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Charles Dickens and Colonial Expansionism “Obscured” in *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro

Abstract

The intertextual associations with Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations* in *When We Were Orphans* seem unobvious. In this paper I will show that Dickensian motifs are nonetheless noticeable in Ishiguro’s novel and, relating to Dickens’s fictionalised biography by Peter Ackroyd, some events from his turbulent life can also be recognised. The concept of “obscurity” of the image that derives from Emanuel Levinas, and which was later elucidated by Homi K. Bhabha, will be employed in my analysis. Ishiguro seems to conceal a true picture of British colonialism, drawing the reader’s attention to Christopher Banks’s futile mission to find his missing parents, remaining myopic to the real evil around him. The enunciation of “the unspoken,” that is to say, the history of colonial power dynamics will be particularly clear while elaborating on the story of Christopher’s mother, Diana Banks. I will also demonstrate that *When We Were Orphans* accentuates the issue of the binary opposition between the West and the East, which explicitly alludes to Edward Said’s politics of bipolarity.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*, colonialism

The intertextual connections with Charles Dickens’s fiction and life in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) seem inapparent. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Dickensian motifs are nonetheless discernible in Ishiguro’s novel and, referring to Dickens’s fictionalized biography by Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (1991), some events from his turbulent life can also be identified. The methodological basis of my analysis is “obscurity” of the image, a term first coined by Emanuel Levinas, later elucidated by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Citing the novel *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, the latter theorist accentuates that the presence or “the eruption of ‘undecipherable languages’ of slave memory [in the house number 124] obscures the historical narrative of infanticide only to articulate the unspoken” (Bhabha 15). In addition to this, Bhabha draws a telling conclusion:

Is it not uncanny that Levinas’s metaphors for this unique “obscurity” of the image should come from those Dickensian unhomely places – those dusty boarding schools, the pale light of London offices, the dark, dank second-hand clothes shops? (15)



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Uncovering these “obscured” signs exposes “an externality of the inward” (Bhabha 15), which allows for the emergence of other narrations or the enunciation of the subject’s history. Ishiguro seems to similarly articulate the unspoken through obscuring a real image of British colonial expansionism, focusing the reader’s attention on Christopher Banks’s utopian mission to find his missing parents and eradicate evil of the world, remaining blind to the real evil around him. The articulation of “the unspoken,” that is to say, “the historical narrative” of colonial expansionism will be particularly explicit while analysing the story of Christopher’s mother, Diana Banks.

When We Were Orphans is a story of Christopher Banks, a British teenager raised in the Shanghai International Settlement (the British and American enclave), who is sent to England after a mysterious disappearance of his parents. He becomes a famous detective and returns to Shanghai at the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937) in the hope of finding his missing parents. The novel explores the theme of British presence in China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by the demand for the Chinese commodities (tea, porcelain, silk), which had a devastating social and economic undertow. British outposts controlled and guarded the trade that was based on a barter system: Chinese goods were sold to the British in return for opium delivered from India, a practice which resulted in forming an addicted and socially unstable Chinese population.

Trauma is a primary element that connects Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel with Charles Dickens’s life and oeuvre. Yet, *When We Were Orphans* seems also to be the articulation of colonial trauma of the Chinese caused by the British opium trade and the subsequent Japanese invasion. As Carey Mickalites notices, Ishiguro provides the reader with the appalling image of “the plight of refugees, the orphans of colonial capitalism and imperial war,” the nameless orphans of “an economically weakened China” on account of the opium trade, emerging as easy pickings for Japanese imperial aggression (118). They are seen when Banks and his school friend Morgan drive through the French Concession of Shanghai:

Once we went down a side-street on both sides of which the pavements were filled with huddled figures. I could see them in the lamplight, sitting, squatting, some curled up asleep on the ground, squeezed one upon the other ... They were of every age – I could see babies asleep in mothers’ arms – and their belongings were all around them; ragged bundles, bird-cages, the occasional wheelbarrow piled high with possessions. [...] The faces were mostly Chinese ... (Ishiguro 108)

