A STUDY OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY
IN SELECT WORKS BY
KAZUO ISHIGURO

ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED BY

C.LALRINFELI
Ph.D. RESEARCH SCHOLAR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
MIZORAM UNIVERSITY

SUPERVISOR

Dr. MARGARET L.PACHUAU
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
MIZORAM UNIVERSITY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.
This thesis attempts to examine aspects related to memory and identity, and its thematic centrality in Kazuo Ishiguro’s texts with special references to the manner in which memory initiates the construction of identity in five of his texts namely i) *A Pale View Of Hills* (1982), ii) *An Artist Of The Floating World* (1986), iii) *The Remains Of The Day* (1988), iv) *When We Were Orphans* (2000), and v) *Never Let Me Go* (2005). The term ‘memory’ has been defined by a number of psychologists, philosophers and thinkers. Amongst them, Tim Woods and Peter Middleton observes:

Memory is a means of overcoming the limitations of the human condition as it is understood in contemporary culture, by making the past appear once again in the present, despite its temporal, and possibly spatial, distance.¹

Memory not only serve as building blocks for identity, but also plays an important role in the interaction with others since details of the past are employed in order to validate images that are conveyed. Recognizing the crucial role of memories for social relationships, Gergen describes memory as a “form of social skill”² and memory according to Assman is a “backbone of identity”.³ According to Dorothee Birke:

In order to answer the age-old question ‘who am I?’ we more often than not look to our past and fashion a narrative for our lives. By comparing our present selves with the selves we remember, we experience ourselves as being in time – an experience which is crucial for our sense of self.⁴
Kazuo Ishiguro utilizes memory as the focal point in his novels. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan, on November 8, 1954. In 1960, the five-year-old Ishiguro moved with his family to Britain, where his father, an oceanographer, began a one-year research project funded by the British government. What was originally intended to be a temporary visit gradually became a permanent one. While maintaining ownership of the family home in Nagasaki, the Ishiguros have remained in Britain. Ishiguro admits that leaving Japan has left him a sense of “emotional bereavement or emotional deprivation”. Though not overcharged with the raw nerves of unhealed exile, this sense of loss may be deemed as a defining streak of his personal and artistic temperament. This is how he describes it:

For me, the creative process has never been about anger or violence, as it is with other people; it’s more to do with regret or melancholy. I don’t feel I’ve regretted not having grown up in Japan. That would be absurd. This is the only life I have known. I had a happy childhood, and I’ve been very happy here. But it’s to do with the strong emotional relationships I had in Japan that were suddenly severed at a formative emotional age particularly with my grandfather.

The process of atoning for emotional and physical losses stems deeply from his own past and his novels demonstrate clearly that memory of the past enables an individual to come to terms with one’s own identity and that memory is the means of finding solace in an often inconsolable world. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the chief protagonist, Etsuko uses her memory in order to overcome loss and to define her identity. The reason for this is that her elder daughter, Keiko had committed suicide by hanging herself in her rented room in Manchester. Etsuko finds herself
alone and neglected, and her account in the novel can be viewed as the result of her desperate struggle to establish for herself an impression of structure and agency in her past and hence to identify for herself meaningful reasons and causes for her current position and to reassure herself that she ‘was not responsible for Keiko’s death’. As she recalls her past, she strives to structure and to organize it, and in the process she attempts to identify patterns and consistencies by which to grant her history a sense of agency and design. Therefore, Etsuko has to explore the painful past, in order to decipher the making and remaking sense of who and what she is. Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* feared that his involvement in the Nationalist movement might hamper the marriage negotiation of his daughter. In order to justify to the readers that his actions were done with the heart of innocence, Ono reflects upon his past with the aid of his fragile memory. He knows that he had lived without purpose or lasting impact, and finds himself stripped of all agency and control. In the emptiness of his waning life, he desperately seeks relief from the desolation that he faces, and therefore he returns to his past while working to extract from it, proof of his own significance. *The Remains of the Day* similarly portrays the suppressed emotion of Stevens who denied human warmth and ‘bantering’ in pursuing dignity. But his concept of ‘dignity’ makes him a loner and he felt the need to reconsider the same. In *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, Banks and Kathy hold on to their childhood memories in order to continue living. They both returned to their childhood memories in order to understand the basis of their adult isolation. They struggle to hold onto a peace that is evoked by a necessary nostalgia, but they simultaneously realize the horror of their discoveries. In an interview, Ishiguro explains his permanent interest for memory in its various approaches:

I like memory, at various levels. At a purely technical level, I like it as a method of telling a story – it gives me plenty of freedom … And I just like
the texture of memory as well. I like that the scenes are necessarily foggy around the edges, because they’re open to manipulation and they’re open to self deception and embroidery. And they’re often tinged with nostalgia, some kind of strong emotion. I like all these layers that come with a scene. Thematically, I have been interested in memory itself.⁸

