

Between Memory and Trauma: The Search for Self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

A Pale View of Hills (1982), the debut novel of Kazuo Ishiguro is a narrative of the fragmented memories of a middle-aged Japanese woman, Etsuko, who migrated from Japan to England after she separated from her first husband. Ishiguro, deftly employs unreliability in narration to explore the complex interplay of memory and trauma in shaping the battered psyche of modern man who lives in a multicultural environment through the character of Etsuko. Etsuko's life, in the novel, is repeatedly overshadowed by trauma. Her visions of her past and memories are replete with delusions and sadness which consequently makes Etsuko deceive herself to construct a truth which is only true for her. Her search for self in the novel unfolds her failures and failed vision of life. The present paper is an attempt to examine how memory and the disruptive impact of traumatic experience affect our perceptions and interpretation of reality.

Keywords: Deceive; Memory; Nagasaki; Trauma; Unreliability.

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, *A Pale View* 156)

A Pale View of Hills (1982), the debut novel of Kazuo Ishiguro is a narrative of the fragmented memories of a middle-aged Japanese woman, Etsuko, who migrated from Japan to England. Through the unreliable narrator Etsuko, Ishiguro explores the complex interplay of memory and trauma in shaping the battered psyche of modern man who lives in a multicultural environment. Etsuko's narration of her past of a particular summer in post-war Nagasaki, associated with her friendship with Sachiko and Sachiko's daughter, Mariko, and her father-in-law, Ogata-san, reveals

how memory and the disruptive impact of traumatic experience affect our perceptions and interpretation of reality.

Memory as a theme dominates much of Ishiguro's work throughout his writing career. In an interview, Ishiguro has said, "I've always been interested in memory, because it's the filter through which we read our past. It's always tinted with self-deception, guilt, pride, nostalgia whatever. I find my memory endlessly fascinating, not so much from neurological or philosophical viewpoint, but as this tool by which people tell themselves things about who they've become" (Ishiguro, Author Q&A). In Ishiguro's novels, "the theme of memory is often linked with characters who have had something gone wrong in their lives, and are compelled for various reasons to revisit the past in an attempt to right this wrong" (Teo 7). The return is melancholic bearing in mind that a wound, once inflicted, cannot be fixed or healed. For a period of time, it might become oblivion but certain events in one's life might trigger the trauma and resurface it all over again. "The purpose of the return is to serve as a kind of emotional consolation" (Teo 8) for what is lost, and with it, the acceptance of loss begins.

The story of the novel unravels with the visit of Etsuko's second daughter, Niki, who came to see how her mother is doing after Keiko, Etsuko's first daughter's suicide. Etsuko, a woman who has double heritage and a hybrid culture, suffer from a dilemma which makes her life vacillate. The predicament of Etsuko leaves her totally unredeemed and degenerated which in turn deprives her of her connection with her own past. Consequently, Etsuko's memories are heavily tainted with her own delusion. She remembers her past while trying to forget and the recollection of this particular past indicates the apparent unreliability in her narration, for there are gaps and limitations in her memory and the fact of forgetting instances from the time. Her memory deceives her of her own identity, evident by her friendship with Sachiko. And the unreliability comes from the traumatized past that Etsuko has experienced; the memories she represses becomes ironically alive in fragments, of a war-ravaged Nagasaki, the aftermath of atomic bombing in which she lost her family. Consequently, Etsuko was living in a delusional happiness with her first husband, Jiro. Etsuko's traumatic experiences enable her to uncover her latent mental landscape by teasing out her fantasies, fears and desires. Her memories are accounted deceptive due to which her reluctance in remembering makes her discover the dissolution of her own identity. Etsuko remained delusional and hallucinated by the visions replete with sadness and prove to be painful. In a conversation with Ogata-san, Etsuko was reminded by him how much she used to love playing violin that sometimes she relent-

lessly played the entire night when she lived with them after the war, waking up the whole house. In the recollection of this memory, Etsuko tries to give justification of her action, but she could not as it remains a void in her memory. There is a palpable emptiness and inefficacy in her attempt to play the violin again as her traumatic past segregates her past and present: "a great shame, Etsuko. And you were so devoted. I remember when you used to play in the dead of night and wake up the house" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 57). This apparent madness and the void in her memories are nothing but the ramifications of the war, which destroyed her city and her family. This unbearable loss was too much for her to decipher as a result of which she deceived herself of the truth that she did not know how much she loved playing violin.

