Revisiting the Memories of War in Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills

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Abstract: *A Pale View of Hills* represents Kazuo Ishiguro's literary exploration of his memories of postwar Japan. This analysis delves into the nature and interpretations of these recollections. The protagonist, Etsuko, a Japanese widow residing in the English countryside, offers insights into the social and psychological aspects of postwar Japan. Many characters in the novel avoid discussing the past, leading to gaps and omissions in Etsuko's memories. Despite this, her recollections serve as a means for Etsuko to come to terms with her history. Additionally, the concept of history is employed to examine the novel's importance to Ishiguro, showcasing his endeavor to revive fading memories of his homeland.

Keywords: memory, history, nostalgia, trauma.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's initial significant literary creation, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), presents a narrative that possesses both retrospective and analytical qualities. This novel, which secured him the Winfred Holtby Prize from the Royal Society of Literature in 1983, showcases a retrospective nature as it follows an elderly widow's exploration of her past in post-war Nagasaki. Concurrently, it also embodies an analytical aspect, as this exploration into the past serves as a self-reflective endeavour wherein the widow endeavours to comprehend her present circumstances. Ishiguro adeptly emphasizes the interplay between past and present through his skillful narrative approach. This is evident in his seamless integration of episodes from different time periods, the fluid movement of the narrative voice between these moments, and the shifting settings between post-war Nagasaki and a more contemporary England, likely in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Through this technique, Ishiguro masterfully weaves together the threads of "now" and "then" and "here" and "there" forming a cohesive narrative tapestry.

Memory plays a pivotal role in human experience, functioning as a dual process that connects the past and present. When memory operates in equilibrium, it contributes to a balanced mental state. Memory isn't constrained by forgetting facts or revisiting them on demand, making it a enigmatic psychological journey in human existence. Ishiguro's novels are deeply engaged with memories, exploring their capacity to diverge and distort, to fade and linger. The protagonists in Ishiguro's initial series of novels grapple with personal losses amid historical events: loved ones lost to atomic bombings in Japan, their suffering, unfulfilled love stories, regrettable decisions, and lives built on aspirations. By recounting these sorrows and the unfulfilled hopes tied to them, Ishiguro offers readers an avenue to empathize with his characters' circumstances. These characters yearn for clarity and redemption. Ishiguro once elucidated to a probe that the emotional force of his novels and the characters are set within "an internal world it's an emotional logic that is being played out" (24). Ishiguro's fiction is remarkable at once for its technical and formal execution as his writings are highlighted by an aesthetic integrity, and a touch of modernity.

In "A Pale View of Hills," Etsuko, a humble Japanese widow residing in the English countryside, recounts two stories. The initial tale revolves around Etsuko's interaction with Sachiko, a fellow war widow of similar age, hailing from a once-affluent family now facing financial struggles. This segment occurs during the summer, set in the Nagasaki of the late 1940s or early 1950s when "there was fighting in Korea" and "American soldiers were as numerous as ever" (Ishiguro 11). The second narrative unfolds in England, where Etsuko, now a widow herself, reflects on the distressing suicide of her older daughter, Keiko. Keiko tragically took her own life by hanging in her Manchester room. Etsuko's life is marked by a series of losses, starting with her British husband's passing before her daughter's tragic demise. Amid Etsuko's recollections, her younger daughter Niki pays her a visit. The second tale concludes with Niki's departure for London.

Both stories revolve around Etsuko's life, where her memories serve as the only link to her past experiences. Although Etsuko begins her narration by expressing her "selfish desire not to be reminded of the past" (Ishiguro 9), she turns out to be an active and an unreliable narrator. Etsuko's memories are meticulously chosen to shape our perception of her current circumstances, yet moments of her past that are considered taboo or embarrassing exhibit gaps and omissions in her recollections. The Sachiko-Mariko episode, for instance, concludes suddenly without a sense of resolution. The fate of the widowed mother and her enigmatic daughter, including whether they eventually relocate to the United States, remains untold. Even Etsuko's own life is shrouded in undisclosed mysteries. Details such as the reason for Jiro's absence, whether he divorced or passed away, and how Etsuko came to be in England with a British husband, remain unknown. Numerous other unanswered questions persist, inviting thoughtful conjecture.

At one point during her recollection, Etsuko blames the passage of time for these gaps and omissions in her declaration of these memories: "It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today" (Ishiguro 41). She justifies the circumstances of recollection to explain away the involute and fallible feature of memory: "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one

remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here" (Ishiguro 156). Etsuko acknowledges the haziness and constraints of memory, and while that holds validity, her disinclination to revisit specific aspects of her history is equally significant. She seems to avoid delving into certain undisclosed facets, deeming them unrelated to the present. Whenever issues related to Jiro and Keiko arise, she promptly dismisses them, deeming them as distant relics that don't warrant contemplation.

The novel's title hints at the pallor, not so much related to the hills, but to one's perspective. The past remains ever-present, yet Etsuko's deliberate avoidance of certain memories impedes her capacity to construct a more lucid, precise representation of her life.