There are also discernible, though obscured, parallels between the life of Dickens which emerges from Ackroyd’s biography and Ishiguro’s fictitious protagonist, Christopher Banks. *When We Were Orphans* is imbued with an issue of orphaning, which implicitly refers to the Dickensian portrait of an abandoned child as well as the writer himself. Just as Christopher Banks, Dickens was beset by his past and was not able to supplant the perplexing thoughts of being emotionally orphaned, which became an intrinsic part of his life. It is a well-known fact that, as a twelve-year old boy, he had to make a living at rat-infested Warren’s blacking factory, the consequence of his father’s debts and incarceration in the Marshalsea Prison (Ackroyd 81). Being part of a working-class society in the blacking factory, young Dickens must have felt abandoned and experienced emotional orphanhood. Dominick LaCapra notes that the traumatic experience “relates to the past that has not passed away – a past that intrusively invades the present,” adding that “so-called traumatic memory carries the experience into the present and future in that the events are compulsively relived or reexperienced as if there were no distance or difference between past and present” (55–56). This definitely befell Dickens, and the recurring experience of the blacking factory was reflected both in his fiction where, being especially empathetic toward the fate of the forsaken and aggrieved children, he attacked social injustice, and the reality in which his yearning

for love, emotional protection and financial stability was never fully satisfied. In *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), the novels containing the most autobiographical elements, hunted by the traumatic memory, Dickens seems to return to a state of emotional orphanhood he experienced in the factory, attempting to “rewrite the world [...] to make it more secure place [...] so that the child himself can be remade and thus redeemed” (Ackroyd 87).

Dickens was considered a moralist uncovering the evils of the Victorian era or, as Walter Bagehot called him, a “sentimental radical” (145), whose fiction expresses his disapproval of social constraints, vices and individual suffering of his times. It also refers to his traumatic childhood which impinges upon his life, thereby the writer’s urge for creation as if “the plight of a solitary child provoked [him] into full-scale conceiving and scheming and designing, [...]” (Ackroyd 327). It is not only potent on the pages of his fiction where the image of the “insecure, maltreated, starved, frail, sickly, oppressed, guilty, small” child still dwells within the novelist (106), but also in real life. Dickens felt exigency of a mission to reveal the evils of the British system in the Victorian era and to assuage them: “I have very seldom seen, [...] in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children” (Ackroyd 427). It is unquestionably an echo of his own memories from the blacking factory. Thus Dickens’s fiction exemplifies his retributive tone while lambasting child labour, child neglect and parlous living conditions, especially those of the orphans.

Dickens’s yearning for his carefree years of early childhood, before experiencing the feeling of abandonment which is comparable to orphanhood, was reflected in his attitude to his children back when he used to be a caring and affectionate father. His need to return to the times before the ignoble occupation is perceptible in his self-communing with his children before their adolescence, when he “could retrieve his own early happy childhood” (Ackroyd 477) as well as in his novels and public readings, which marked him out as embodiment of familial unison and domestic hearth. However, when his children became older, he developed an increasing reserve and emotional coldness towards them, making him more sensitive to his fictional characters. His son Henry sensed this detachment and described later Dickens’s “heavy moods of deep depression, of intense nervous irritability, when he was silent and oppressed” (478). As for Dickens’s marriage, it may be concluded that for twenty-two years his wife felt completely overpowered by her eminent husband. After their legal separation, Dickens, who ceaselessly relied on his audience for approval and pleaded not guilty for the breakdown of his marriage, published the “violated letter” in which he charged his wife with all anguish and referred to her mental disorder (Ackroyd 859–860).

After being released from prison and notwithstanding the pecuniary problems, John Dickens wanted his son to return to school and regain his lost ambitions and expectations. However, his mother insisted on keeping him in the blacking factory. This fact sank deep into Dickens’s memory, impinging upon his later life, especially on the relationships with women and his children. “I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back” (Ackroyd 102). The whole gamut of traumatic events, humiliations, rebuffs and disappointments he experienced as a child, seems to have shaped his entire life. The past that invaded his life, the traumatic experience of an abused, orphaned child found its way in his novels, such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Great Expectations*.

