

Comparison of the Flow of Post-War Reflective Literature in Germany and Japan: On the Example of Schlink and Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract: Starting from a brief introduction to the history of Germany (West Germany) and Japan's acceptance of the spiritual and cultural takeover from the United States after the Second World War, and taking the analysis of specific works by Schlink and Kazuo Ishiguro as an example, this article tries to analyse the commonality embodied by the two countries in their reflections on the history of the Second World War. Both countries have gone through the process of the collective mind from reticence to selective remembrance. The article then focuses on the mode of dealing with the memory of the war, both individually and collectively, in the post-war period, pointing out that this mode is also a typical strategy for reflecting on the war. After the development of reflective literature in the two countries has reached a new stage, it reflects the intergenerational differences and the moral dilemmas arising from that place and finally points out that the great influence of the United States in the post-war period has shaped the value logic system of the reflective literature of the two countries.

Keywords: reflective literature, generational differences, Bernhard Schlink, Kazuo Ishiguro

1. Introduction

The Second World War had a great impact on the whole world pattern in all dimensions, and the great inciting force shown by fascism in the war was enough to make the masses fall into a kind of collective fanaticism, so reflection on the war naturally became a trend after the war, and a large number of reflective literatures came into being. However, the process of actual implementation of such reflection often implies the consideration of interests, human nature and other factors.

Germany and Japan, as defeated countries, were both liquidated and taken over by the victorious countries to varying degrees after the war, but it is obvious that the ecology of reflective literature presented between the two countries is vastly different. Who is doing the reflecting? Are there similarities and differences in the themes and perspectives of reflection? The chosen writers below are both internationally renowned as well as members of the post-war generation, namely West German-born Bernhard Schlink (1944) and Japanese-British writer Kazuo Ishiguro (1954). Through horizontally comparing the deeper differences between national and individual reflection behind the differences in their works, it is hoped that via the differences in the styles and kernels of the works of specific writers, we will be able to get a glimpse of the different cultural evolution of the two countries

in the post-war period, as well as the involvement of the United States as a powerful post-war Other in their value identities.

2. The 50's of Coincidental Reticence

With the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, Germany and Japan were subjected to the sanctions and liquidation of the Allied Powers to take over. Under the background of national defeat and international high-handedness, the reconstruction of the two countries' post-war literature experienced great difficulties. In the 1950s (and even for Japan for a longer period thereafter), both countries basically adopted a unanimous attitude of collective silence towards the evils of the war, and the logic behind this is undoubtedly worth exploring.

In the case of Germany, the division of East and West Germany followed on the ruins of the war, and in the face of the material and spiritual barrenness of post-war life and the ideological oppression from the front line of the Cold War, "to write even just half a page was unimaginably difficult at the time" (Heinrich Böll). "Literature of Ruins", with its theme of the individual's inevitable confusion about the meaning of life as a result of the incomprehensible forces of the times, became the dominant voice at the beginning of the 1950s. In the 1950s, Bernhard Schlink lived in West Germany, where the United States had already achieved a long period of supervision, and it experienced a harsh policy of "democratisation" and "de-Nazification" as well as the so-called "collect guilt" charge from Britain and the United States [1]. This accusation, which first appeared in the British Robert Vansittart's *The Black Record: The Life and Times of Germany*, demanded that the Germans accept unconditional surrender and collective responsibility for the Second World War. In order to accelerate post-war economic reconstruction and salvage its international reputation, West Germany adopted a "selective collective silence" at the national level, whereby the horrors and brutal atrocities of the Nazi regime were so readily reflected that they were elevated to the level of political correctness. This is also reflected in the plot of Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*, in which all those who took part or were suspected of taking part in Nazi actions during the war are reported, denounced and liquidated. However, at this point in time, popular reflection was based on a pragmatic attitude of getting rid of and setting aside, such as how to solve the problem of post-war unemployment and poverty as soon as possible, which was their real concern. After appearing as a victimised and motivated group, the phenomenon of "collective amnesia" is very common.