The word trauma literally means physical injury or wound; however, the meaning has been variously defined from different perspectives in the recent years. It has now come to signify the wounds inflicted upon the psychological or mental wellbeing of an individual. Trauma can be understood as an interference to the normal cognitive function of human beings, thereby producing a series of interrupted identities instead of a singular identity. The interruptions in the normal functioning of the brain are due to varied reasons - emotional loss, extreme shock, blunt violence, brutal experience etc. Trauma can also be looked from a collective perspective which links to the intergenerational, generational conflict or collective trauma. Therefore, an individual's trauma is a person's suffering, a disruption to the psychic stature of the human mind on a personal level and it somehow connects to a broader experience of trauma which is shared and suffered collectively by a community; there is also a constant dialoguing between these two forms of trauma. Trauma as a theory gained significance in the 1990s after scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Anne Whitehead propounded works that visualized the theory in its full-fledged form. *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), written by Freud and Breuer, is often considered to be pivotal in conceptualizing the ideas of trauma. According to the book, hysteria is caused by traumatic experiences which have been repressed and forgotten because of their painful nature and remains completely ignorant in the unconscious. The repressed memories of the past traumas are reactivated by intrusion which is called "foreign bodies" in the psyche, after which there comes the suffering by neurosis, which ultimately leads to hysteria. "Foreign bodies" as defined by Greg Forter is: "Heterogenous memorial kernals that threaten to unleash unpleasurable affect if the mind's associations approach them too closely" (Forter 262).

Trauma and memory constantly converge with each other, which is possibly due to the essential similarity between their subjects. But not all memory is traumatic but trauma is generally described as a kind of memory, which is drawn closer to the nature of an injury (Traverso and Broderick 5). Therefore, chiefly perceived as a damage, traumatic memory is often described “as a wound: a painful mark of the past that haunts and overwhelms the present” (Traverso and Broderick 5). Cathy Caruth have also pointed out a relatively similar idea of trauma as an overwhelming experience of an event which is quite sudden or catastrophic, and the response that take place are often delayed, which is the latency period between the event and its effect, marked by “uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 11). Trauma is understood only after a period of time which is between the witnessing of a trauma and the reoccurrence of the same trauma later, in doing so delays the effect and the meaning of the past. The paradoxical face of trauma when encountered with truth always brings a certain inhibition in the form of repression: “in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth, “Introduction” 5).

The latency time period between the occurrence of the actual traumatic event and the reoccurrence of the same feeling later could vary from a day or years. Resurfacing of the memories could be triggered by anything, like an observation, an object, a feeling or a perception – “since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (Caruth, “Introduction” 7) - which leads to myriads of links to the repressed memories unconsciously embedded in the psyche rendering it traumatic.

In her article, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”, Michelle Balaev highlighted that, trauma is unrepresentable because in remembering the experience and events, the past is always vague and thus impeding our knowledge and representation. Therefore, the memories are incoherent and deceptive, as a result of which there is an improper integration of the moments and false linking of the memories. In other words, the dots are never connected. On the other hand, there is no apparent device to measure suffering as human suffering remains unrepresentable. This is because of the fact that traumatic experience silences a part of our lives which becomes repressed in our subconscious, even though there is an eerie tendency to resurface and haunt our present lives. This experience is best defined by Cathy Caruth, when she says that, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in

the way its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4).

In the novel, it is often subtly described how the city of Nagasaki and Etsuko, were recuperating and recollecting from the repercussions of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In Etsuko's recollection, Nagasaki was a few years after the bombing of the two cities. The effect of the bombing on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was unimaginably severe, people were left traumatized by the cataclysmic harrowing aftermath. The fragility of human existence and the supreme value of life marks the beginning of an era where there is a looming doubt of a fallout of human civilization. The post-war Nagasaki was a period of great reconstruction, albeit the tangible presence of the remains of the atomic bomb in various parts of the city. Destruction in Nagasaki, both physical and psychological, is beyond words, and the survivors find the horrific experience ineffable and want to obliterate their memories of the bombing. People who witnessed the horror, react to it with a seeming oblivion and overwhelming silence. Etsuko, constantly finds herself in the ebb and flow of this fragile existence. Life abruptly changes for Etsuko and those she encounters. They are, in fact, forced to accept heart-wrenching losses and both emotional and physical damages, which came to them unexpectedly without any admonition: "There is a sense of a future that could have been, but one that has been suddenly removed and irrevocably changed" (Teo 49).