A parallel conjuncture takes place in *When We Were Orphans*, when Christopher Banks is unable to extricate himself from the traumatic past – the inexplicable disappearance of his parents in the International Settlement in Shanghai. As a child, he lived happily with his parents and his next-door friend of Japanese origin, Akira, in a protected Eden of which one day he was abruptly deprived. He prematurely enters a cruel world, and later becomes a disappointed idealist sticking

to his illusion of repairing the world: “those of us whose duty is to combat evil, we are like the twine that holds together the slats of a wooden blind. Should we fail to hold strong, then everything will scatter” (Ishiguro 80). Banks is “likely to retreat into his childhood memories [persisting] in his mission to find his mother” (Ge 13) since the experienced trauma seems to consume his mind and results in the perpetual search for security and a state of childhood innocence. Throughout the novel, he is relentlessly overwhelmed by his utopian yet abortive mission of finding his parents, which, in his reasoning, entails purging the world of evil. His becoming a detective was mainly driven by his imperative yearning to “[root] out evil in its most devious forms, often just when it is about to go unchecked [...]” (Ishiguro 18). Sensitive to the fate of orphaned children, Banks adopts an orphan, Jennifer, whose parents got drowned in Cornwall. However, the recurring childhood trauma makes him incapable of building a wholesome relationship with his adopted daughter. It can also be seen in Christopher’s inability to strike up a lasting relationship with Sarah Hemmings. She appears as a shadow, a mirror, an embodiment of his childhood memories, making them more vivid, especially when she recalls her own trauma after her parents’ death.

In the course of *When We Were Orphans*, an adept detective, Christopher Banks, possesses the power of observation, deduction and constructive imagination while solving crime cases. It is another parallel between Dickens and Ishiguro’s protagonist. In Dickens’s biography, focusing on his disposition of observation, Peter Ackroyd elucidates that in the writer’s journals, letters and fiction there are heterogeneous extracts concerning his infancy, recounted with an extraordinary precision. Dickens himself purports, “I was a child of close observation [...] different peculiarities of dress, of face, of gait, of manner, were written indelibly upon my memory” (15). In addition, in the novel *Bleak House*, Dickens introduces the first significant character of a detective in English literature, Inspector Bucket. Perhaps, the introduction of this figure mirrors Dickens himself as a proficient detective with an exceptional eye for details, famous for noticing the finest peculiarities in other people’s looks and character. It has to be stressed that, before reaching eminence as a fiction writer, Dickens had some achievements and much experience in journalistic and reportorial work, where he could make use of his extraordinary gift of scrutiny and accuracy to details.

Still, examining Dickens’s and Banks’s childhood memories, the reader will come to the conclusion that the latter’s infant recollections seem to be devoid of this clarity. It is particularly noticeable when Banks mentions a conversation between his mother and a health inspector: “while I am fairly sure I have remembered its essence accurately enough, turning it over in my mind again, I find myself less certain about some of the details” (Ishiguro 41). Banks’s blurry memory of the essence of the conversation, which is definitely the repulsive opium trade, emerges as a telling trope to British expansionism, namely, as Carey Mickalites stipulates, Bank’s unsound memory of the colonial opium trade “underscores his partial and hazy comprehension of imperial exploitation” (116). Brought up in the secure International Settlement perceived as “a site of English authority and colonial stability” (Mickalites 116), the protagonist develops a distorted image of imperial Englishness and, in addition, “a microcosm of global trade, uneven development, and exploitation [...] in Bank’s memory [...] remain bracketed off from both an ideal of Englishness and the forces of historical change, evident in his nostalgic attachment to the International Settlement” (Mickalites 116). Such an obscured image of the British Empire can be read as the articulation of the unspoken colonial history. It also hints at the Victorian society’s blind faith in its nation’s flawless morality, and British colonial expansionism regarded as the noble mission and godly obligation to eradicate the “savagery” of the so called “inferior races,” enlightening them with the “glow” of the Western civilization, as proposed in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The White Man’s Burden” (1899).

