

Fragmented Truths of a Detective Mind: Memory and War in the novel *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract

In many of his renowned novels, Kazuo Ishiguro deals with a number of memories with specific signs; such as human feelings, emotions, trauma, love, attraction, forgetting, rewriting memory, anomaly of the story or narrator and many more. It is one of the essential implements for human beings as it makes a bridge or connection between past and present. The weakness and perplexing potential of memory has been used as an unavoidable tool of the plot in his novels. He uses the stream of consciousness also where recollection and forgetting both are included in the different shades of memory. Again, he writes about the occurrences of war which keeps an unforgettable connection with the characters of his novels. In the novel *When We Were Orphans*, through the Second Sino Japanese War and Opium War, the protagonist gains a lot of memory about his personal life. Memory and war are intertwined in this novel, mainly in the context of the protagonist's struggle finding his missing parents. This article wants to explore how the wars in Shanghai make a deep impact on the protagonist, a professional detective by persuading his memories.

Key words: War, Memory, Reconstruct, Emotion, Childhood, Trauma, Shanghai, Past.

Introduction

The British-Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro frequently explores some particular topics for his novels. Among them, memory comes first as his personal sentiment and emotion are combinedly found in memory. In most of his novels, he brings memory through the characters and plots. Sometimes memory reflects with nostalgia and grief. Again, memory gives a wonderful

and sweet description of the character, event and place. In his novel *When We Were Orphans*, while applying memory, he does not confine himself to any specific memory. Rather, there are several types of memory. Such as cultural memory, traumatic memory individual and collective memory, and historical memory. The protagonist of the novel named Christopher Banks is a private detective whose intention is to find his missing parents with the help of his profession. He remembers his childhood and thus finally becomes successful to find his mother. Another topic comes after memory is war. Ishiguro describes the Sino-Japanese War and Opium War in this novel. As a Japanese by born, Ishiguro keeps his interest about the political issues of Japan which he likes to express in this novel. His personal history represents what might be termed as “estrangement” (Lewis, 01), an issue that inevitable affects the function of his memory. He always gives importance a particular historical situation by referring specific time and specific action. According to his critics named Matthews and Groes, the examples of time and place used by the novelist in his novels, are inseparable part from the narrator: “hauntingly present in the narration itself” (Matthews and Groes, 2010). While he focuses on the dilemma of the protagonist of the novel named Christopher through the speech and description, he makes the historical time and place as the support of his novel. This article argues that in Ishiguro’s novel *When We Were Orphans*, how personal trauma and collective historical events, particularly war interweave through memory to shape the identity by using Christopher’s detective quest as a metaphor for fragmented remembrance.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Research Methodology using trauma theory and memory studies has been employed in this article. The purpose of this method is to discover the fundamental purposes of human behavior in many ways. It also refers to the understanding of people’s regular dialogues, attitudes, beliefs and experiences. The primary tool that is used here is a close study of the novel with a detailed exploration of the themes and issues connected with the characters as well as a good understanding of the viewpoints of the author. Secondary sources include scholarly critiques and historical records; such as, several books written by the critics, topic related documents, library sources and online references are used in this article for evaluating purpose.

Hypotheses/Research Gap

The key research questions guiding this study are given as follows:

- a. How does memory play an important role in the characters of the novel?
- b. Discuss the reasons of the author's applying of wars in his novel.
- c. How can we make a connection between memory and war in the novel?
- d. Explain the different types of memory and war used by Ishiguro in his novel.

Result and Discussion

Memory

To Ishiguro, memory is used for different purposes in his writings: to privilege the self, to escape from realities which is very tough to accept or to bear, to defend one's views with logic and common sense, to draw comparison with among the situations and characters, and meet expectations. His discussion on memory is very rich as he describes the events of past in detail. Sometimes memory negatively impacts on individuals and communities, hampers their progress and makes a barrier for not to continue further. It is true that most of the people love to recall their past based on their early experience from their childhood. In this regard, Luke Mastin gives a wonderful definition of memory. According to him,

Memory is the sum totals of what we remember, and gives us the capability to learn and adapt from previous experiences as well as to build relationships. It is the ability to remember past experiences, and the power to process of recalling to mind previously learned facts, experiences, impressions, skills and habits....It is the re-creation or reconstruction of past experiences by the synchronous firing of neurons that were involved in the original experience...Our memories are not stored in our brains like books on library shelves, but are actually on-the-fly reconstructions from elements scattered throughout various areas of our brains...Thus memory depends on learning because it lets us store and retrieve learned information. (Mastin, 2010)

Though Mastin comments on memory after Ishiguro has published the novel *When We Were Orphans*, it is clear that Ishiguro applies the definition of memory the way Mastin comments. The novelist portrays the protagonist as a young detective whose memory is fully relying on his bitter childhood experience and Chinese history. By relating past memories to present facts within the narrator's memory in the novel, Ishiguro portrays the childhood trauma and dreams of the narrator blending with cruel realities and expectations of the protagonist when he becomes a matured person in a plot.

