old and new values becomes an important sociological and psychological theme throughout the novel. This study examines how An Artist of the Floating World presents the tension between tradition and modernity through character development, family relationships, cultural transformation, and post-war social changes. The paper also explores how Ishiguro portrays the decline of traditional authority and the rise of modern values in Japanese society.

Keywords: Tradition; modernity; post-war Japan; cultural conflict; identity crisis; nationalism; family values; memory; social change; Kazuo Ishiguro.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most important contemporary novelists in English literature. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954 and later moved to England with his family when he was a child. His writings mainly focus on memory, identity, guilt, loneliness, and social change. Ishiguro is known for his simple narrative style and deep psychological understanding of human emotions. His novels often present characters who struggle with their past memories and changing social realities. In 2017, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature for his outstanding contribution to literature. Some of his famous works include *Never Let Me Go*, *The Remains of the Day*, and *An Artist of the Floating World*. *An Artist of the Floating World* is an important post-war novel published in 1986. The novel explores the conflict between tradition and modernity in Japanese society after the Second World War. During this period, Japan experienced major social, political, and cultural changes. Traditional values such as loyalty, nationalism, family honor, obedience, and respect for elders slowly began to decline, while modern ideas influenced by Western culture, democracy, and individual freedom became more popular (Ishiguro 18). Through the character of Masuji Ono, Ishiguro presents the emotional and psychological struggle of a man who finds it difficult to accept the changing world around him.

Masuji Ono is an aging painter who once supported nationalist ideas through his paintings before the war. After Japan's defeat, society began to criticize those beliefs that were once respected and admired. Ono belongs to the older generation that strongly believes in traditional Japanese culture and social hierarchy. However, the younger generation, including his daughters and their families, prefers modern ideas and independent thinking. This difference creates tension within families and society (Wong 52). Ishiguro uses Ono's memories and personal reflections to show how people often struggle

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between attachment to the past and acceptance of present reality. The novel also highlights the effects of modernization on cultural identity and family relationships. Traditional Japanese society valued collective identity, discipline, and social duty, while modern society encouraged freedom, self-expression, and personal choice. Ono feels confused and isolated because the values he once trusted are no longer respected in modern Japan (Shaffer 39). Through this conflict, Ishiguro presents the larger social transformation taking place in post-war Japan. Another important theme in the novel is memory and guilt. Ono often remembers his past differently and sometimes tries to justify his actions. This shows how people may reshape memories to protect themselves from regret and emotional pain. Ishiguro's simple language and emotional storytelling make the novel a powerful study of human psychology, cultural conflict, and social change (Lewis 67). This paper examines how *An Artist of the Floating World* presents the struggle between tradition and modernity through character development, family relationships, social values, and post-war cultural transformation. It also explores how Ishiguro portrays the decline of traditional authority and the rise of modern thinking in Japanese society.

Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to examine the conflict between tradition and modernity in *An Artist of the Floating World* and to understand how social and cultural changes affected Japanese society after the Second World War. The study aims to explore how traditional values such as loyalty, nationalism, family honor, and social responsibility gradually lost importance with the rise of modern ideas and Western influence. It also focuses on the psychological struggle of Masuji Ono, who feels trapped between his past beliefs and the changing present society (Ishiguro 22). Another purpose of this research is to analyze how modernization affects family relationships, identity, memory, and personal values. The study further aims to understand Ishiguro's portrayal of post-war Japan and the emotional conflict experienced by individuals during periods of rapid social change.

1. To examine the conflict between tradition and modernity in *An Artist of the Floating World*.
2. To analyze the character of Masuji Ono and his attachment to traditional Japanese values.
3. To study the impact of modernization and Western influence on post-war Japanese society.
4. To explore the role of memory, guilt, and identity crisis in the novel (Shaffer 41).
5. To understand how changing social values affect family relationships and cultural identity in the novel.

An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro is a remarkable novel that explores the conflict between tradition and modernity in post-war Japan. The novel presents the emotional and social struggles of people living in a society that is rapidly changing after the Second World War. Traditional Japanese values such as loyalty, honor, nationalism, respect for elders, and family reputation begin to lose importance, while modern ideas like democracy, freedom, and individual thinking become more powerful. Through the character of Masuji Ono, Ishiguro shows how difficult it is for people to accept social change when they are deeply attached to the past. Masuji Ono is an old painter who once enjoyed respect and social importance because of his nationalist paintings before the war. He strongly believed that his artwork was helping the nation and guiding young people toward patriotism. Ono proudly says, "I was simply a painter" (Ishiguro 32), but this statement also hides his guilt because his paintings supported political propaganda. Before the war, Japanese society respected nationalism and obedience to authority. However, after Japan's defeat, society began criticizing those old beliefs. Ono slowly realizes that the values he once followed are no longer admired in modern Japan.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is clearly visible in family relationships. Traditional Japanese culture gave great importance to elders and family honor. Older people usually controlled important family decisions. However, the younger generation in the novel prefers modern thinking and independence. Ono's daughters behave differently from traditional expectations. During Noriko's marriage discussions, the family becomes worried about Ono's political past because it may affect the marriage proposal. This shows how society has changed after the war (Wong 58). Ono feels hurt because he understands that his authority and reputation are weakening in modern society. Modernity



