

## One Territory, Two Worlds: Criticism of Colonialism in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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Editors' note: As an introductory exercise in editing, this process taught us about querying compassionately and suggesting edits purposefully. We also learned – through Luke's enthusiastic embrace of edits that suggested he broaden the contextual information he was giving his readers – how to craft a meaningful author-editor relationship. To prepare this piece for publication, Luke substantially re-worked the introduction to this essay, checked facts, enriched the historical information, accepted numerous small adjustments for clarity, brushed up his citation formatting, and expanded his Works Cited list. We are proud to see his hard work rewarded through publication.

In contemporary society, the role of colonial governments and the territories they administered are increasingly being re-examined. From scholars to artists, the dialogue on both the colonial projects themselves and their lasting impacts is one of the most predominant issues of our time. Many artists use their work to critique and examine these colonial structures and their consequences; Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* is a strong example of a literary work in this tradition. The novel is largely set in the colonial Shanghai International Settlement and depicts it in such a way as to draw attention to the impact of the colonial project on all who were affected by it. The Shanghai International Settlement was established in 1845 and provided a space for foreigners to live and conduct trade without living under the authority of the Chinese government (Haan, 31-32). The novel tells the story of Christopher Banks, a man who grew up in the Settlement but was born to British parents. Christopher was orphaned at a young age and moved to Britain following the disappearance of his parents. Readers follow him as he returns to the Settlement shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, after the fighting had

already begun in China, to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearances. In his novel, Ishiguro criticizes the colonization of Shanghai by showing the inherent power imbalance between the native population and the colonizers, the chaos and lawlessness outside of the Settlement as opposed to within, and through the general understanding of Shanghai and the Settlement held by characters from Britain. As a work of historical fiction, the novel serves to explore a particular society at a particular point in time, and therefore, must be analyzed with close consideration to the historical period and context in which the novel is set.

Through his depiction of the various characters involved in the Shanghai International Settlement, Ishiguro shows a colonial society in which the native Chinese population is inferior and subservient to the colonizing British and American population. Lea Ypi defines colonialism as “a practice that involves both the subjugation of one people to another and the political and economic control of a dependent territory” (162). The use of the word “subjugation” is vital, as it shows a clear hierarchical model of colonized societies – the colonizers will always be on top by virtue of being colonizers, and the native population is inherently and necessarily subservient. Ishiguro demonstrates this model clearly throughout the novel; nearly all of Christopher's experiences in Shanghai are shaped by his status over the native population in some way or another. When explaining why native Chinese inhabitants coming from a specific region are unfit to work for the colonizers, Mr. Wright, an official from the trading company which employs Christopher's father, tells Christopher's mother that “inevitably, those who come from Shantung to work in Shanghai [...] tend sooner or later to resort to thieving” (Ishiguro, 61). Through this quotation, Mr. Wright shows the attitude of superiority that is held by the colonizing population towards the native population and the feeling that the native population is not to be trusted. This is an attitude that has been extremely common throughout colonized

states, and one which is still often seen today. It reflects the most fundamental elements of the colonial mindset through the inherent inequalities between the different populations that are caused by colonialism.

However, it is not only the colonizers who hold this mentality, because a certain number of the colonized population eventually take on this attitude for themselves and begin to truly view themselves as subservient. When visiting his childhood home on his return to Shanghai, Christopher speaks to one of the native Chinese residents who have moved in following his departure, who admits that he “will be saddened to leave this house”, but that he still “consider[s] it a great honour and privilege to return this house to [Christopher] and [his] parents” (Ishiguro, 205). Regardless of his history in the household over decades, and his right to claim it, he ultimately views giving back to Christopher as the right, even honourable thing to do, despite the fact that Christopher had not even asked for it back. This shows how deeply ingrained the inferiority of the native Chinese population within the colony has become, as he views servicing the colonists as his duty and as the right thing to do.

Another method used by Ishiguro to critique colonialism is the way he contrasts the relative peace and stability of the Settlement against the war and the chaos that is occurring outside of it. Despite the horrible brutality of the Second Sino-Japanese War just outside the walls of the Shanghai International Settlement, the British and American population living there are extremely sheltered. They even view it as an intellectual exercise, like any other topic from the news one might discuss. While attending a party after his return to Shanghai in 1937, Christopher looks at the fighting from afar, and notes that “that’s the war. Most interesting. Are there many casualties, do you suppose?” (Ishiguro, 171). Rather than showing any concern for himself or those living mere miles away, he simply regards it as just another thing happening in

the world, and comments on it at a party in passing. There are essentially two separate worlds in Shanghai, the colony, with its peace and order for the British and Americans, and the world outside the colony, with its devastation and destruction for the Chinese.