Japan is even more special. In fact, among the academic research in China, there are reservations about whether there is a "genuine literature of reflection" in Japan [2], and it should be made clear that the attitude of China and Japan towards the Second World War is completely different. The United States, for strategic reasons of the Cold War, was not as harsh on Japan as it was on Germany, and even in the 1950s, when Japan became an ally of the United States in its liberal democracy, it quickly achieved a booming domestic economy with American aid. Under such circumstances, it was almost impossible to reflect on the war, but at most to show the devastation of the war on the people - Japan has always repeatedly mentioned the devastation of the atomic bomb incident on the country, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hill*, which is set in Nagasaki after the dropping of the atomic bombs [3]. Japan's attitude towards the atrocities of militarism is also the same as that of West Germany: "amnesia and silence". In contrast, this "unanimous reticence" became an intentional guidance that contributed to the post-war development of the country. In this regard, Kazuo Ishiguro also pointed out bluntly in an interview that "Japan not only surpassed the US economy in the 1980s, but also established the value of free speech and democracy, and built a solid democracy. Such achievements would have been difficult to realise if they had not been based on a certain degree of 'forgetting the past'" [4]. This logic also applies to Germany, which also took off economically in the 1950s, thus showing that it is unrealistic to ask for further reflection in the context of the 1950s.

3. The Generational Dilemma of Reflection

As mentioned above, the demand for deep reflection on the war by those who experienced the war has been intentionally avoided in terms of the general environment. Thus, a clear generational difference has emerged in the development of reflective literature in both countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the post-war generation, like Bernhard Schlink and Kazuo Ishiguro, who were young people in their twenties, clearly had a very different attitude from that of their fathers, and the 1960s (The sixties) appeared in the Western context as a rebellious, questioning, and authority-challenging gesture, with a large-scale wave of rebellion sweeping across the West, mainly by young students, as Xu Ping explains in his book *Interpretation of the Era - Historical Positioning of the Western Student Movement in the Era*, “They threw themselves into the destruction of the old authority with the momentum of destroying everything [...] in the process of revealing themselves and realising themselves [...] creating the ‘era’” [5]. The emergence of the “rebellious ‘68’ generation” among West German students, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s own youthful influence on the hippie movement of the 1970s, the second generation of the war, no longer believing in the narratives of their fathers, and choosing to challenge their values and consciously constructed historical memories. After the sentiment of anti-war spreading throughout society, it finally prompted the reflection to rise to a more profound level. However, although the second generation of the war and their reflective works are intended to subvert the concepts of their fathers and challenge the evils that their fathers avoided talking about, they also present the dilemmas and struggles brought about by the intergenerational challenge.

In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Kazuo Ishiguro sets up a triple generation gap: Ono’s father is a pre-war generation -- the main character, Masuji Ono, is a witness of the war -- his son-in-law, Ikeda, his daughter, Senko, and his latest generation, Ichiro, as a post-war generation. Masuji Ono deliberately plays down the past of the war, using the first-person “unreliable narrative” to suggest that the older generation is struggling with the moral dilemma of a national identity crisis brought about by the upheaval of the post-war value system [6]. Masuji Ono, as a young man, had been strengthened in his ideals by his rebellion against his father’s generation, but this militaristic ideal proved to be completely wrong, and he himself was challenged by the next generation in the post-war period. “Many have regained their place in the war, and it is they who should come out and give thanks [...] It is cowardly of these men to refuse to admit their mistakes. Moreover, it is even more of a cowardly thing to do when these mistakes were made on behalf of an entire nation.” (73) The accusation from his son-in-law Ikeda is exactly what the younger generation is accusing a tainted father like Ono of. However, Kazuo Ishiguro’s own reflective attitude is even more complex. *An Artist of the Floating World* does not start from the point of view of his children but rather from the hesitant and perplexed state of mind of the challenged fathers, thus revealing that such “Onos”, after being challenged, can only maintain the fragile balance between their individual desires and the external reality by means of the artifice of their self-remembering. This reveals the pain that society must go through in reflecting on the new generation. As for Ono’s confession at the engagement party, “I make no secret of the fact that I have made many mistakes. I admit that many of the things I have done have been extremely harmful to our nation [...] It is hard for me to understand that any person who values his own dignity has for so long avoided responsibility for the things he has done in the past” [7]; perhaps it is also Kazuo Ishiguro’s urge and earnest expectation for his father’s response.

