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Trauma and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels- A Study

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Abstract

Ishiguro labels himself an international writer to substantiate his point that he is the writer of universal themes that applies to people of different cultural and historical background of different generations. He was accredited with the noble prize in literature for the year 2017 for his novels of "great emotional forces" (The Swedish Academy). His novels have the focus on the interior rather than the external factors of humanity. He always tries to go for something interior following the characters' thoughts, memories, and emotions. Memory, trauma and pain are the major themes of his novels. He is interested in memory not from the perspective of neurology or psychology but how memory can be used as a tool to tell past stories about individuals. The protagonists recall their past events through hindsight so as to come to terms with their repressed memories and also as a way to vindicate their efforts. Hence, this article aims to prove how the personal and national memories are discussed from different perspectives in his novels and also how the life of the protagonists are affected by the traumas.

Key Words:

Trauma, memory, individual and collective memory

Trauma and Memory

According to the earlier editions of the Oxford English Dictionary trauma is defined as 'a wound, or external bodily injury in general'. Trauma was the term at first associated with medical pathology in the seventeenth century. All the associated terms of trauma such as 'traumatic', 'traumatism', or 'traumatize' were

used in the sense of 'physical piercing or wounding'. Only one citation that deviated from the above was recorded in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1895. It referred trauma to emphasis 'psychical trauma, a morbid nervous condition'. So the transition of the concept from the physical wound to the psychical wound was taken place in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Railway accidents were the first cause to bring the transition in the concept of trauma. The shocks from the railway accidents were considered as a beginning point to realise the impact of physical jars to nervous composition, which they called a 'railway spine'. It was soon recognised that the victims of the accidents soon got rid of their physical injuries completely but they suffered severe 'mental distress'. Hence, the term 'traumatic neurosis' and 'nervous shock' were coined in the 1860s.

The historian Ian Hacking called the 'disease of memory-mysterious conditions' are in fact independent in nature. They did not have any relation to the physical condition of the victim. So the whole issue was investigated seriously from the new perspectives. They investigated hysteria, double or multiple personality, hypnotic, amnesia and other trances under the above stated condition of the victims.

Since psychology in the nineteenth century was considered not as a respectable discipline, the doctors, also called 'mad doctors and alienists', could gain attention only if they investigate the mental states of the patients with reference to their biological status. Mental illness was often considered a physical weakness, often a result of hereditary weakness. Madness was as sign of decline where man comes down to primitive and animalistic state in the evolutionary scale. So the new psychological approach gave more independence to the 'psychical apparatus' (Waugh 500).

The essay "on the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena" was published in 1893 by two young psychologists from Austria, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer. It was challenge to the traditional belief that the hysteria was the result of 'mental degeneration'. Freud's writings in 1890s were considered important phenomena for tracing how 'trauma' acquired new psychical meanings and understanding over a time. The essay outline that any strange symptoms of the hysterical trances, such as violent mood swings, amnesia, partial paralysis of the body were due to the traumatic effects of the accidents. So in the 'traumatic neurosis', the reason for the illness was not because of their physical injury but due to the shock and the psychical trauma. They suggest that a psychical trauma enters the psyche which cannot be handled by usual mental

processing because it slips out of the conscious memory and at the same moment never get erased from the mind completely. It presents in the mind like "an intruder or a ghost" (Waugh 500). Hence, physical symptoms were the only way to indicate such traumatic memories that were hidden in the psyche. They found cure for this which they call "talking cure" (Waugh 501). The individuals' hysterical symptoms can be erased when the victims articulate and acknowledge the memory of events openly.

Although Freud deviated from Breuer and reduced everything to sexuality, he returned to the subject of traumatic neurosis after 1890s on the account of World War I. The military and medical authorities faced a new form of psychical wounding caused by "shell-shock" (Waugh 502). They began to recognise the psychological damage caused by the trance conditions. They suffered memory gaps, flash backs, nightmares, and hallucinations endlessly. The concept of 'repetition compulsion' was introduced to block the memory concerning the serious injuries. The subjects were insisted to replay their anxieties over and over again in order to confront with the traumatic events.

The concept of memory as a literary themes plays a vital role. It emerges from the historical past as well as formed by the socio, political, cultural and religious events of the individuals' life of the literary characters. It is employed as a means to instil the feeling of nostalgia, shame, repression in a text, especially during the wake of socio-political upheavals due to the world wars. Memory is used a method of constructing individual, social and cultural identity. Ishiguro's novels are known for his themes of memory and trauma. He asserts how unique his novels are with the theme of memories which are coloured by the events of the protagonists' lives. Hence, the whole universe of the novels are framed by the protagonists' thoughts and traumatic memories.