Nagasaki, in the novel, is portrayed as a place that is moving towards progress after unrecoverable damage. Despite of all the advancement, industrially and economically the city was going through, there is a sense of emptiness and held-back emotion pervading in the city and its people; in the apparent optimism and politeness, there is a strong sense of resentment and sorrow among the people. Etsuko delineates the trauma, the repression, and the loss, the city was going through in her recovering from the trauma. There is anxiousness in her inaudible voice and thought about her future. The hollowness and sorrow Etsuko is holding up echoes a sense of futility emitting from within the city. Mrs. Fujiwara, the owner of the noodle shop, and a good friend of Etsuko's mother lost her family in the bombing; but she looked forward to the future with great optimism and bright prospects for the city and its people, thereby representing the progress and the desire to move forward from the recent bedlam. It is in contrast to Etsuko's anxious doubts about the future, her feeling of "emptiness and sorrow symbolize the city's inner turmoil at the generations of

inhabitants that have been obliterated by the bomb" (Teo 53). It could be deciphered that Mrs. Fujiwara and Etsuko occupy two different aspects of the city's collective memory. On the individual level, the working of 'inner life', Etsuko's narration appears to be working from the perspectives of both the collective trauma due to the historical facts and the social scenario she was allegedly in but in truly determining her context of recollection, she is actually working in finding the inner cores of life while also struggling to put in words her experiences and memories. There is an irrefutable connection between memory and trauma. Traumatic memory works on two levels- on individual context and on cultural context: "The personal experience of trauma exists initially within the individual's imperfect memory- inexplicably punctuated by blind spots, hallucinations, displacements, and other factors that preclude any notion of objective or reliable recall". (Michael R. Molino 322)

Etsuko carries her memories as "traces of a battlefield long after a war" (Michael R. Molino 323). Her traumatic memory integrates between her individual memory, replete with sadness, uncertainties and gaps, and her recollection of larger cultural collective memory. She is trying to narrate a past, of her ordinary delusional life against the backdrop of a great historical significance. In moments of her recollection, she often reflects to the blind spots, the gaps and limitation leading to the apparent unreliability in her 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" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 41). A certain image of a little girl on a swing keeps coming back to Etsuko in her dreams, the image keeps poking in her head, in her conscious mind also:

At first it had seemed a perfectly innocent dream; I had merely dreamt of something I had seen the previous day- the little girl we had watched playing in the park. And then the dream came back the following night. Indeed, over the past few months, it has returned to me several times. (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 47)

This image keeps on repeating as flashes of "the little girl found hanging from a tree" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 100), when there was a series of child murders in Nagasaki, portraying a lucidly harrowing mental picture which ignites trauma in Etsuko's psyche and she acknowledges that she feels "disturbed by such image" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 156). As Etsuko unfolds layers of her memory, the girl on the swing and the girl found hanging from a tree blend together and creates the image of Keiko taking her own life by hanging in her room at Manchester, far away from Etsuko:

““You see,” I said, “the little girl isn’t on a swing at all. It seemed like that at first. But it’s not a swing she’s on.”” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 96). Etsuko was obsessed with Keiko’s suicide that she continually imagined how it must have been for Keiko and about Keiko’s room, and even before registering her shock at the news of the suicide, Etsuko first wondered, “how long she had been there like before they had found her” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 54) because she knows her daughter’s reclusive nature: “the horror of that image has never diminished, but it has long ceased to be morbid matter” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 54). And it is quite discernible that Keiko’s death is the connection between Etsuko and her second daughter, Niki, as they both share an untold guilt about the suicide and fear recapturing their shared memories with her. In the novel, Etsuko’s memories of that particular past are represented as ‘pale view’. Her narration brings forth the ambiguity of her own identity, which is immersed in Sachiko, a neighbor and a friend of Etsuko during the post-war summer. As the novel progresses, there is an apparent parallelism between Etsuko and Sachiko, that Etsuko was deceptively narrating her own story, in the disguise of Sachiko.

In this dubious duplicity, Etsuko creates an unreliable truth, a false version of her past in trying to protect and justify herself of reasons of her incompleteness, all the while deceiving herself. Etsuko gives Sachiko and Mariko significant places in her life in a short span of time. When at first acquainting with Sachiko, Etsuko finds her to be adamant of going to America, a migration that will uplift their state of living, while considering less of whatever Mariko’s interest were. Sachiko’s treatment of her daughter was alarmingly neglectful and abusive, which in turn makes Mariko a troubled child. Sachiko allows her daughter to remain out of school and leaves her unattended for long stretches of time, even at night during a period of mysterious child murders in Nagasaki. Etsuko tries her best in alleviating the situation by volunteering to take care of Mariko when Sachiko was away, romancing Frank, an American soldier who promised to take Sachiko to America with her daughter. She also arranged a job for Sachiko at Mrs. Fujiwara’s and also helped her by lending her personal funds to take care of their deprived needs for both of them. Mariko was vehemently against going to America, and she hated Frank. However, these were of little concern to Sachiko. She even ignored her daughter’s wish, although repeatedly says that Mariko’s interest remained vital to her. The crux of Sachiko’s ill-treatment of her daughter is evident when she drowned the kittens, which her daughter loved dearly, in front of Mariko’s eyes, knowing lucidly of the impact of the horror of witnessing a woman drowning her infant, which later left an indelible trauma in Mariko’s psyche.