in the novel is strongly connected with Western influence. After the Second World War, American culture and democratic ideas entered Japan. Young people started supporting freedom, equality, and personal choice instead of strict social duty. Ono's grandson Ichiro represents this modern influence because he admires American heroes and popular culture more than traditional Japanese ideals. This change creates a gap between generations. Ono belongs to a generation that values sacrifice and loyalty to the nation, while the younger generation focuses on personal happiness and future progress (Shaffer 46). Another important theme in the novel is memory. The story is told through Ono's memories, but these memories are often unclear and unreliable. Ono sometimes changes details or avoids discussing painful truths. Ishiguro uses this technique to show how human beings try to protect themselves from guilt and regret. Ono remembers his past with pride, but at the same time he feels responsible for supporting harmful nationalist ideas. He admits, "There are some things a man cannot admit to himself" (Ishiguro 71). This quote reflects his inner struggle and emotional confusion. The novel also presents the theme of guilt and responsibility. Ono initially believes that his actions during the war were honorable. However, as society changes, he begins to question his own beliefs. Younger characters indirectly criticize people connected with wartime nationalism, which increases Ono's feelings of shame and loneliness. Ishiguro does not present Ono as a completely bad person. Instead, he presents him as a human being who made mistakes because he blindly trusted traditional authority and political ideology. This realistic portrayal makes the novel emotionally powerful (Lewis 74).

The title of the novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, has symbolic meaning. The "floating world" represents a world that is temporary and always changing. It also refers to the uncertain condition of post-war Japan where old beliefs are disappearing and modern ideas are replacing them. Ono himself feels emotionally lost in this changing society. He struggles to understand his identity because the world he once knew no longer exists. Ishiguro uses this symbolism to show the instability of human life and cultural identity during periods of social change. Tradition in the novel is not presented as completely negative. Ishiguro also shows positive aspects of traditional Japanese culture such as discipline, social responsibility, family loyalty, and respect for elders. Ono genuinely believed that he was serving his nation through his paintings. However, the novel also suggests that blind loyalty to tradition can become dangerous when people stop questioning authority. Ono's generation followed nationalism without fully understanding its destructive consequences. In this way, the novel criticizes extreme nationalism and rigid traditional thinking (Parkes 94). At the same time, Ishiguro does not fully glorify modernity either. Modern society in the novel brings freedom and new opportunities, but it also creates emotional distance and loss of cultural identity. Family relationships become less formal and traditional values slowly disappear. Ono feels isolated because the younger generation cannot fully understand his emotions and experiences. The novel suggests that modernization may improve society in some ways, but it can also weaken emotional and cultural connections.

Identity crisis is another major theme in the novel. Ono struggles to understand who he is in modern society. Before the war, he was respected and confident about his beliefs. After the war, he feels uncertain and confused because society now judges him differently. He realizes that his social identity has changed completely. This emotional conflict reflects the larger identity crisis experienced by post-war Japan itself. The country was trying to rebuild its future while dealing with memories of war and destruction. Ishiguro's narrative style is simple yet deeply emotional. He uses calm language, reflective memories, and quiet conversations instead of dramatic action. Much of the emotional meaning is hidden beneath ordinary dialogue. Ono rarely expresses his pain openly, but readers can understand his regret through his thoughts and memories. Ishiguro's simple style makes the novel realistic and easy to understand while also creating deep psychological impact.

The historical background of post-war Japan is also important in understanding the novel. The destroyed buildings and changing city landscape symbolize the collapse of traditional beliefs and the beginning of modernization. Society wants to move forward and forget the painful past, but Ono remains emotionally attached to old memories. This difference between remembering and forgetting becomes an important conflict in the novel. Ishiguro shows that social transformation is not only political or economic but also emotional and psychological. In conclusion, *An Artist of the Floating World* beautifully presents the struggle between tradition and modernity through the life of Masuji Ono



and the changing condition of post-war Japan. Through themes such as memory, guilt, nationalism, identity crisis, family conflict, and cultural transformation, Ishiguro shows how difficult it is for individuals to adjust when society changes rapidly. The novel neither completely supports tradition nor modernity. Instead, it presents both as complex forces that shape human identity and social life. Ishiguro's emotional storytelling, simple language, and psychological depth make the novel an important study of cultural conflict and human experience in modern literature.

