

Memory as a contesting element in two novels of Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Remains of the Day* and *When We Were Orphans*

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Abstract:

Kazuo Ishiguro, the Nobel Prize and Booker winning novelist is a writer of modern age. In his novels, he brings human feelings, emotions, trauma, love, and so on. In most of his novels, the author uses memory as one of his favorite topics. Memory is a crucial but a delicate power of human mind which is stored and regained. It plays a vital role in the characters of the novels of Ishiguro through which the loss and gain what they deserve, is expressed. Most of Ishiguro's novels are covered with memory, reminiscence, and grief. Memory persists to grow in significance inside the humanities. It is observed that, in some of his novels, Ishiguro brings memory positively, and in some novels, it is used in an opposite way. His profound and elegiac work on memory is very much present in two of his renowned books: *The Remains of the Day*, and *When We Were Orphans*. This paper discovers how the textual characters of Ishiguro apply and establish the concept of memory in order to prove it as a contesting element in these two novels.

Keywords: Memory, Emotion, Childhood, Trauma, Orphan, Past

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, the British-Japanese novelist, deals with the various tinges of memory with particular hints; such as trauma, unconscious, forgetting, rewriting memory and irregularity of the story or storyteller successfully in many of his novels. Memory is one of the essential implements for human beings as it makes a bridge or connection between past and present. At the same time, memory sometimes misleads persons. The vulnerability and confusing potential of memory has been used as a plot instrument in the novels of Ishiguro. Ishiguro describes the example both of missing and finding by using memory from the past lives of the characters and events in a parallel

way. Sometimes memory reflects in his novels with nostalgia and grief. Again, memory gives a wonderful and sweet description of the character, event and place in the same novels. It is also clarified that, in his novels, the role of Nemesis used in Greek tragedies, is found in so many ways. He uses the stream of consciousness also in his novels where recollection and forgetting both are included in the different shades of memory.

2. Memory

In his novels, Ishiguro brings memory as it is one of the most important topics in accordance to the choice and demand of his characters. He then discusses the events of the past in detail. Memory is used for different purposes in his writings: to privilege the person or character, to escape from realities which is hard 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. Memory can sometimes negatively impact individuals and communities, hamper their progress and make a barrier for not to continue further. Ishiguro writes about the occurrences of the Second World War which keeps an unforgettable connection with the characters of his novels. About this issue, William Sutcliffe, a reviewer of the novel *When We Were Orphans*, comments 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).

For example, in the novel *When We Were Orphans*, the Japanese War is one of the most important topics through which the protagonist, who is a detective, gains a lot of memory about his personal life. Another novel, *The Remains of the Day*, is based on the World War Two as the novel centers on the build up to and an outcome of the war. The narrator of this novel is a butler named Stevens who reflects on his tenure working for his previous master Lord Darlington in the year 1930's. Ishiguro brings memory through the whole story described by Stevens during the time of his holiday trip for six days across England.

3. Definition of Memory

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).

4. Memory in the novel *The Remains of the Day*

In the novel *The Remains of the Day*, the novelist Ishiguro brings this concept of memory described by Luke Mastin (Mastin, 2000). He portrays the protagonist Stevens, a very sincere butler of Darlington Hall for many years. The novel is told from the perspective of Stevens, who reflects on his past at Darlington Hall. Because of his busy life, he always skips his personal life. Later, when he manages a holiday week from his present master, he gets time to think about his early life. During his trip for six days, he takes his car and his destination is to the western part of England. While driving, the greenery natural sights of England make him very happy and relaxed. There he meets several people who remain busy with their regular activities. Both the place and people help him to be reminded. He remembers one by one many events from his early life; for examples, key episodes with Miss Kenton and other household staffs of Darlington Hall, the critical condition of his father's body and mind because of his old age and sickness, death of his father, different political events and homely gatherings organized by his former master Lord Darlington, and so on. During his journey, he feels that he never gets the chance to memorize his past because of his regular work which he has maintained always very sincerely. However, during such flashbacks, readers get an insight into Stevens' wonderful description of Darlington Hall's magnificent time. At the same time, they get the scope to know about his thoughts, what he already lost and what he now wants to get back.

