

Spatial Ontology and the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and "A Family Supper"

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's lengthy novel *The Unconsoled*, published in 1995, and his short story "A Family Supper" bear resemblances to each other as the protagonists in both works take a journey to their past. Ryder, the protagonist of *The Unconsoled*, travels to a nameless European city, while the unnamed protagonist of "A Family Supper" travels back home to visit his father after his mother's death. Ishiguro's narration in both of these works functions to depict the journey of a protagonist to his past as a spatial restriction. The purpose of this study is to analyse these two texts by Ishiguro in terms of the existence of their characters in relation to their spatial ontology and their past to point out the relationship between space and memory.

Key Words: space, ontology, spatial ontology, memory.

Özet

Kazuo Ishiguro'nun 1995'te yayımlanan uzun soluklu romanı *Avunamayanlar* ile "Bir Aile Yemeği" adlı kısa öyküsü kahramanlarının geçmişlerine yaptıkları yolculuklar bağlamında benzerlikler taşımaktadır. *Avunamayanlar*'ın kahramanı Ryder adı belirtilmeyen bir Orta Avrupa şehrine seyahat ederken, "Bir Aile Yemeği"nin isimsiz kahramanı ise, annesinin ölümünün ardından babasını ziyaret etmek için büyüdüğü eve gider. Ishiguro'nun anlatısı, her iki metinde de, kahramanın geçmişine yaptığı yolculuğu bir mekan kısıtlaması olarak betimlemektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Ishiguro kahramanlarının mekansal varoluşları ve geçmişleriyle olan ilişkilerini, varoluş ve mekan-bellek ilişkisi açısından çözümlenektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: mekan, varlık, mekansal varlık, bellek.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* centres on a protagonist who is confronted with his concealed past. The protagonists in "A Family Supper" and *The Unconsoled* share the similar problems of the uncertainties of their past; and the irresolvable nature of their memories due to the limitations imposed upon them by their space dominates Ishiguro's narratives in both works. The temporal and spatial framework

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Spatial Ontology and the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's

of the narratives are restricted by his strategy to narrate the events from the perspective of the protagonists' perception interrupted by the fragmented elements of their past. Thus, his novels turn into texts restricting the characters in an isolated fictional framework to foreground the irresolvable nature of memory. This study, therefore, aims to analyse Ishiguro's narratives in two of his texts in terms of their protagonists' restricted memory caused both by their lack of information about the past and by their spatial ontology in order to illustrate the relationship between space and memory.

Ishiguro's lengthy novel *The Unconsoled*, published in 1995, and his short story "A Family Supper" present the protagonists' unhappy moments about their memories and they bear resemblances to each other in terms of their journey to past. Ryder, the hero of *The Unconsoled*, travels to a nameless European city, while the unnamed hero of "A Family Supper" travels back home to visit his father after his mother's death. Ishiguro's narrative in both of these works functions to depict the journey of a protagonist to his past as a spatial restriction.

Spatial ontology, in Theodore R. Schatzki's terms, is marked by "the distinction between objective space and social space" (1991: 651). Since all ontologies arise in particular social circumstances, social space "does not exist independently of human lives" (Schatzki, 1991: 652). However, as Schatzki asserts, "it is important to realize that social space is not experiential space" since "experiential space differs from social space because experience is always someone's experience" (1991: 652). Ishiguro's heroes in *The Unconsoled* and "A Family Supper" do not have any personal experience in their new spatial ontology over which they have no control at all.

Ryder of *The Unconsoled* and the unnamed hero of "A Family Supper" both represent uncertainties of their existence by pointing out the gaps and hole they discover in their memory about their past during both their physical and mental journeys to the past. Both protagonists lose control over their visit during their stay and thus both works have an uncertainty of space, uncertainty between past and present. This uncertainty puts them in ambivalence about their past and future in unfamiliar environments which provide the atmosphere of both texts with a sense of homelessness, of not belonging. Ishiguro creates an atmosphere of an ontological limitation of space. The spatial ontology of the characters in both works determines and limits their relationship to their space, society and their own selves. Within this limitation, both Ryder and the nameless narrator of "A Family Supper" lose their ability to identify themselves with where they are and the way they exist. Their own identities are also alienated in their familial relations.

In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro constructs the story in an unspecified European city where Ryder, the protagonist, has just arrived to give a piano recital. Ryder is an internationally acclaimed pianist and has a pre-arranged schedule about which he has no information at all. "A Family Supper" surrounds the story of an unnamed protagonist who visits his family home after his mother's death, and in a similar fashion to the protagonist of *The Unconsoled*, does not know anything about what awaits him at home. As Hugh Lacey and Elizabeth Anderson point out, places are identified "through the particles which occupy them, and through their relations with

other occupied spaces" (1980: 273). In these two texts by Ishiguro, the protagonists cannot identify the places they arrive, because these spaces are occupied by people, objects and memories from which they are distanced.