I contend that the elites inhabiting the protected zone of the International Settlement out of the reach of the war become a mirror reflection of the citizens of London, the imperial core. Their indifference to the Japanese aggression of China is evident during the extravagant gathering of Shanghai's elite in the Penthouse of the Palace Hotel. The sound of the far-off gunfire and the battle that overshadows the party become nothing more but a spectacular phenomenon or, as one of the guests tells Christopher: "the shells actually arc over us and land over across the creek. After dark, it's quite a sight. Rather like watching shooting stars" (Ishiguro 194). This quotation implicitly hints at Edward Said's statement that "[t]he Orient's cultural, political, and social history are considered mere responses to the West" (109). The West is privileged to rule, judge and survey the non-white world, which becomes a scene of the western hegemony – "The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator, the judge and jury, of every facet of Oriental behaviour" (Said 109). Following Said's politics of bipolarity, Irina Toma adds that "China is an infant in need of Western protection" (64), which foregrounds the issue of the binary opposition between the West and the East. The representatives of the West, in this case, the elites of the International Settlement, become the invisible judges of the colonial power dynamics of "the perfidious Chinese" (108), who, after all, are "not quite as human as we [the West] are" (Said 108).

In addition to this, the blindness to Japanese aggression in Ishiguro's novel seems to more generally reflect the myopic attitude to the realities of colonialism which characterized the Victorians. Sven Lindqvist comments on this as follows: "the men representing civilization out in the colonies were "invisible" not only in the sense that their guns killed at a distance, but also in that no one at home really knew what they were doing" (85). A parallel situation occurs in Ishiguro's novel where, as Carey Mickalites notices, "the chaos of a war that, like the commercially exploitative opium trade, takes place outside the reach of the international law" (118). In other words, the white man becomes invisible. Just as the International Settlement was literally divorced from the brutal reality of people dying outside its borders, so did the Victorian core's (London) marginalization of the British colonies evince itself in the profound detachment from the genocide happening therein. Such an attitude was evident in Dickens's fiction in which he ridiculed the vices of the British society and felt sorry for the fate of the aggrieved and the orphaned, but remained completely indifferent to the atrocities of the colonial imperialism, that is to say, those orphaned by British expansionism.

Another analogy to Dickensian fiction is noticeable in the story of Christopher's mother, Diana Banks, who is, on the one hand, a representative of colonial ideology, and, on the other, an ardent advocate of the anti-opium campaign, fully committed to her principles. Her character emerges as an unobvious parallel to Estella's mother, Molly, the character from Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

Diana's life is overshadowed by a sense of a mission to fight against a trade of opium widespread in Shanghai, which "had brought untold misery and degradation to a whole nation" (Ishiguro 36). Here, Ishiguro openly refers to the colonial imperialism of the British, who wanted to subordinate the trade in China. By delivering opium from India to China, the British contributed to getting the Chinese addicted to the drug, making them stupefied and unable to make any sensible decisions, thus exposed to easier annexation by the imperial powers. Ishiguro's depiction of the opium trade and the backdrop of Sino-Japanese war in the novel is the author's intention to articulate one telling, though obscured, issue: the Japanese invasion of China is the implicit consequence of colonial expansionism, which "stems from colonial exploitation and uneven economic development" (Mickalites 112). According to Brian Finney, the novel depicts "a vivid confrontation with the death and destruction produced by the commercialism and imperialism of the industrial nations prior to

the War, death that inevitably adds heavily to the number of children left orphaned" (26). The motif of weakening the underprivileged nations by the use of mind-numbing substances is further developed by Sven Lindqvist in *Terra Nullius* (2014), a story of colonial horror and genocide of the natives by the European powers in the nineteenth century. Lindqvist demonstrates that addiction, in this case alcohol, not violence, is an ultimate way to get rid of the indigenous inhabitants and create a no one's land, the land which can be easily conquered by the white: "Alcohol is just the latest ploy for achieving a terra nullius" (236).