Stevens gets a chance to think about the characteristics of his former master Lord Darlington and present master Mr. Farraday while he drives. To him, his former master Lord Darlington carries a number of good qualities; like immensity, seriousness, nobleness, professionalism, good judgment, dignity and the real aristocracy. On the other hand, his present master Mr. Farraday keeps a cheerful sense on typically American humor who loves to talk about such topics like the regular football match and live making. By such remembering, Stevens un mindfully makes a comparative study between his former and present masters. Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, evokes in his mind

the memories of many love opportunities which he missed; for example, an incomplete love affair between Stevens and Miss Kenton, her sentiment, emotion and passion of love for him, his own feelings of self-denial and humanity, and his devotion and seriousness to his professional work as a butler. There are other characters in this novel, like Mr. John Campbell, Mrs. Benn and Mr. Herman who also help to make spaces for them in the mind and memory of Stevens in many ways.

The pleasure of Stevens lies in remembering the past while travelling. Especially, he expresses his keenness to remember only those happy moments related to his former master Lord Darlington. Stevens describes also about this feeling of happiness in this way: "predominantly (they) concerned (themselves) with very happy memories" (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 10). He avoids remembering the awful implications made by newspapers about his former lord throughout the war. At the time of remembering a good memory, he tells to Mrs. Benn,

Oh yes, Mrs. Benn. But enough of this. I know you remember Darlington Hall in the days when they were great gatherings, when it was filled with distinguished visitors. Now that's the way his lordship deserves to be remembered (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 10).

From his memory, Stevens describes his father's actions and works in Darlington Hall. His father was also a butler in the same place where Stevens is working at present. He memorizes many incidents about his father related to his father's working period, and later, how he quit his job because of his old age and sudden collapses. Miss Kenton, the young housekeeper, always had a special feeling for Stevens. In spite of their separation for so many years, still Stevens remembers her and secretly keeps her name in his mind next to Lord Darlington and his mansion Darlington Hall. Stevens' specific statement in the novel represents Lord Darlington as an ideal and honest man. From his memory, readers come to know that later Lord Darlington is blamed for treachery against his own country. This aspect of Stevens brings about many statements to a significant judgment from his recall, the role of an ideal butler for his work, who always gives his master a great importance and priority in every aspect. From his remembering, readers can depict the picture of his former master with his characteristics so realistically.

In the full novel, Darlington Hall plays a significant role. It is the center of all the characters from both high class and servant class. From the master down to the housekeeper, all lead their lives actively in the performance of their own duties and responsibilities. All of them use memory to make a link between the past and present and thus make the concept of memory more fruitful.

5. Individual and Collective Memory

There is a vast difference between the implementation of memory as a course of action and as a course of the 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 a problem in the plot and thus mollifies the narrator. Maurice Halbwach, a renowned critic of Kazuo Ishiguro, gives a great importance on memory and all other features related to memory which is slowly shifted from the individual to collective memory during the 20th century. By collective memory, we mean recollections of the past life created by society and culture. In the novel *The Remains of the Day*, when Stevens 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. In this stage, Ishiguro follows the great philosopher Aristotle. In his book *On Memory and Reminiscence* (350 BCE), Aristotle brings the difference between habit and conscious memories of human beings as well as living creations. 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 experience. Luke Mastin comments in his essay *The Human Memory-What It Is, How It Works and How It Can Go Wrong* about Aristotle's work: '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).

While describing the characteristic features of the characters, Ishiguro uses their memories depend on longing and grief. During his trip for six days, Stevens memorizes Miss Kenton's care and love for him. With a great regret, he remembers how he refused and avoided her several times because of his sincerity and devotion for his work. He consoles himself later thinking that it was his luck that he failed to get the love from Miss Kenton. Nemesis works in his mind in this regard. Another important feature of this novel is identity or uniqueness which is closely connected with memory. Stevens keeps the happy moments in his memory like a storehouse. To him, this memory is a journey into the emotions of happiness and grief, an excuse to escape the sorrowful moments of uncertainty and humiliation.