Ishiguro's novels, in Timothy Bewes' words, are told from the perspective of a consciousness from which all elements of certainty, "not only personality, identity, subjectivity, opinions, signification and ideology, but also physical factors", have been removed (2010: 8). These elements of certainty include "spatial restrictions of vision, bodily infirmities [and] temporal limitations" (Bewes, 2010: 8). The heroes, therefore, are not controlled by the reality of the fictional framework of the novel, but rather controlled by the consciousness outside that fictional framework, which renders them uncontrolled. Life is only a symptom in Ishiguro's novels, not a centre of reality since "reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art" as in Georg Lukács' theorization of today's novel and there is "no longer any spontaneous totality of being" (1971: 17). Lukács' understanding of realism points out that fictional reality "becomes problematic precisely because reality has become unproblematic" (1971: 17). For this reason, "a hero is no longer the natural form of existence in the sphere of essence" according to Lukács (1971: 44). Bewes, at this point, suggests that Ishiguro insists on dismantling the possible by revealing "[p]erception, agency and emotion" to be "delusory" and knowledge is "almost always absent" (2010: 11). Ishiguro's heroes, then, are so away from the possible expectations that their lack of information shows the implausibility of their unnatural form of existence in the "sphere of essence" in Lukácsian terms.

The unnamed European city in *The Unconsoled* functions as a powerful sign of Ishiguro's insistence on dismantling the possible. Ryder does not know anything about the city to which he is invited to give a concert, let alone its name. Despite being invited as a highly reputed pianist, he is met with a shocking silence and emptiness. The opening paragraph marks his alienation and the sense of loss in a place where he newly arrives. Mystery of a new environment is intensified by the emptiness and the absence of a welcomer at the hotel:

The taxi driver seemed embarrassed to find there was no one – not even a clerk behind the reception desk – waiting to welcome me. He wandered across the deserted lobby, perhaps hoping to discover a staff member concealed behind one of the plants or armchairs. (*Unconsoled*, 1995: 3)

The opening paragraph not only functions to indicate Ryder's alienation from the space, but also suggests his lack of control over his visit. Although he does not know anything about the city and the people, everyone knows everything about Ryder. Similarly, the protagonist of "A Family Supper" finds himself intensely alienated in his childhood place as if in a totally foreign city. His homeland and his father's house turn out to be alienated bearing the secrets and details of his own mother's death. His childhood home, despite Ryder's realistic memories from his childhood, is unrealistically estranged and mystical. His father's version of what happened there becomes Ryder's only source of information about the period in his absence:

Spatial Ontology and the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's

It was my father who supplied me with the details as we drove from the airport to his house in the Kamakura district. When we finally arrived, it was nearing the end of a sunny autumn day. ("A Family Supper", 1987: 434)

Like the unnamed hero of "A Family Supper", Ryder has to face the certainties of the space he arrives in and finds out that the whole city is related to his own forgotten past. They are, then, both alienated from their own past but are forced to face its consequences in an environment that makes them disoriented. The first thing that Ryder wants to do is to have a walk outside. However, his first trip outside the hotel increases his feeling of estrangement among the overwhelming buildings that make him feel totally an outsider:

The route from the hotel to the Old Town – a walk of some fifteen minutes – was distinctly unpromising. For much of the way glassy office buildings loomed over me along streets noisy with the late-afternoon traffic. (*Unconsoled*, 1995: 31)

In Lukács' terms, this is the paradoxical nature of the novel which is "most strikingly revealed in the fact that the world situation and the human type which most closely correspond to its formal requirements ... confront the writer with almost insoluble problems" (1971: 119). Ishiguro's narrative reflects this paradox not only to confront the author with insolubility but also to put the character in contradictory situations. In this way, the narrative moves away from depicting an atmosphere to be expected in a crowded city. For instance, the overwhelming atmosphere of the streets is juxtaposed with the quiet pace of a tourist town with all its ordinariness that carries Ryder's mood back to stability:

A few minutes later I had entered the Old Town. The narrow cobbled streets were full of people walking at an easy pace. I wandered around aimlessly for some minutes, past numerous little souvenir shops, confectioners and bakeries. (*Unconsoled*, 1995: 31)