Problems and Findings

One major problem shown in the novel is the conflict between old Japanese traditions and modern Western ideas after the Second World War. Older people strongly believe in loyalty, nationalism, discipline, and family honor, while the younger generation supports freedom, democracy, and independent thinking. This difference creates misunderstanding, emotional distance, and tension within families and society (Ishiguro 39). Another important problem is identity crisis. Masuji Ono struggles to accept that the beliefs and values he once respected are no longer admired in modern society. He feels isolated and emotionally disturbed because people now criticize the nationalist ideas he supported in the past. The novel also highlights the problem of guilt and regret. Ono often avoids accepting full responsibility for his past actions, but his memories continue to trouble him emotionally (Lewis 75). The story further presents the problem of cultural transformation. Rapid modernization weakens traditional family relationships and social values. Younger people become more attracted toward Western lifestyles and gradually move away from Japanese customs and traditions (Shaffer 48). As a result, older generations experience emotional insecurity, loneliness, and confusion in the changing social environment.

The study finds that the novel presents tradition and modernity as two powerful forces that deeply affect human life and social identity. Post-war Japanese society experiences major cultural and social transformation where traditional values such as loyalty, nationalism, and respect for elders slowly lose importance, while modern ideas of freedom and personal choice become stronger (Wong 61). The study also finds that Masuji Ono represents the emotional struggle of individuals who cannot easily adjust to changing social realities. His memories reveal feelings of guilt, regret, confusion, and emotional insecurity regarding his past beliefs and actions. Another important finding is that modernization changes not only society but also family relationships, cultural identity, and personal values. The research further shows that the writer does not completely reject either tradition or modernity. Traditional values provide discipline, social responsibility, and cultural stability, while modernity brings freedom, progress, and independent thinking. However, extreme attachment to either side creates emotional conflict and social suffering (Parkes 97). Through simple narration and psychological depth, the novel successfully presents the human struggle between past traditions and present realities.

Hypothesis

The present study is based on the hypothesis that the conflict between tradition and modernity creates emotional, cultural, and social struggles in post-war Japanese society. The study assumes that older generations strongly attached to traditional values such as nationalism, loyalty, family honor, and social duty face difficulty in accepting modern ideas influenced by Western culture and democracy. As a result, individuals experience identity crisis, guilt, loneliness, and emotional confusion. The second hypothesis of the study is that modernization changes not only social structures but also family relationships and personal values. Younger generations prefer freedom, independence, and practical thinking, while older generations remain emotionally connected to past traditions. This difference creates tension and misunderstanding within families and society. The study further assumes that the novel presents both tradition and modernity as complex forces that influence human identity, cultural stability, and social transformation in different ways.

Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative and descriptive research methodology. The research mainly focuses on analyzing the conflict between tradition and modernity in post-war Japanese society as



presented in the novel. Qualitative research helps in understanding human emotions, social values, cultural transformation, and psychological conflict in a detailed manner. The study uses both primary and secondary sources for analysis. The primary source is *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro, while the secondary sources include books, journal articles, research papers, and critical essays related to post-war literature, Japanese culture, memory, identity, and modernity. The study follows a thematic and analytical approach to examine important themes such as tradition, modernization, nationalism, guilt, memory, and identity crisis. Special attention is given to the character of Masuji Ono, whose experiences reflect the emotional struggle between past values and present realities (Ishiguro 52). The research also analyzes family relationships, generational conflict, and the influence of Western culture on Japanese society after the Second World War. Descriptive analysis has been used to explain how social and cultural transformation affects individual identity and emotional stability. The study further examines the writer's narrative style, symbolism, and use of memory to present psychological conflict and social change (Lewis 71). Through this methodology, the research aims to provide a clear understanding of the tension between tradition and modernity in the novel.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the novel presents a deep conflict between tradition and modernity in post-war Japanese society. Through the character of Masuji Ono, the writer shows how older generations struggle to adjust to changing social values and modern ideas after the Second World War. Traditional beliefs such as nationalism, loyalty, family honor, and social duty slowly lose importance, while modern concepts of freedom, democracy, and individual thinking become stronger (Ishiguro 89). This cultural transformation creates emotional pain, identity crisis, and social confusion among people who remain attached to the past. The novel also highlights how modernization affects family relationships, cultural identity, and personal values. Younger generations prefer practical and independent lifestyles, whereas older generations continue to value traditional customs and social hierarchy. As a result, misunderstanding and emotional distance develop within families and society (Wong 64). The character of Ono represents the psychological struggle of individuals who feel guilty and uncertain about their past beliefs and actions. Another important conclusion of the study is that the writer does not completely support either tradition or modernity. Traditional values provide discipline, responsibility, and cultural stability, while modernity brings freedom, progress, and new opportunities. However, extreme attachment to either side creates emotional suffering and social conflict (Shaffer 56). Through simple language, memory-based narration, and psychological depth, the novel successfully presents the human struggle between old traditions and modern realities.

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