Bernhard Schlink’s masterpiece, *Der Vorleser* (1995), on the other hand, is a serious exploration of the confusion and struggle of the children when confronted with the guilt left behind by their fathers in the war generation, with the theme of “Crime and Punishment” from the point of view of the challenged post-war generation [8]. “‘Overcoming’ is both remembering and forgetting at the same time, and only when we can remember and forget at the same time can we be at peace with ourselves”

(Bernhard Bernhard Schlink), *Der Vorleser*, a masterpiece of the new reflective literature, brings the former Nazi perpetrators as the novel's central characters to the forefront of Holocaust discussion, with perpetrators and victims speaking together about that history. Hanna and Misha, in essence, remain a father and son model in the broader context of family/generational fiction. The figure of one of the main characters, Misha's own father, is abstract, and his lover Hannah, who is twenty-three years older than him, is, in fact, a metaphor for the birth father [9]. This set-up, which transcends the limitations of blood, makes the discussion of Nazi culpability between fathers and sons somewhat contingent and thus provides an opportunity to discuss the issue of intergenerational guilt transfer in Germany in a broader sense. Hannah is the first generation to conceal the guilt of her past, while Misha inevitably carries the burden of unredeemed sin in her body because he loves such a guilty father. However, the children are often unable to reach a complete break with their own fathers and so can only experience the transferred, new guilt of the previous generation in another kind of silence. This dilemma of an inescapable love-hate relationship with one's father is directly articulated in *The Return* (2006), where De Bauwer, confronted with his own father's diary, is forced into a complex state of mind of being shocked at his father's wickedness and inheriting a tormented conscience because of his father's sins. It is the love of the post-war generation for their fathers as children that involves the post-war generation in the shadow of their fathers' unredeemed sins.

4. Oblivion and Memory: The Unchanging Theme

On the theme of war, apart from reflecting on the blood and flesh, life and death brutality of war itself, the impact of the memory of war on the individual and the collective has also been an unchanging theme. War does not end the moment an armistice is declared, and the battle that every war survivor faces and remembers after the war is often a fierce battle that lasts for the rest of his or her life, so the excavation of memories is a classic strategy in post-war reflective literature.

In *Der Vorleser*, the contradiction between Misha's memory of Hannah and Hannah's memory of herself during the war is precisely the contrast between her dual identities as a human being and as a war machine, a double line deliberately set up by Bernhard Schlink to express the theme of "crime and punishment"[10]. Kazuo Ishiguro, respectively, used to start with the theme of memory, asking what the state and society remembered and what they forgot after the war and whether the collective and individual memories of the war were the same. The hesitation of the dragon slayer in *The Buried Giant* (2015) is a metaphor for the different choices of peoples and nations standing in different positions regarding the memory of war and which is the right choice, forgetting or remembering. "Perhaps with the fog, old wounds heal" and "the nation calms down in forgetting" correspond to the fact that after World War II, Japan, in order to gain the status of an ally of the United States in the Cold War and to regain its national self-confidence and international reputation, guided its citizens into a collective forgetfulness; "How can old wounds be willing to heal? How can peace last when it is built on massacres and magician's deceptions?" The film corresponds to the desire of a group of countries such as China, which made great sacrifices in the fight against fascism, to consolidate justice and strengthen national self-confidence by remembering the past and judging the evils. Starting from *A Pale View Of Hill*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, *The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans*, and *Never Let Me Go* are within the shared series, although the setting of the story and the image of the main characters are different, their essential kernel maintains a high degree of unity, and this unity has been unprecedentedly distilled and abstracted here in *The Buried Giant*, which abandons the realistic elements of all previous works (the time background of World War II, the geographical background related to World War II, and the experiences of the characters related to World War II), and directly empties the story under a completely fictional mythological system, which perhaps directly constitutes the new archetypal paradigm of Kazuo Ishiguro's creation. That is to say that the kernel of logic distilled from the novel can be used to decipher all of the above-mentioned works, and