In the light of self-deception, our moral compass is, generally, guided by how much one can deceive oneself into believing that even when our actions might harm other people or suggest otherwise, we could continue to see ourselves as conducting morally good. This is evident when Etsuko was convincing Mariko to go to America. The truth about Etsuko's deceptive narration slips when she says that if things do not work out "over there, we'll come straight back" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 173). This in fact is, directed towards her own daughter, Keiko who was still inside her womb at the time. This somehow imbues a significance to the link she establishes between her and her impending future, as if the pregnancy was a harbinger of what is going to happen. Etsuko had overlooked the repercussions of her morally good action towards her daughter and convinced Keiko to leave her home, the place where she was born, and settle in a foreign land. In the scene, Mariko runs off from a potential grip but Keiko was helpless; she was held captive by the searing confines of emotions. The move immensely displaced Keiko psychologically, that she took her own life. Etsuko remains traumatized by her daughter's suicide which is evident by her obsession over the incident:

I feel only regret now for those attitudes I displayed towards Keiko. In this country, after all, it is not unexpected that a young woman of that age should wish to leave home. All I succeeded in doing, it would seem, was to ensure that when she finally left—now almost six years ago—she did so severing all her ties with me. But then I never imagined she could so quickly vanish beyond my reach; all I saw was that my daughter, unhappy as she was at home, would find the world outside too much for her. (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 88)

Etsuko is hesitant to admit her guilt of making Keiko adjust to a new world. She knew all along that Keiko will never be happy at a new place with a new father. However, Niki, played a rationalizing voice in her life, that it was bold of her to bring about a change in Etsuko's life, by not accepting her fate and led an unhappy life, and that she couldn't have known that Keiko would fall into reclusiveness and would take her own life; "you're the last person anyone could blame" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 176). To Etsuko, the death was "as a wound on one's body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 54). The reactivation of the painful traumatic experience is somehow an endeavour to acclimatise and compromise to the unpleasant feelings of neurosis. The memories are never just and in retelling, there is always intentional voids and gaps and hence the unreliability. The "inadmissi-

ble past experience whose effective repercussions” become “exceedingly difficult to defend against. Trauma might in this sense be defined as the internal, retrospective determination of a momentous yet initially incomprehensible event’s memorial significance” (Forster 264). In fact, what was at first strange becomes a flesh of one’s own being. A particular picture of a harbour in Nagasaki triggered an acute sense of nostalgia, sorrow and lost as she remembers the day, she took Keiko for a day trip to the harbour when they were in Japan. Keiko was happy and alive that day but she realizes now that she’ll never see that happiness again as Keiko is forever gone from her life: “Oh, there was nothing special about it. I was just happy remembering it, that’s all. Keiko was happy that day. We rode on cable-cars. It’s just a happy memory, that’s all” (Ishiguro, *A Pale View* 182).

Regardless of how unpleasant the suicide was, in remembering her daughter Etsuko finds her solace which enables her to move forward in life. But this psychologically disturbing loss displaces her identity of self and makes Etsuko difficult to position herself in the representation of her incomplete reason of her migration to England from her homeland, Japan; where she thought she will feel complete and she would find her happiness, but all in vain. Etsuko, while trying to adjust her life in both the places, loses herself in bits, succumbing each day in a labyrinth of unclaimed chaos of mind, all the while deceiving herself of a happiness she thought and dreamt she had. Etsuko’s two daughters are her double vision, each positing an identity. While Keiko asserts on her a Japanese identity, Niki imposes an English identity. But when she lost Keiko, she lost an unredeemable part of her life, her true connection to Japan, which now lingers only as a fading, blurred memory. In fact, Ishiguro endeavours to understand the past not to correct or redeem, but to explore and relive the experience however traumatizing, one must forget in order to survive. Memory and identity remain central to the depiction of trauma’s impact. Etsuko never fully relived her past, there is unresolved ambiguity in the novel. Her traumatic guilt shifts her in the ebb and flow of past and present. Etsuko’s recollection of her disorienting and disturbing past, however much ridden by trauma, is a self-deception, a shield from the obvious failures in her life, at the same time justifying her search for self in the face of trauma in her failed vision.

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