Ishiguro is a great follower of the great ancient philosopher Aristotle who comments about memory very clearly. In his book *On Memory and Reminiscence* (350 BCE), Aristotle brings the difference between habit and conscious memories. To him, among all living creations, only human beings know how to recollect intentionally. Aristotle also reveals the link of the memory of the characters who gather traumatic experiences. Later, about Aristotle's work on memory, Luke Mastin comments in his essay *The Human Memory-What It Is, How It Works and How It Can Go Wrong*: 'Aristotle compared memory to making impressions in wax, sometimes referred to as the "storehouse metaphor", a theory which held sway for many centuries.'(Mastin, 2010)

Christopher is an orphan since he lost his parents during his childhood. As an orphan, he keeps memory which haunts him always for getting back his missing parents. In an interview with Cynthia Wong, Ishiguro specifically talks about his realization about Christopher as an orphan. He comments in the following way:

There was a metaphorical direction in this condition of being orphaned. What I was interested in exploring here was the journey that we all must have made out of a protective childhood bubble where we didn't know about the harsher world... When I say orphan, it is in that very broader sense of having left the protective world of childhood that I am referring to. (Wong, 2005)

From his early childhood to his present age, Christopher passes a life full of depression and trauma. As a narrator, he describes his personal life story to public history with the help of his memory.

Traumatic Memory

In his novel *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro uses several memories of his protagonist based on human mind and history. Among the memories, traumatic memory comes first as it is applied by Ishiguro many times. When the readers go through the novel, they find Christopher plays dual role from the very beginning to end in the novel. There he narrates his life who challenges everything through his misty nostalgia of childhood memories. He fulfills his dream by becoming a detective and starts looking for his missing parents while he engages himself with his regular activities. As a professional detective, Christopher always proves his loyalty and seriousness. The struggle of Christopher amidst remembering and forgetting is a process named psychological ratiocination. By this term, we understand that it is a mixture of the split elements of one's self-identity and disturbing historical events. In both cases, trauma plays a significant role. In this novel, Ishiguro has applied traumatic memory over the protagonist. Traumatic memory is strongly connected with the behavioral and emotional response; such as fear, horror or helplessness. (Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict, 2008, p.924) When trauma modifies core features of personal identity, at that time the maximum level of autobiographical memory is extremely affected. It is because, traumatic memories strikingly differ from other types of autobiographical memories as they carry some troubling pictorial remembrances. Kapfhammer comments on traumatic memories in the following way: "...beyond voluntary control and are automatically triggered by external or internal stimuli related to the original trauma context." (*Kapfhammer, 2013*)

Two types of traumas are used by Ishiguro in this novel in order to bring the memory back. They are General Trauma, and Specific Trauma. General trauma is used by the author to express common people's estrangement in the world. For example, the following lines uttered by Christopher are examples of general trauma:

In fact, I cannot remember at all what came before and after this particular moment. What I have is a memory of walking into a classroom-Room 15 in the old Priory-where the sun was pouring

through the narrow cloister windows in shafts, revealing the dust hanging in the air. The master had yet to arrive, but I must have come in slightly late, for I remember finding my classmates already sitting about in clusters on the desk-tops, benches and window ledges. I was about to join one such group of five to six boys, when their faces all turned to me and I saw immediately that they had been discussing me. (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 10)

On the other hand, by specific trauma, Ishiguro clarifies the characteristic of the protagonist about his personal traumatic experience. The following lines are the example of specific trauma where Stevens particularly talks about his missing parents with a painful heart:

It was the last remark, this notion that I was ‘going home’ which caused my emotions to get the better of me for-I am certain of this-the first and last time on that voyage. Even then, my tears were more of anger than sorrow. For I had deeply resented the colonel’s words. As I saw it, I was bound for a strange land where I did not know a soul, while the city steadily receding before me contained all I knew. Above all, my parents were still there, somewhere beyond that harbor, beyond that imposing skyline of the Bund and wiping my eyes, I had cast my gaze towards the shore one last time, wondering if I even now I might catch sight of my mother-or even my father-running on to the quay, waving and shouting for me to return. (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 30)

At the time of narrating the full story about his childhood from the beginning of the novel, Christopher uses imagination several times as he fails to describe his childhood clearly and perfectly. According to his description, he has passed his childhood with his parents in the International Settlement at Shanghai in Colonial China. After the unexpected disappearance of his parents, Christopher, at the age of twelve, goes to England to his aunt for living purpose. From that time, he is affected by trauma. When he becomes a grown-up man, he starts solving all kinds of mysterious problems around him as a professional detective. His profession helps him to guess and predict the actual situation of his past which is narrated by himself in his later description.