Diana Banks's anti-opium campaign reflects a Victorian notion of repairing and enlightening the world. Yet, her endeavours are repressed by a warlord Wang Ku, who, once offended by Diana, kidnaps her with a view to taming her, "as he would a wild mare" (Ishiguro 179), compelling her to submissiveness and concubinage. Wang Ku "regularly whipped [Diana] in front of his dinner guests. Taming the white woman, he called it" (Ishiguro 181). It seems that this discriminatory practice was widespread not only in colonial contexts as evidenced in *Great Expectations*, where Dickens also explored the motif of taming a woman. Its hallmarks pervade Mr Jaggers's servant Molly, Estella's mother, who is described by Mr Wemmick as "a wild beast tamed" (Dickens 186). After being acquitted by Mr Jaggers's of a charge of murdering another woman, Molly becomes the lawyer's debased servant or a slave with a "face to bear a curious expression of suddenness and flutter" (Dickens 195). Mr Wemmick's comment that the taming process "depends on the original wildness of the beast" (Dickens 186) encourages us to extend the metaphor to the colonial reality of taming the "inferior" indigenous. The wildness of the indigenous inhabitants from colonial territories could be compared to that of an untamed animal, thus the punishment had to be harsher. Dickens's intention to underscore the mechanism of the violent process of intimidation of the weaker is reflected in Ishiguro's depiction of the mechanisms of colonization and then subversively reversed in his portrayal of the treatment Diana Banks received from Wang Ku. The main tool of subordination was violence and, as Lindqvist states, "people are seized with a kind of madness when they take to violence" (30).

The colonists perceived themselves as noble, philanthropic heroes sent to the uncivilized world of darkness with a view to bringing enlightenment to "primitive" races. The sense of white race superiority in comparison to other races is manifested in the above mentioned poem by Rudyard Kipling's, where the author regarded the colonial mission as "an ethical imperative" (Lindqvist 77). In his work and life, Kipling extolled the British Empire, which, in his presumption, was "an island of security in a chaotic world" able to: "maintain stability, order, and peace amongst the heathen, to relieve famine, provide medical assistance, to abolish slavery, to construct the physical and the psychological groundwork for 'civilization'" (Cody). In *When We Were Orphans*, Diana Banks seems to follow Kipling's manifesto and burdens herself with it, that is to say, "considers the building of the British Empire as an essentially civilizing activity" (Webley 189). Although ashamed of her husband's complicity with the company engagement with the opium trade, and driven by Christian values, Diana has to face the unpleasant truth that her family's financial status is owned "to such ungodly wealth" (Ishiguro 37). She is contra-volitionally drawn to the sinful practices of the company, part of the infamous British expansionism. Alyn Webley accentuates the fact that Diana becomes "part of the machinery of empire [...] a machinery dedicated to the continuance of European rule, the exploitation of natural resources, and the spread of European cultures as an accompaniment to the continued subordination of native peoples" (189).

Lindqvist mentions a book *In the Shade of the Palms* (1907) by a Swedish missionary Edward Wilhelm Sjöblom, in which the author describes types of corporal punishments administered by Europeans to the indigenous people in Congo. According to Sjöblom, during colonization, the

white assented in one matter: “only the whip can civilize the black” (qtd in Lindqvist 30). In this light Ishiguro subverts the colonial practices by showing a white woman as a victim of the same process implemented in other parts of the world by the Europeans. Wang Ku’s “taming process” of Diana Banks is a reversal of dehumanizing colonial practices that deprived the natives of their identity, dignity and hope, leaving nothing but despair. In *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro illustrates another reason for trauma, the fall of Victorian values, and the failure of a woman with unusual aspirations and expectations, who ends up in a mental hospital. Ishiguro shows Diana Banks, a model of Victorian values of morality, fall to a nefarious fate of becoming a victim of repetitive sexual and physical abuse. She is the one who gets punished because “her sense of religious mission supplements the establishment and preservation of colonial power” (Webley 189). With this manoeuvre Ishiguro openly condemns the colonial ideology aimed at civilizing and Christianizing the non-European world, and, by subverting, ridicules and annuls Kipling’s manifesto of “The White Man’s Burden” and the so-called Victorian “morality.”

The intertwining stories of Christopher Banks, his mother Diana, Sarah Hemmings, and her husband Sir Cecil Medhurst have one thing in common – all the characters suffer utter defeat in their pursuits to fight evil. Through these characters’ actions, Ishiguro, an outsider in the English world, attacks and ridicules the Victorian society and the so-called “eminent statesmen” described in the novel as “greedy and self-seeking, lacking any idealism or sense of public duty” (8). In addition, the author expresses his strong disapproval of the actions of the opium-based European trading companies regarded as “un-Christian and un-British” (Ishiguro 37) or the narcissistic European ideals focused on redeeming the world, especially in the colonial times. The failure of the missions presented in the novel, especially Banks’s and his mother’s, seems an intentional measure Ishiguro employed as a metaphor of lampooning the notion of Kipling’s manifesto so deeply ingrained in colonizers’ minds.