Once Christopher eventually leaves the walls of the Settlement and steps into the warzone in search of his parents, he is shocked at the living conditions he sees. While speaking to the Chinese lieutenant he encounters, the lieutenant observes that “[f]oreigners rarely see such places unless they are missionaries [...] you would not believe human beings could live like that. It is like an ants’ nest. These houses [...] were intended for the poorest people” (Ishiguro, 251). Through this, he shows how the Shanghai International Settlement shelters the colonizers from the issues facing the land they live in, making them able to, quite easily, ignore the poverty and the issues facing the rest of the nation. His description of the houses as being for the “poorest people” demonstrates further how the native population has suffered under colonialism and been lowered down to an almost subhuman level in terms of how they are treated by society. Ishiguro’s use of juxtaposition between life inside the colony and life outside of it is faithful to the reality of life in Shanghai just before the Second World War. While analyzing the Settlement in this period, Alexander Bain observes that “the Settlement became a kind of safe haven, where a neutral international elite buffered local populations from outright conquest while not really ensuring their security.” (244). Bain reinforces Ishiguro’s depiction of the war and the attitudes towards it held by characters in the novel as being faithful to the actual historical record, and how sheltered those living in the Settlement truly were. The outward neutrality by the colony and those living in the Settlement allowed them to avoid the trials and tribulations of war, which is well reflected in the novel.

The final way in which Ishiguro criticizes colonialism is through the attitudes held towards Shanghai by those living in Britain. The colony is viewed with disdain and understood as being greatly inferior to Britain, even to the point that British citizens born to British parents in the Settlement are inferior to those who were born in Britain. Throughout his whole life in Britain, Christopher experiences mistreatment to some degree owing to the fact that he is from Shanghai. While remembering his time at school, he recalls that “the outsider was bound now and then to become the butt of some harmless banter” (Ishiguro, 83). Although he recalls it as being “harmless” (Ishiguro, 83), it is still demonstrative of the attitudes that were held by native British citizens towards their colonies and those who lived there. Additionally, he recognizes that he will always be an “outsider” (Ishiguro, 83) within British society, solely by virtue of being from Shanghai. Negative attitudes towards Shanghai can further be seen through the character of Colonel Chamberlain, who accompanied Christopher on his journey back to Britain as a child after he was orphaned. Chamberlain feels that “Shanghai’s not a bad place. But eight years is about as much as [he] can take of it, and [he] expect[s] [Christopher has] had about as much as [he] need[s]. Much more, [Christopher will] be turning into a Chinaman” (Ishiguro, 29). He demonstrates how he views Shanghai as a nasty and unpleasant place to live compared to Britain, and his automatic assumption that Christopher feels the same shows how widespread that feeling was. Despite being part of the British Empire, there is a sense that the colonies will never come close to Britain itself in their standing within British society, and it is the same for those who live there.

Once again, Ishiguro’s portrayal is an accurate historical depiction of life in the British Empire, and there exist numerous historical records expressing similar opinions towards Shanghai. One such example comes from William Lockwood, who in a journal article in 1934

observed that “the authorities [in Shanghai] have yet to face squarely the social problems caused by the rapid growth of an urban proletariat. [...] Until adequate financial provision is made [...] the title “Model settlement” will invite the retort ‘model for whom?’” (1036). This reveals that the attitudes held towards Shanghai in the novel are attitudes which are historically accurate and not unique to Britain, coming from Lockwood, a contemporary American author. Rapid urban settlement and development in this time period was not unique to Shanghai, nor to colonies in general, yet Lockwood still focuses on the poor living conditions in Shanghai, further cementing the accuracy of the novel. Altogether, colonies were regarded very poorly by those not living in them, especially when compared to perceptions of the Western world.

Through the setting of the novel, Ishiguro undertakes significant analysis and criticism of the colonial project, and he shows the impact it has had on all who were involved in it. First and foremost, the native population of the land being colonized suffers directly, and are subjugated and reduced to subservient beings in their own land, while those who have colonized take on a role of lordship and superiority, as shown through the interactions between Christopher and the native Chinese characters. Secondly, colonies create a sheltered environment, where those living inside the colony can easily ignore the issues facing the region in which they live. Life within the colony as portrayed by Ishiguro is a world unto itself, and the chaos and war outside their walls is happening in a different world. Lastly, in addition to there being two worlds in the colonies themselves, there are also two worlds between the colonies and the homeland proper. Despite being British himself, Christopher is not quite on the level of someone born and raised in Britain, and all those around him understand his home as a frightful and horrid place. Over the entire novel, Ishiguro paints a picture of colonialism and its consequences, and his observations and critiques are highly relevant in today’s society.

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