it is a common phase of the spirit of Kazuo Ishiguro's creation. *The Buried Giant*, in fact, has already departed from the traditional post-war reflective works, and after deliberately emptying itself of all realistic factors, the theme, which is seemingly hidden behind a fog, appears particularly obscure, and the novel's reflection on the war is no longer portrayed purely in terms of whether the defeated or the victorious side is the one, but rather, it subverts the entire meaning of the war through unreliable narrative tactics and at a high level of latitude. The author can be regarded as not taking any position, or he can be said to be taking an international position, exploring the way of dealing with the memory of the war calmly and objectively, with a dimension that is outside the nationalistic vision of the state. Leaving the real historical context, setting the discussion of war in a more postmodern spiritual dimension, and dealing with the impact or trauma of war on the memories of all people after the end of the war that did not end, it has to be said that it is indeed the first scene faced by the new generation of post-war writers who are far away from the first scene of the war.

5. The Eternal "Other": The United States

In the process of German-Japanese post-war reflection, there is no doubt that the dominant role of the United States, the emerging hegemony of the post-war period, is enormous. It is worth noting that although the discussion above takes Kazuo Ishiguro as an example to analyse the Japanese post-war reflective literature, in fact, if we look into the creative ideology of Kazuo Ishiguro himself, the deeper logic behind it is still dominated by the "American democracy" which has successfully colonised the spiritual and cultural dimensions, rather than by the native Japanese national culture. As Chinese academics have argued, Japan's post-war generation has not discussed the trial of their fathers' sins too deeply because of the delay in the complete liquidation of Japan.

Kazuo Ishiguro's ability to reach a discursive view in his works is largely due to his dual identity background. He emigrated to Europe and America with his parents at a very young age, and most of his memories of Japan come from his parents' narratives, which makes it possible for him to have an "alienated and transcendent" perspective, and this kind of internationalist creation is his usual way of trying to break away from the limitations of nationalism. The country is just a geographical location full of multiple narrative possibilities. With regard to the materialisation of this "other" perspective in his works, Kazuo Ishiguro has keenly chosen the United States, a "neo-colonial actor" that emerged after the Second World War. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono is dismayed that his grandson Ichiro's heroes are not Yoshitsune-sama or ninja warriors but American cowboys of the West, as his son-in-law Ikeda argues that, "Instead of worshipping people like Miyamoto Musashi, we should prefer cowboys [...] Nowadays, American heroes are a better role model for children." (40) The metaphor of the American cowboy replacing the Japanese samurai symbolises the subversion and takeover of traditional Japanese bushido by American individual heroism.

As for post-war West Germany, after an almost stereotypical "de-fascist Nazism", it also logically accepted the American logic of political governance and the spirit of democratic culture. Unlike his predecessor, Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel*, which presented a traditional German literary ecology, Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorlese* transformed the novel from an event within the literary community to a public event, moving from a purely literary discussion to a discussion of social issues [11]. The work achieved the success of a bestseller in the United States and has since sparked numerous debates in the media and literary circles. In 2008, the book made its way to the Hollywood screen, once again creating a buzz. The accessibility of this acceptance, in turn, can, to some extent, confirm that Bernhard Schlink himself was greatly influenced by the American concept of democracy in his creation.

6. Conclusions

Germany and Japan, in the development of post-war reflective literature, whether it is selective forgetting or the judgement of the fathers, are the result of the introduction of the idea of American liberal democracy and ultimately were able to complete the explanation of the collective sin and anxiety. However, as such a strong “other”, the universality of the American concept itself has been challenged in today’s complex international situation. It is worth warning ourselves that when the tools used to reconstruct post-war moral and ethical disorders bring new possibilities of disorders, writers, like their characters, will again be confused by the impact.

This paper only selects two writers who are well known to the public in recent years to make a horizontal comparison, focusing on the similarities and differences between the two countries’ reflective literature in the category of bestseller literature, which is more accepted by the public, and referring to the field of academic research, because of various limitations, the in-depth discussion has not been carried out. It is hoped that the strategy of comparing the differences between the post-war generation’s reflective literature of the two countries and analysing the narrative logic behind them from a more macro dimension can be realised in future studies, ultimately reaching the goal of refining a more rigorous model.

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