However, the stability of his mood does not last long, and is juxtaposed with a tension caused by the unfamiliarity of the old town's local quietude that overwhelms Ryder even more than the crowd on the busy streets. As Geoffrey Maloney suggests, Ishiguro's world in *The Unconsoled* "disregards the known laws of space and time" adding "fantastic elements to illustrate the central theme of his novel" to picture his protagonist as "isolated" (2011). In this isolation, Ryder soon realises that the city and its people belong to a world that he already knows. The hero's life, which is meant to be "a work of literature", becomes only "a poor fragment", and thus, the novel "remains a beautiful yet unreal mixture" of sorrow and scorn but "not a unity" (Lukács, 1971: 120). "The greatest discrepancy between idea and reality" is time (Lukács, 1971: 120) in such a narrative of series of images. As a result of this, the strange overwhelming world that Ryder thinks he does not know turns out to be a place where his past resides and begins to reappear:

Turning I saw a woman sitting with a young boy waving to me from a nearby table. . . . I could not understand how I had failed to notice them earlier. (*Unconsoled*, 1995: 32)

In an interview conducted by Brian W. Shaffer, Ishiguro asserts that *The Unconsoled* "takes place in a kind of dreamlike world in which the narrator's past, present, and future merge to some extent" and he places the narration on a "spectrum between a weird world and a recognizably realistic, everyday world" (Shaffer, 2001: 3). Despite the ordinary everyday life going on in the city and the realness of the people who take Ryder around the town, there is still an incomprehensible ontology of the things around him. He cannot be certain whether or not the people and the things that surround him are real or the reoccurring images of his memory. As Tom Wilhelmus points out, he "may or may not have visited or inhabited the city before; he may or may not have a wife and child there with whom he has a dysfunctional and guilt ridden relationship" or perhaps he complies "with all the roles" arranged for him (Wilhelmus, 2006: 322). This is not only due to his vague memory, but also due to his disillusionment caused by the social roles and engagements. At one point, he succumbs to the idea that what he experiences in the old town must be real in spite of their ontological uncertainty. He understands that the woman and the young boy who wave him from a table are his family from his own past. Sophie, his assumed wife, and Boris, his assumed son, leave the café and walk through the streets of the old town. Yet, the unexpected nature of the novel continues:

Up ahead of us, Sophie's figure vanished around a corner and Boris's grip on my hand tightened. I had not until this moment appreciated how far in front we had allowed his mother to get, and though we increased our pace, it seemed to take an inordinate time for us to reach the corner ourselves. (*Unconsoled*, 1995: 40)

Although they lose Sophie round the corner, the novel's pace and unexpectedness of events give the narrative a powerful sense of spatial restriction. Ryder is unable to overcome his spatial ontology as he meets people from his past unexpectedly, loses people and finds them back again. The context in Ishiguro's narration loses its spatio-temporal relations. Ryder almost forgets why he is there and continuously gets occupied with people and memories coming from his past and with the tasks given to him. It becomes apparent that, as Bewes asserts, "the members of the community have enormous and irrational expectations of his abilities" (2010: 9). For instance, the manager of the hotel where he stays asks him to look at an album containing photographs about Ryder's whole career collected by his wife (*Unconsoled*, 20). The manager also wants him to listen to his son Stephan practicing a piece on the piano (25). Even Gustav, the porter of the hotel, requests him to have a word with his psychologically disturbed daughter. Ryder, therefore, is received as not only a pianist invited to give a concert, but also as a person to console the people, while he finds himself rather unconsoled as well as finding his ontology being changed by the new environment in this city where he temporarily stops for a concert.

The quandaries of Ishiguro's heroes do not only stem from their uncentred and uncontrolled focalization but also from the spatial restrictions created by elements such as the city walls, unknown or forgotten pasts, chance acquaintances or distant family members. In "A Family Supper", the nameless hero is an upper class business man's son who has been away from home for long years. The story

Spatial Ontology and the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's

begins with information about a type of fish that turns out to be the cause of his mother's death:

Fugu is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan. The fish has held a special significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one. The poison resides in the sexual glands of the fish, inside two fragile bags. When preparing the fish, these bags must be removed with caution, for any clumsiness will result in the poison leaking into the veins. Regrettably it is not easy to tell whether or not this operation has been carried out successfully. The proof is, as it were, in the eating. ("A Family Supper", 1987: 434)

This horrifying information about fugu functions to foreshadow the unpredictable nature of his visit. The narrator informs the reader that his mother passed away after eating one and fugu is used by families or groups of people for total suicides. His visit, as long as bearing the secrets of the period in his absence, reminds him of not only his physical alienation in his childhood home but also his years' long distance from his father and his sister:

His general presence was not one which encouraged relaxed conversation; neither were things helped much by his odd way of stating each remark as if it were the concluding one. ... Inevitably, our conversation since my arrival at the airport had been punctuated by long pauses. ("A Family Supper", 1987: 435)