Ishiguro's protagonists are deeply traumatised by their past painful events. Hence the memory associated with their trauma remains haunting them throughout their lives. They use their self-narratives as a "kind of consolation or therapy" (vorda and Herzinger 151) in order to come to terms with their own traumatic memories. For instance, in *A Pale View of Hills* the protagonist Etsuko, a Japanese woman in her 60s, was haunted by the memory of her daughter's suicide. Masuji Ono, a renowned painter in *An Artist of the Floating World* carry on within him shameful memories that his propaganda paintings have brought on him and others in the society. Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day* the protagonist Stevens the English butler who lives by his

professional ethics has to carry on his "uncomfortable memories" (Matthews 119) of his service to his lordship who was misguided and tricked by the ideals of the Nazi regime. He was tormented by the thought that his life has been wasted on misguided values. He finds difficult acknowledging his service although he still believes that his lordship was gentleman of great stature.

In his initial novels, the narrators operate in a different way, they complain about the unreliability of their memories which at times fail them by not rendering the true account of the events. The open confession of the flawed memories and their efforts to disclosing the gaps are evident in all his narrators. For instance, Etsuko asserts: "Memory, I realise, can be unreliable thing, often coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers" (*A Pale View of Hills* 156). These first person, unreliable narrators do not wish to bring their repressed memories to the surface or to their consciousness due to fear of guilt, shame, and pain.

The protagonists of his later novels function in a unique way as W. Wolfgang describes a process of 'narrativity knowledge' where in the process of narrating their past events they reorder their understanding. They never want their memories to get faded away. Unlike his previous novels where the protagonists openly confesses their flawed memories and then they work on to disclose the gaps. For instance the protagonists Banks, Kathy, and Klara operate in a different ways. They do not wish their memories to fade away since it gives consolation and meaning to their existence. Kathy in *Never Let Me Go* pointed out: "Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But, I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading" (280).

Ishiguro explores the texture of memories through different dimensions in each novels. For instance, it is a different kind of exploration in *The Buried Giant* where the emotion of people is merged with the historical past. People in the novel suffer from a selective memory loss because of the magical mist has settled on their countryside and left a strange blankness. The mists brought peace in the land because the Saxon and Britons could not remember their fierce duals. An elderly couple Axl and Beatrice try to remember their shared memories which are long lost in the mists. At the same time, they fear whether their love could survive once the dark passages of their life are retrieved at once. The mists clears at the end, by slaying the Querig who is responsible for creating the mists. Not only are the private memories retrieved but also the national memories.

The Buried Giant considers the matters of memory, trauma and forgetting on national scale. It is always good to live in the moment and forget the traumatic memories to restore peace in the world. The novels highlights how Ishiguro has applied the individual's dilemma about what to remember and forget to nation's dilemma over when to forget and when to remember the past memories.

While flashback and disorientated memories characterize his novels except *The Unconsoled* which depicts the character not of someone like other narrators, who are obviously "looking back and ordering his experience, but of someone in the midst of chaos, being pulled in different directions at once, and not realizing why" (Ishiguro and Mason 23). Barry Lewis rightly pointed out that Ishiguro's novels are engaged with uncertain memories and are "subject to erasure and displacement" (Lewis 101). He experiments with memory in different dimension in *The Buried Giant*. It is a different kind of exploration where the emotions are merged with the historical past as a collective memory. People in the novel suffer from selective memory loss. They struggle to hard to remember their past memories which are important to their life but are erased by the mysterious mist that descend the country. The novel is about how better things can be when it is left hidden than retrieved.

The subjective nature of memory and traumatic events experienced by the characters create, to put it in Roman Ingarden's term, a 'particular world' which allows the readers to actively participate in the protagonists'' retrospection. While the sufferings and pain from their traumas haunts his narrators, Ishiguro expects his readers to participate in the "painful reconstruction of their failed lives" (Wong 26). While employing the broader themes of memory and trauma, his writings allow readers to use their own personal experiences to relate to the characters and their situations. His writings therefore trigger the memories of readers from all cultural background. (Teo 9). The characters, by the tools of memory and pain, achieve catharsis at the end and thereby come to terms with their past painful memories. By using the "language of self-deception and self-protection" (Mason 337) and unreliable narration, they try to get away from their traumatic past memories to seek consolation.

Yugin Teo in his *Kazuo Ishiguro and Memory* insists that melancholia, as suggested by Freud, is distinguished by a "profound painful dejection" (Teo 8) where the self-criticism of one's past is evident. The protagonist Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, and Ryder return to their past is a melancholic type of return. It is done with

the knowledge that one cannot fix the pain inflected in the past but at least it would provide a kind of consolation for what has been already permanently lost in life (Teo 8). Through the universal themes of memory and trauma, Ishiguro novels have a didactic function which give the characters a momentum to go on with their life with a renewed spirit.

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