Ishiguro’s reference to *Great Expectations*, especially the theme of a mysterious benefactor is another significant, though not explicit, link with Dickens. Abel Magwitch, condemned by the Victorian society and forcedly deported to a penal colony in Australia, is presented as the one orphaned and forgotten by his mother-country. Bracketed off from the imperial core and used in the exploitative labour in the colonial realities, Magwitch evokes the image of the faceless Chinese people in Ishiguro’s novel, abused and disobliged by the British Empire in its global expansionism. These forsaken, nameless “huddled figures” on the street, victims of British and then Japanese colonial imperialism, bear close affinity to the image of sick Magwitch kept in prison after returning to England – the social outcast, abandoned and sentenced to death by the Empire he helped to build.

At the end of Ishiguro’s novel, Christopher Banks finds out that Wang Ku, who had kidnapped his mother, was his benefactor: “Your schooling. Your place in London society. The fact that you made of yourself what you have. You owe it to Wang Ku” (Ishiguro 181). In Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Pip’s education and gentility is similarly fully credited to the ex-convict Abel Magwitch. Pip’s expectations for the better future seem suddenly thwarted just like Christopher’s ambition to find his parents and eradicate evil from the world. Nonetheless, when comparing the relationships Christopher-Wang Ku and Pip-Magwitch, one can conclude that it is interpreted differently by Ishiguro. Banks’s secret benefactor is a villain, an embodiment of lascivious inhuman desires, whereas Abel Magwitch, paradoxically presented at the beginning of Dickens’s novel as a hardened criminal, turns out to be a pattern of honour, gentility and benevolence. Pip and Magwitch’s first encounter is filled with a feeling of dread, yet, at the end of the novel, a strong emotional bond develops between them. In the case of Christopher, no such relationship will ever be possible with his benefactor, Wan Ku, a man who once became a source of his childhood trauma.

It has to be noted that Magwitch made a fortune through hard work, thus in fact acting in accordance with the Victorian values of multiplying the capital.

It is a complete opposite to Wang Ku, for whom seizing opium shipments was a source of income. It seems paradoxical, if not hypocritical, that in Dickens’s novel the Victorians got rid of Magwitch and regarded him as the undesirable citizen, whose behaviour was contrary to the norms of accepted morality, whereas their own treatment of the poor and the non-whites in overseas territories was far from appropriate. The same British hypocrisy seems to be reflected in Ishiguro’s novel when Diana’s opposition to her own people’s involvement in the opium trade reveals that they are actually not a bit morally better than their Chinese accomplice Wang Ku.

However, one question arises: why did Ishiguro decide to relate to *Great Expectations* and evoke the figures of a secret benefactor and an ex-convict? It seems to be a reference to the colonial era, when in 1788–1840 convicts from England were deported to the penal colony in Australia (Pajewski 307), the plight of Abel Magwitch in Dickens’s novel. Another reason may be the wish to depict the motif of a boy stepping into the world of the privileged society. Both Pip from Dickens’s novel and Christopher Banks from Ishiguro’s are presented as orphaned beneficiaries of British colonial aggression in Victorian era. Pip’s education and prosperous life as a gentleman were at the cost of Magwitch’s exploitative labour in the Australian penal colony, while Christopher Banks’s advancement was possible due to his mother enslavement and the money from the opium trade. Brian Finney comments:

protected childhood was bought at the price of his mother’s servitude to a Chinese warlord, so the protected and privileged existence of the wealthy community living in the International Settlement was bought at the cost of widespread opium addiction and poverty among the Chinese population.