In addition, he also finds himself too unfamiliar to remember even the shape of his childhood home. His lack of experience at home, his own home, makes him unable to associate what he sees to any of his memories from his childhood. He loses his spatial memory, a situation that limits his spatial ontology. In a sense, his past restricts him in his present ontology to be familiar with his own home, while his new presence equally limits his reminiscence, and thus his spatial ontology becomes somewhat inexplicable. This is signified by the loss of his spatio-temporal relations:

I followed my father from room to room. I had forgotten how large the house was. A panel would slide open and another room would appear. But the rooms were all startlingly empty. ("A Family Supper", 1987: 439)

When he meets his sister Kikuko, his past memories begin to reappear. They both talk about the well in their garden which makes his memories clearer. However, what the well signifies is yet another mystification, blurring the past memories. He always claimed to see a ghost of a woman wearing a white kimono walking around the well. Yet, these past memories about the well are the things Kikuko never believed:

"Do you remember," she said, as I came walking up to her, "how you used to say this well was haunted?"

"Yes, I remember."

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Ali Çelikel, M. / JSS 13(1) (2014) :59-67

"Mother always told me that it was the old woman from the vegetable store you'd seen that night," she said. "But I never believed her and never came out here alone." ("A Family Supper", 1987: 437)

Trying to adapt and clarify his memory, the unnamed protagonist can never be oriented with space and time. By attempting to turn towards his past he is totally disoriented with his present and future. As a result, he is associated with neither present nor his past. His ontology freezes at timelessness in an unspecified spatial ontology. As Ishiguro himself asserts, "the way[...] in which we try to repair something from the past when it's actually far too late [is an] unrealistic ambition to try and put back something that fragmented a long time ago" (Shaffer, 2001: 3). While talking to his sister about the haunted well, the unnamed hero once again sees the same ghost of an old woman wearing a white kimono in the garden, coming from years ago. Upon Kikuko's disbelief, he never minds and they get in. However, from this fragmented and blurred past, his thrilling memory revisits him during the dinner in his mother's unrecognisable photograph:

"Who is that? In that photograph there?" "Which photograph?" My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze. "The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono." ... "Your mother." His voice had become very hard. "Can't you recognise your own mother?" ("A Family Supper", 1987: 440)

His mother becomes a figure and shape that thrilled him many years ago when he believed that the well in the garden was haunted. "A Family Supper", then, is surrounded by mystery, unpredictability and insolubility defying the plausibly natural ontology of a fictional hero in relation with his space and time. His lack of information and loss of ties with his past and the spaces related to his past make him succumb to the circumstances. The only reliable and certain information in the story is his mother's death caused by eating fugu. His knowledge about the consequences of eating fugu, as proved by his mother's death, remains as his only tie with presence, home and his family. As the quiet dinner continues, a large steamy pot at the centre of the table remains untouched. The father opens the lid to serve the main course:

"You must be hungry," he said. ... "Thank you." I reached forward with my chopsticks. The steam was scalding. "What is it?" "Fish." "It smells very good . . . What is it?" "Just fish." . . . The three of us ate in silence. Several minutes went by. "Some more?" "Is there enough?" "There's plenty for all of us." ("A Family Supper", 1987: 441)

In the final part, the story hints that the supper is organised by the father who wants to follow the path of his business partner who committed suicide by taking all his family with him by turning the gas on all night. Although the father does not mention the name of the fish, it is evident that they eat fugu in silence and succumb to the circumstances.

To conclude, as in Wilhelmus's views, Ishiguro's texts are swirling mixtures of "guilt and dislocation in time" (2006: 322). The heroes in both texts studied here are dislocated and surrounded by a world that is organised beyond their perception, which makes them feel lost in time. They both find themselves in unrelenting

Spatial Ontology and the Past in Kazuo Ishiguro's

environments that make them disoriented. Hence, Ishiguro's narrative in both texts achieves the effect of a problematic fictional reality as in Lukács' theorization of realism in fiction. Ishiguro creates this function of problematic reality by disorienting his heroes not only spatially but also temporally. The framework of Ishiguro's texts also includes the influences of what is not framed within the story. Thus, both Ryder and the unnamed protagonist of "A Family Supper" find it hard to believe in the meaningfulness of their circumstances created by the ontology unknown to them. This is, as Bewes argues, the greatest achievement of Ishiguro's writing that registers "the vast discrepancy between the framed" and the "unframed perception in which the world is conscious of itself" (12). The memory of Ryder and the unnamed hero, therefore, depends on their spatial ontology that enables or disables them to remember according to what is framed by the narration. Their consciousness, limited to their personal experience, is dismantled by their lack of knowledge about their physical environment and the gaps in their memory. The haunting stories in both texts, as a result, present disruptions in the perception of the characters and these disruptions render the familiar narrative formulations like sentimentality and emotive descriptions almost absent.

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Ali Çelikel, M. /JSS 13(1) (2014) :59-67

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