Ishiguro’s novels depict that memory becomes an important (function) in reconstructing past events in a way that generates meaning for the present and that allows an individual to integrate identity. The human ability to select and interpret relevant experiences in retrospect and thus to harmonize past and present selves (in terms of how identity is formed with memory) is thus the major concern of Ishiguro’s work. Leavis had stated that the major novelists ‘not only change the possibilities of art for practitioners and readers’ but also that ‘they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life’.⁹ These terms certainly included Kazuo Ishiguro. The works of Kazuo Ishiguro are a powerful exploration of ethics as well as an insightful exploration of the human psyche. As Sebatian Groes opines:

The power of Ishiguro’s fiction lies in its ability to make us care about the world, about other people, about ourselves. The carefully crafted narratives invite us to invest our time and emotions in his fictional worlds and characters. This ethical imperative is Ishiguro’s signature.¹⁰

Having worked as a social worker in Glasglow and London in the 1980s, Ishiguro had probably shaped his understanding of human awareness and suffering, elements that are present in all of his novels. In dealing with these issues, Ishiguro deploys memory as a dynamic phenomenon which is characterized by its adaptability to present needs and circumstances. Ishiguro tends to
centre his novels on characters that have relevant bearing upon the psychological and emotional relationship with the past. The issue of memory arises as the protagonists try to find closure with their past. Ishiguro’s narrators have made choices in their past and so they have to face the consequences in the present. Barry Lewis marked:

The novels are all engaged with memory and memory, by its very nature, is uncertain, quivering, subject to erasures and displacement.¹¹

Ishiguro in his novels foregrounds memory through the method of narration and the narrator’s admission of uncertainty in the veracity of their recall. By using first person narratives, the events of the novels are told in retrospect – sometimes from the distance of only hours, sometimes from a great many years. Additionally, the structuring of the narrator’s account in a notebook /diary format, established in part by the detailed dates and places provided at the beginning of every chapter is continuously overrun by their memories. Reich expresses:

Despite the superficial fixing of time in his work, the narrative frequently spins wildly through different eras. The date Ishiguro likes to fix are merely the dates of recall.¹²

Ishiguro’s focus in fact appears to be the struggle that memory imposes upon the individual and the insistence of the past in a character’s present. As Sutcliffe notes:

His[Ishiguro] narrators, all of whom have suffered a deep psychological rupture in their lives, are often fighting a long-standing battle to relate their past to a present with which it does not seem to fit.¹³
In *A Pale View of Hills*, as Etsuko reconstructs the past, she also reveals her reluctance to either fully remember or reveal the instances of her past. Like Etsuko, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* also critically assesses the function of his memory with the idea that “when with the benefit of hindsight one begins to search one’s past for … ‘turning points’, one is apt to start seeing them everywhere,”\(^{14}\) and he implies that such articulation of a consciousness may reveal truth’s elusiveness. Similarly, the narrator Masuji Ono of *An Artist of the Floating World* punctuates his story with remarks that any reconstructed narrative may be flawed representation: “This may not have been the precise words I used that afternoon”.\(^{15}\) His narrative, in this continued fabrication, becomes a self-acknowledged tale comprised as much from forgetfulness as remembrance. And Etsuko herself observe how memory “can be an unreliable thing”\(^{16}\) as she struggles for correspondence in recalling what she might have felt or experienced in the tumultuous period with what ‘actual memory’ produces. In *When We Were Orphans* also, Banks dwells on his memories and things thought forgotten, which are carefully dredged up and the novel depicted that Banks was cautiously recounting his life-story in terms of his fragile memory in order to identify who he really was. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy begins to identify small but peculiar turning points that might have instigated awareness of their conditions as her memories are reworked in the present circumstances. For each protagonist, remembering offers a catharsis through which they can solve their past and they find peace in the present because they have an opportunity to a future. James Procter pointed out that:

All of Ishiguro’s novels to date, narration is, at least partly, a therapeutic process. The novels are not attempts to render the past convincingly, but rather to pursue how individuals interpret and construct that past.\(^{17}\)
In the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, the way memories work is geared towards producing coherence between past and present experience. The structuring of the past as a narrative thus allows the characters to incorporate various fragments and aspects of their lives into one continuous pattern. However, Ishiguro notes that he likes to follow his protagonists “thoughts around as they try to trip themselves up or hide from themselves.” In narrating their past, the protagonists thus suppress their feelings in order to protect themselves from painful experiences and to maintain their dignity as well. Ishiguro comments of his protagonists - as characters who:

Know what they have to avoid and that determines the route they take through memory, and through the past. There’s no coincidence that they’re worrying because they sense there isn’t something quite right there. But of course memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception.

Therefore in Ishiguro’s novels, the nature of memory which is characterized by its unreliability is explored and at the same time, memory is depicted as a means of constructing narratives and identity. Ishiguro notes:

I’m interested in memory because it’s a filter through which we see our lives, and because it’s foggy and obscure, the opportunities for self-deception are there. In the end, as a writer, I’m more interested in what people tell themselves happened rather than what actually happened.