Individual and Collective Memory

There is a vast difference between the implementation of memory as a course of action and as a course of situation. While carrying the description, memory turns into a situation which helps the characters to discover themselves in a new way. Rather, memory helps to create problem in the plot and thus pacifies the narrator. Maurice Halbwach, a renowned critic of Kazuo Ishiguro, gives a great importance to memory and all other features related to memory which is slowly shifted from individual to collective memory during the 20th century. By collective memory, we mean recollections of the earlier life created by society and culture. For example, in the novel *The Remains of the Day* written by Ishiguro, when the protagonist Stevens, who is a butler, remembers the parties and programs organized by his master in Darlington Hall, a touch of collective memory is found where the description of contemporary society and culture is highly focused. On the other hand, in the novel *When We Were Orphans*, the readers become familiar with individual memory which is reflected through some characters like Christopher, Sarah, the adopted daughter of Christopher and so on. Here each and every character is fully depended on his or her personal and individual memory which is completely different from one another.

Christopher's description makes up the imaginary area through which he puts his memory into his speech in order to find out his own identity. Narration plays a great role at this stage in how memories are communicated in the mind of Christopher. His identity disclosures his suffering and traumatized condition. The novelist relates Christopher's distressed condition to the historical time full of chaos and suffering. The story of the novel began when the National Revolutionary Army of the Japanese Empire had the combat of Shanghai during the second Sino Japanese War. Unfortunately, Christopher's parents both were involved as eyewitnesses of the processes of this despicable combat. At that time, Christopher was completely unaware of those serious incidents as he was a very little boy. He could remember very little about the serious war, surrounding atmosphere, soldiers and wounded people. At the same time, in imagination, he always became a soldier who remained busy fighting with the soldiers of his opposite group. After becoming a matured

person, he confesses that, at first, he is completely unaware about the particular event. But later, his evaluation gives him a self-realization about the importance of that event. His belated narrative of his past life finally helps him to make sense of his traumatic past and to form his present identity. By utilizing an integrated outline of Christopher's life and his description about his past and present life, the novelist tries to show the mechanism of memory. Thus, by describing the earlier period through such narration using sound memory, Christopher finally finds his life meaningful.

War

Ishiguro's curiosity about war is found when we see that he writes in brief about real wars that appear in the world. He brings the reasons and the results about the wars in many of his novels as he feels that the historical background of the war has a great impact on the plots and the characters. In the novel *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro describes previous, current and later condition of Sino-Japanese War and Opium War. William Sutcliffe, a reviewer of the novel *When We Were Orphans*, puts his remark about this issue in his book review that, Even when he seems to be writing about something else, Ishiguro's writing is infused with a profound sense of the effect that great historical events have on people's lives. This, not blood and guts and perfectly researched period underwear details, is the real story of the cataclysmic century just closed. (Sutcliffe, 2000)

However, the novel is set against the backdrop of pre-war and wartime Shanghai, a city marked by political doubt and violence. The war serves as a catalyst for the events that lead to the disappearance of Christopher's parents and highlights the themes of loss and displacement. In the same novel, the Opium War is a significant event that shapes the protagonist's life and the backdrop of the story, though it is not the central focus of the plot. The Opium War and its consequences, particularly the involvement of Christopher's parents in the opium trade, are crucial to understanding his childhood and his quest to find them.

Sino Japanese War in the novel *When We Were Orphans*

The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) was a significant conflict between China and Japan, activated by China's resistance to Japanese territorial expansion, which began in 1931. This war took place from the year 1937 to

1945. Ishiguro describes this real war and its impact on the characters in this novel. The story follows Christopher, the British detective who returns to Shanghai during the war to investigate the disappearance of his parents' years earlier. The novel is primarily set in Shanghai, China, during the 1930s, a period marked by the rising rigidities and conflict of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The war forms a significant backdrop to the narrative, manipulating the characters' experiences and the atmosphere of the story. Orphaned at a young age, Christopher returns to Shanghai as a renowned detective to uncover the truth behind his parents' disappearance, which he believes is connected to the war and the opium trade. The story includes the period before and during the war, and also features recollections to Christopher's childhood. However, amid this war, Christopher finally comes to find out his missing parents in an uninvestigated house within the French Concession, aided by a clue provided by the former Chinese Inspector Kung. The fight between China and Japan was so intense that ghastly scenes could be found within the International Settlement. After finding his boyhood Japanese friend Akira amidst the injured soldiers, both of them head towards the house where the missing parents are supposed to be. On their way, they could find that:

The damage was so extensive, we would frequently have to halt, unable to find a way through the debris... Amidst the wreckage, we could see blood-sometimes fresh, sometimes weeks old- on the ground, on the walls, splashed across broken furniture. Worse still- and our noses would warn us of their presence long before our eyes...piles of human intestines in various stages of decay. (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 161)

But at that time, they become unable to find out both the parents of Christopher. At last, they find and rescue his mother who fails to recognize her son as her mental health is not good at all.