Critics have noted the connection between the Sachiko-Mariko incident and Etsuko's personal narrative. In Cynthia F. Wong's analysis of *A Pale View of Hills*, she highlights Etsuko's preoccupation with her enigmatic bond with Sachiko, whose daughter's actions seem to foreshadow the eventual suicide of Etsuko's own daughter years later. Ishiguro, in an interview conducted by Gregory Mason, makes this point absolutely clear when asked whether Etsuko and Sachiko "were not one and the same person":

What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. (Mason 337)

II. FINDINGS

Etsuko recalls her brief encounter with Sachiko and Mariko in postwar Nagasaki. This recollection is prompted not just by Niki's visit, but also by her need to justify Keiko's suicide. She delves into her past not with nostalgia, but with remorse. The Sachiko-Mariko incident becomes a mirror for her own life, aiding her in understanding her role in Keiko's fate. This journey into her past is not mere reminiscence; it's a psychological expedition to quell her guilt and sorrow for Keiko's death. The journey culminates in a moment of relief and reconciliation when Niki reminds her, "You did everything you could for her. You're the last person anyone could blame" (Ishiguro 176).

At its core, *A Pale View of Hills* can be interpreted as Ishiguro's endeavour to reconcile his sentimental recollections of his upbringing in Nagasaki. His initial creations distinctly reflect his yearning for a Japan entrenched in historical shifts and socio-political transformations that unfolded in the aftermath of the war— this Japan, as he recollects, is gradually diminishing from his memory.

The extent of devastation in Nagasaki, encompassing both the physical and psychological realms, defies adequate description. Survivors are left struggling to articulate the indescribable horror of their experiences and express a strong desire to erase the memories of the bombing. "We were all shocked, those of us who were left," says Etsuko's father-in-

law, Ogata-San, who has come to visit his son and daughter-in-law that particular summer. It is Ogata-San who urges Etsuko to "forget these things" (Ishiguro 58). Even Mrs. Fujiwara, who has lost her husband and several children during the bombing, reminds Etsuko that the tragedy is "all in the past now" (Ishiguro 76).

III. DISCUSSION

People respond to the horrors with an apparent lack of awareness and an all-encompassing silence. For numerous surviving women, the experience of loss, particularly of husbands and sons, became an unfortunate reality. The mosquito-ridden empty area surrounding Jiro and Etsuko's apartment functions as a potent symbolic setting, mirroring the collective mindset of war-ravaged Nagasaki. This space represents not only loss and desolation but also uncertainty, symbolizing the deeply shattered condition of post-war circumstances. It stands as a testament, a tangible memory, and a stark reminder of the disastrous trajectory of human history.

The vacant area, intricately linked with Etsuko's postwar Nagasaki memories, serves as Ishiguro's contrasting representation of historical progression. Yet, within Etsuko's recollections, the rejuvenated Nagasaki is also a city of optimism. When Mrs. Fujiwara, who has endured indescribable loss, encourages Etsuko to "move past all things" (Ishiguro 76), she embodies a forward-looking attitude amidst the sorrow and desolation of postwar Nagasaki. Etsuko mirrors this reconstructive spirit in her memory of an outing with Sachiko and Mariko to Inasa. The blend of clamor and restoration in this memory remains remarkably lucid and harmonious to Etsuko, potentially echoing Ishiguro's fading impression of his childhood city. It's important to note that amid the clamor of commerce and industry, there are discussions concerning the nation's social and political direction. These discussions reach a pivotal moment in the novel with the clash between Ogata-San, a fervent advocate of Japanese militarism and social feudalism, and Shigeo Matsuda, a former student who has penned an article denouncing his mentors for endorsing the fascist ideology responsible for the country's gravest historical catastrophe.

The bombing inevitably turned Nagasaki into a poignant memorial. In honour of those lost to the atomic bomb, a statue was erected within the city's Peace Park. Ishiguro's criticism of human innocence and the irrationality of war is evident in the novel's portrayal of this monument. Etsuko's recollection highlights that the statue appeared more akin to a Greek deity rather than something tied to the bombing and the grievous days that ensued. Etsuko's memories bring the past to life and also manifest it materially. During her five-day visit to her mother, Niki dedicates time to perusing her father's newspaper articles, books, and letters. This seems like an attempt to reconstruct the time and context of her mother's memories—the postwar Japan observed and depicted by her father. This endeavor serves as her way of connecting her present reality to the Japanese past, regardless of its potential inaccuracies. Niki's act of reading her father's articles regarding postwar Japan also reflects her endeavour to comprehend her mother and her mother's history. The

photograph's subject, the harbour, effectively triggers recollections of the postwar reconstruction period in Nagasaki. The history and imagery of Japan vividly come to life through this photographic portrayal.

IV. CONCLUSION

The author centered the novel on the protagonist's emotional upheaval, allowing the characters to revisit instances of suffering, shame, hardship, and occasional joy throughout the novel. In essence, Ishiguro harnessed the journey of memory as a potent force within the characters, liberating them by oscillating between past and present, unveiling their experiences. This utilization of memory's journey not only captivates the readers but also shapes the novel's ambiance. The author, adeptly, guides the protagonist in meticulously, sequentially, and purposefully recollecting her experiences, adroitly bridging gaps between the past and present. This skillful approach enables the protagonist to reconcile with her former self and previously suppressed memories, ultimately finding solace.

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