His works exude an increasing interest in the narrative structuring of memory as a way of making sense of the past. Memory is of paramount importance in building up the identity of his
characters, and at the same time, it is also highly ambivalent: at times, it can be used to control self narratives, but often it proves to be beyond the control of the present self.

Chapter 1 – Situating Kazuo Ishiguro Within the Realms of Memory and Identity:

This chapter has focused upon the introductory components that are related to the framework of the author’s world view, as well as a brief biographical sketch of Kazuo Ishiguro.

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the many writers who has concerned himself with the unique interrelationship between memory and identity. Memory, however fragile and unreliable becomes the means of establishing identity in his works. The chapter explores ways in which memory and identity are represented in literature and especially in Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction. In the novels of Ishiguro as well as in real life, memory is an act of reflection and recall. The characters in the novels of Ishiguro find that memory often functions as a filter through which individuals are able to recall episodes in a manner which they are in tune with and how they would have wanted it to be.

Chapter 2- Memory and Unreliable Narration:

This chapter has dwelt specifically upon the dynamics of memory in Ishiguro’s discourse in terms of distortion and its selectivity, partial forgetting or biased elaboration of past experiences. In Ishiguro’s fiction, the tension between the narrators’ conscious version, the past they narrate, and the manner in which they convey their narration without intending or even realizing it makes them appear as unreliable narrators. Therefore, the subjectivity and selectivity of memory is explored through the device of unreliable narration. The chapter also explores the complex time structure of Ishiguro’s novels which contributes to the staging of memory as a non-linear and highly subjective phenomenon. Ishiguro has developed characters who return to
the past with the help of memory in order to heal the wounds, and to replace what has been lost and to subsequently recreate a sense of identity.

Chapter 3 – Narrative, Memory and Identity:

This chapter has concentrated upon the interconnection of memory, narrative and identity and how these concepts enable Ishiguro’s protagonists to reorder their past. In his discourse Ishiguro vividly portrays how memory and narrative are the windows through which individuals are able to understand and subsequently are understood by others. He also explicitly denotes that the narrative is absolutely dependent on the memory of the narrator. It is made of memories, it discloses memories, it creates memories, and it brings back memories. His works depict that without the ability to remember past experiences, there is no life story to be created. Ishiguro’s works exude that consistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the actions and events of the past, and the experience of the present are integral to a sense of personal identity. The concept of identity which is constructed in narratives is also dependent upon the function and process of memory and the kind of access it gives to the past. In essence, memory is the fundamental force behind identity formation and self-understanding.

Chapter 4 – Memory, History and Identity:

The chapter has reflected upon the tension between memory and history. The chapter explores ways in which Ishiguro’s narratives portray the function of memory as a primary source for understanding how differing versions of the past are reconstructed. Memory, as such, is the process by which the quest for identity becomes the search for one’s own history. By producing alternate narrative patterns, Ishiguro’s writing provides openings for other narratives, and other versions of history which are precipitated by memory.
Chapter 5 – Conclusion:

This chapter has analysed and in the process, summed up the aspects that are related towards the concept of memory and identity that have been rendered within this study.

As denoted at the very outset, the thematic concern of the research has been focused upon the aspect of memory and identity, and thus the study has concluded that Ishiguro is concerned in terms of constructing identity with the aid of memory. His novels selected for study portray the silent anguish of people who suffer, and in like manner he renders them a voice for locating solace. Through his literary art, Ishiguro opens up a new consciousness which examines how people simultaneously deceive and protect themselves in the language used by them. The study has also concluded that always in his writing there is a depiction that people reflect their past life in the light of ‘what wasn’t known then’, and that each had done something in the past which they regret or are ashamed of. It has also established that through his characters, Ishiguro explores the intrinsic nature of memory with all its fallibilities in order to serve one’s own end. His characters reflect their past in terms of establishing the kind of identity which they would want to have. However, they eventually arrive at the conclusion that they have lived a failed life. Consequently, his characters locate their own selves within the narrative and have thereby established a semblance of their own identities.

In conclusion, the study has reflected that in Ishiguro’s work, the dignity of an individual lies in the acceptance of identity, and that memory, however fragile has formulated the foundation of identity. Each of the novels that have been selected for study support Ishiguro’s contention that, though his characters fail at something essential in their lives, they eventually find the momentum and energy with the help of their memory to keep moving forward. The futility of his characters’ plights, coupled with their ability to remain forward-looking, adds a
poignant dimension to Ishiguro’s view of the world. With his literary approach to the subject of memory, Ishiguro has contributed to the understanding of how the human mind works and how memory plays such an important role in the formation of identity.
NOTES


21 As elucidated by Nicola King in *Memory, Narrative and Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000. Print. 22. King emphasizes that much human experience or actions takes place under the mark of ‘what wasn’t known then’: what one remember are events which took place in a kind of innocence.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


JOURNALS, PERIODICALS AND ELECTRONIC SOURCES