6. Memory in the novel *When We Were Orphans*

In his other novel *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro uses the memories of its protagonist based on human mind and history. In this novel, 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

depicts the childhood dreams of the narrator in combination with adult realities and expectations in a plot. In an interview with Cynthia Wong, the author explains what he means when he describes Christopher as an orphan:

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).

The narrator and protagonist of this novel, Christopher Banks, relates his personal life story to public history where he brings his traumatic memory. Christopher's struggle amidst remembering and forgetting is a process named psychological ratiocination. It is a mixture of split elements of his self - identity and disturbing historical events. In both cases, trauma plays a significant role. Christopher plays a dual role from the very beginning to end; as a narrator, he narrates his life who challenges everything through his blurred recollection of childhood memories, and as a professional detective, he proves his loyalty and seriousness.

Traumatic Memory

Ishiguro has applied the 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 noticeably differ from other types of autobiographical memories as they carry some disturbing visual flashbacks. According to Kapfhammer, traumatic memories are "beyond voluntary control and are automatically triggered by external or internal stimuli related to the original trauma context" (Kapfhammer, 2013). In this novel, the novelist uses two types of traumas in order to bring memory. They are general trauma, and specific trauma. Ishiguro uses general trauma in his characters to express common people's estrangement in the world. On the other hand, by specific trauma, he clarifies the characteristic of the protagonist about his personal traumatic experience. For example, the following lines uttered by Christopher are an example 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).

Again, the following lines are the example of specific trauma where he particularly talks about his 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).

Christopher narrates the full story about his childhood from the beginning of the novel. He fails to describe his past life clearly and perfectly. For this reason, he has to use imagination. From his description, Christopher's early life is known to readers. He 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, trauma affects him so much that he fails to pass a peaceful life till he becomes an adult. 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 he narrates well in his later description.

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. Here narration plays a great role in how memories are communicated in the mind of Christopher. His identity exposes his suffering and traumatized condition. The novelist relates Christopher's distressed condition to the historical time full of chaos and suffering. The story 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 related to his past life finally helps him to make sense of his traumatic past and to form his present identity. Christopher's past which is actually full of fantasy created by himself by unreliable memory has finally materialize into his real present and thus he is able to accept his real story of his life as an orphan. 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.

7. Similarities

Ishiguro successfully makes both novels *When We Were Orphans* and *The Remains of the Day* enjoyable and interesting. In both novels, the protagonists wish to change many events from their past lives. Both Stevens and Christopher think that they have touched on the center of important events only to discover that the real sources of power are in a different place. Both of his protagonists are fully depending on their memories which make complete stories. In both these novels, Ishiguro brings great historical events. Rather than focusing in history, he is interested to write about outsiders from the personal and first-person perspective.

8. Conclusion

In both of his novels, Ishiguro uses first person narrator as a storyteller. He has explained his interest in his first-person narrators while he faces an interview with Gregory Mason. Ishiguro comments: "Things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me ... deeply. And so, for the time being, I'm going to stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves" (Mason, 1989). Ishiguro writes the novel *The Remains of the day* after this interview where he uses first person narrator. His protagonist Stevens successfully narrates the full story by using memory. In the novel *When We Were Orphans*, the author applies the same method about the narrator's case. He uses this concept of memory in order to connect his characters of identity to their split memory, a process which allows them to recover from their

unresolved past. Ishiguro is Japanese by birth. When he was five years old, his family came to England and planned to stay there for few years. Later, he decides to settle there permanently with his family. Because of his bicultural upbringing, he always prefers to write about the crisis, struggles, sufferings, and happy and enjoyable moments of a personal character, forgetting or avoiding the national crisis of human beings of the world. Ishiguro 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 the dilemma of the protagonist through the speech and description, he makes the historical time and place as the backbone of his novel. He constantly tells his readers that the past is alive in the present, and memory gives the life about the past. Stevens and Christopher, his two protagonists of two novels *The Remains of the Day* and *When We were Orphans*, have suffered a lot psychologically for which they are in search of happiness in their present life by reforming their past through memory.

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