Opium War in the novel *When We Were Orphans*

The Opium War and its result, including the unsatisfactory contracts forced on China, are part of the context that drives Christopher's quest to understand

the disappearance of his parents and, ultimately, his own identity. Opium, initially introduced as herbal medicine, became very popular among the Chinese people because of their consumption method. The result was the destruction of around 20,000 chests in the year 1938. The novel uses the setting of the Opium War and its outcome to comment on issues of colonialism, cultural clashes, and the consequences of imperialism. The disappearance of Christopher's parents was very mysterious in Shanghai during his childhood. His father was involved in the British opium trade, and his mother was a vocal rival of it. Christopher was only nine years old when he lost his parents. Later, it becomes clear that the disappearance of his parents is linked to the opium business in China. In the early twentieth century, Christopher's father worked in Morgan Brook and Byatt Company that traded opium into China from India and paid the local generals to help distribution. His mother became very angry when she came to know about the business of Christopher's father. She humiliated him for working in such a company and asked her husband to leave the job. Moreover, she joined the anti-opium campaign. Christopher's father's speech to his wife makes the readers realize that how helpless he was in this case:

We can't do it, Diana. It'll be the ruin of us. I've looked at everything. We'll never get back to England. We can't raise enough. Without the firm, we're simply stranded. (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 52)

When Christopher becomes a famous detective, he finds that a former Chinese Inspector named Kung has become an addict to opium in the later stages. For Stevens, it is a great shock as, to him, Kung was always a heroic figure who once took the charge of handling the case of Christopher's missing parents. Kung's speech to Christopher about his addiction becomes clear when he confesses about fully depending on his pipe to recollect his memory: "Mr. Banks. Sometimes you know, when I indulge in a pipe, it helps me remember many things I have long forgotten drift before my eyes." (Ishiguro, 1995, p. 130) The opium trade, a direct result of the Opium War, symbolizes exploitation, addiction, and the moral compromises made by individuals and nations. Ishiguro's intention is aware his readers about the negative effect of opium trade and opium addiction which he successfully brings in this novel.

Unavoidable link between War and Memory

In the novel *When We Were Orphans*, both war and memory are internally connected with one another. When Christopher memorizes his past, there is presence of Sino Japanese War and Opium War. His memory is full of war and tension more than happiness through which he wants to fulfil his mission about searching for his missing parents. His missing parents, childhood friend Akira, Kung and other characters of the novel become familiar by the readers through Christopher's description, especially from his childhood memory. His childhood memories are flawless and distorted, and make the readers realize how his trauma reforms the past life of Christopher. His description is riddled with irregularities which recommends that memory is not a consistent guide to explore the truth. The lineage of Shanghai into ferocity during the Sino-Japanese War is the reflection of Christopher's internal confusion. According to Ishiguro, apart from the historical context, the war is a strength that disturbs personal quests of Christopher and exposes the futility of his heroism. As a detective, Christopher's quest about solving the mysterious problems and facing the challenges related to his own life are both global and personal.

Conclusion

The novelist uses several memories of the narrator as reflections upon a distorted version of the human mind and history. By relating past memories to present facts within Christopher's memory, the author describes Christopher's trauma, depicting these childhood fantasies in conjunction with other realities in a plot that recalls detective fiction. Thus, Christopher relates his personal story to public history as a fictionalized projection of his memory. Ishiguro's Japanese root and his English upbringing become a blending one. Japanese by birth, Ishiguro's family came to England and planned to stay there for few years when he was only five years old. Later, he decides to settle there permanently with his family. His home is in-between one, neither Japanese nor English, a place including both a Japanese departure and an English arrival. Because of his bicultural upbringing, he always prefers to write about the crisis, struggles, sufferings, happy and enjoyable moments of a personal character, forgetting or avoiding the national crisis of human beings of the world. However, this novel is a good example of postwar fiction as well as

trauma literature. Through his writings, Ishiguro wants to give a message to his readers that the past is alive in the present, and memory gives the life to the past. Christopher, his protagonist of the novel *When We Were Orphans*, has been suffered a lot psychologically for which he is in search of happiness in his present life by reconstructing his past by focusing his memory and war.

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