The character of Sarah Hemmings in the analysed novel is another feature that alludes to *Great Expectations* in Ishiguro’s novel. She is presented as a manipulative “snob of a new resort” moving in the upper-class circles, who does not “consider a person worthy of respect unless he or she possessed a celebrated name” (Ishiguro 12). Such a characteristic makes Sarah a reflection of Dickens’s Estella from *Great Expectations*. Also, the initial relationship between Banks and Sarah appears to be reminiscent of the one from Dickens’s novel: both Christopher and Pip seem too common to live up to Sarah’s and Estella’s expectations. Banks’s lack of high social rank and communing among eminent individuals make him too average to be noticed by Sarah. Their first encounter offers a parallel to an episode when Estella criticizes Pip for being “a common labouring boy” (Dickens 57).

Indeed, I sometimes got the impression she was unable properly to breathe anything other than the air surrounding the most distinguished persons. For a time she became linked with Henry Quinn, the barrister, only to distance herself again after his failure in the Charles Browning case. Then there came rumours of her growing friendship with James Beacon, who at that time was a rising young government minister. In any case, by this point, it had become abundantly clear to me what the silver-haired man had meant when he had declared there was little point in a “chap like me” pursuing Miss Hemmings. (Ishiguro 12)

Banks’s inferiority complex as well as his encroaching on the snobbish community make him similar to Pip from *Great Expectations*. After leaving the world of childhood innocence, both characters are presented with new expectations, creating their own myths which are bound to fail – Christopher’s ambition to become an extolled detective to combat evil can be compared with Pip’s strong yearning to become a gentleman. To achieve their goals, these protagonists dwell in the worlds of delusions, rejecting people who really care for them, Pip rejects Joe and Bidly,

Christopher rejects Jennifer. Yet, Sarah’s restraint and coldness towards Christopher is only a mask since, unlike Estella, who kept Pip in the world he did not belong to, Miss Hemmings becomes for Banks the only chance to renounce his obsessive pursuit of the mission and leave his past behind. She persuades Christopher to escape with her to another country:

I suppose I was surprised when I heard her utter these words; but what I remember now, overwhelming anything else, was an almost tangible sense of relief. Indeed, for a second or two I experienced the sort of giddiness one might when coming suddenly out into the light and fresh air after being trapped a long time in some dark chamber. It was as though this suggestion of hers – which for all I knew she had thrown out on an impulse – carried with it a huge authority, something that brought me a kind of dispensation I had never dared hope for. (126)

Christopher Banks is unable to free himself from his trauma, especially from the image of a “dark chamber” that stands for the prison of his subconscious. At the end of the novel, the protagonist cannot extricate himself from the nagging past and seems to remain “a perpetual exile and orphan who has no home except childhood memories” (Ringrose 182). Moreover, having been brought up in Shanghai, Christopher seems to feel like a recluse when he is forced out of the city to settle in England where he feels he is “not enough Englishman” to be part of London’s high society Sarah is so well acquainted with (Ishiguro 44). The disappearance of Christopher’s parents is also an aftermath of his disturbed sense of national identity and lack of well connectedness. Hence, Christopher Banks’s mission to find his parents acquires a more profound meaning – he searches for his lost identity after moving to England as an orphaned child, which is implicitly shown in the novel as the legacy of British colonial imperialism.

The motifs of orphanhood, childhood trauma and the exigency of eradicating evil employed by Ishiguro in *When We Were Orphans* emerge as the themes not only explored by Charles Dickens in his fiction, but also present in his biography. However, in his criticism of social constraints, Dickens was definitely blind to those “orphaned” in the process of British colonial imperialism, the outcomes of which are articulated and problematized in Ishiguro’s novel. Orphans of global imperialism suffering outside the borders of London or the International Settlement are real, and Ishiguro highlights the “problem of global perception: the moment at which the laboring populations of global capital become undeniably visible to the so-called international community” (Bain 242–245). The ignorant elites inhabiting the International Settlement in the novel seem to have become a compelling trope. Both Victorian Londoners and Dickens, scrupulously avoided commenting on colonial topics, focusing only on the problems at home. It seems that in *When We Were Orphans* Ishiguro alludes especially to Dickens’s *Great Expectations* to show the defeated hopes of an orphaned boy who, living in the safe bubble of his high expectations, collides with the harsh realities. However, Ishiguro rejects the world of delusion Christopher and the Victorian society lived in, particularly evidenced in their indifference to colonial barbarism, and implicitly exposes the truth about the imperial power dynamics in China.

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