CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
Kazuo Ishiguro has produced a body of best-selling work that receives consistent praise from both academic and broadsheet critics whilst appealing to a global readership. His works occupy an important place in contemporary culture. Leavis states 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’.”¹ These terms certainly included Kazuo Ishiguro. The works of Kazuo Ishiguro is a powerful exploration of ethics as well as an insightful exploration of the human psyche. As Sebatian Groes denotes:

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.²

In all of his novels, Ishiguro makes an overt attempt to denote his protagonists’ private penchant for disillusioning themselves as a way to seek comfort from a difficult past. Each of the novels selected for study therefore ends on a somewhat odd or confusing note: an awkward cheerfulness permeates each character’s consciousness. Ishiguro expresses:

I do feel it somehow pathetic, that kind of cheering up of oneself. But on the other hand, I have a certain kind of admiration for the human capacity to do just that. There’s something admiration and courageous about it, even if it seems completely futile.³

This remark is a reminder that literature, like all reflections about human experiences, is an aesthetic form of understanding life: all fictional utterances represent “homesickness [as the expression of] the urge to be at home everywhere”.⁴ Ishiguro keenly and sympathetically
portrays people who are searching for identity with the aid of their memory. Ishiguro admits that leaving Japan has left him a sense of “emotional bereavement or emotional deprivation”, a regret for “never having gone back… [for the] whole person [he] was supposed to become”. Like his protagonists, he feels nostalgia for missed possibilities, wondering about the kind of person which he might have been. 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. This study has predominantly concentrated upon the problems and possibilities of creating or preserving a sense of identity. Ishiguro’s novels challenges the idea that memory is a mere keeping of records and argues how memory allows to fulfill the important functions in reconstructing past events in a way that generate meaning for the present. The major concern of Ishiguro’s work remains the ability to select and interpret relevant experiences in retrospect. In
“How We Tell It and How It Was”, Janet Feigenbaum explains the importance of memory and its vital connections to identity:

Without memory we would have no goals or direction, no ability to plan a course of action and no concept of ourselves in relation to the world. Our capacity to learn from mistakes and to change and grow as individuals depends on our memories.\(^7\)

Similarly, Ishiguro’s protagonists selected for study - Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Banks and Kathy H., despite all the grave differences between them, are all characters who have a lot in common. The novels which they narrate respectively, all “deal in the same meticulous, elegiac way, with the unreliability and the difficulty of self-knowledge”.\(^8\) Ishiguro’s protagonists “draw us into their emotional world”.\(^9\) The narrators deceive themselves and they have to do this because otherwise they would consciously subvert their own identities. Unconsciously of course, they do exactly that, and thus Ishiguro has his first-person narrators unwittingly reveal their identity crisis. Feigenbaum’s article expresses “scientifically” what Ishiguro’s novels and his narrators exemplify, comment on, and make the readers aware of, in a literary form:

We know from research that autobiographical memories are not accurate historical accounts of events as they happened at the time of encoding, but rather a reconstruction based on a number of affective and motivational factors. Memories are contaminated with information from similar events and so change over the years as we encounter new experiences. What we remember about an event depends on when and for what purpose we are remembering, reflecting our beliefs about ourselves and the world at
present. Thus memory is continually reprocesses and reinterpreted with changing contexts and perceptions.\textsuperscript{10}

Thus the nature of memory is clearly depicted in these lines where distortion, suppression and unreliability functions as the texture of memory and which in turn becomes the establishment of one’s identity. Ishiguro has repeatedly and diversely used memory as a literary trope and as a mechanism to enrich his characters and his plot. His novels are fictional memories that are written by ordinary people tormented by guilt and doubt. The moment of remembering or recollecting occurs at the time of crisis, when the narrators are nearing death or the end of their productive lives. Instead of bringing peace, their introspection makes the characters aware of their faults, personal failures and past mistakes. Memory is then a cathartic filter which allows for manipulation by the narrators so as to provide them with what they need. As Linda Grant suggests [quoting Steven Rose]:

\begin{quote}
The self isn’t a little person inside the brain, it’s a work-in-progress, ‘a perpetually re-created neurobiological state, so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows its being remade’. Memory … is a fabrication, a new reconstruction of the original. And yet out of these unstable foundations we still construct an identity. It’s a miracle.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

In \textit{A Pale View of Hills}, Etsuko thus goes back to the past in order to render a conceivable identity. With her fragile memory, she reconstructs the past. The past has sometimes “grown hazy”, and accepts her memory’s unreliability.\textsuperscript{12} She also hints at supernatural possibilities or refers to events or people (in both the past as well as the present) whose significance she leaves
unexplained. The calm tone she has used throughout shows that Etsuko is suppressing or hiding from the painful facts of her period. Her narrative only appears lucidly constructed, despite her own misgivings about a flawed memory, but it is riddled with evasions of more painful truths about her life and her daughter’s death. In an interview Ishiguro notes:

She[Etsuko] feels a great guilt, that out of her own emotional longings for a different sort of life, she sacrificed her first daughter’s happiness. There is that side of her that feels resistant to her younger daughter Niki, who tells her, “You’ve got nothing to worry about”, and that she did exactly the right things. She feels that this isn’t quite a true account. But on the other hand, she does need to arrange her memories in a way that allows her to salvage some dignity.13

Therefore, in *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro denotes memory as a facilitator that allows his narrator, Etsuko to come to terms with her guilt on a number of issues by analyzing her life in Japan and later on in England. Ishiguro’s narrator thus used her memories with three distinct but interrelated functions: as a means to form her own identity in the present time; to free herself from the responsibility of her past life in Japan and her daughter’s suicide; and to overcome her guilt by relocating her identity through her alter-ego Sachiko. Similarly in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro depicted memory as a means of reshaping and rearranging the past in order to serve one’s own end. The narrator Ono like Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* is not so sure of the things that happened in the past and has employed a number of strategies so as to conceal the fact that he is now regarded as a traitor after Japan has lost the war. Jeffrey Prager in *Presenting the Past* elucidates:
The construction of a self depends upon our capacity to provide a coherent, consistent, cohesive, continuity-producing account that, partly by reference to the past, locates us meaningfully in the present situation in relation to ourselves and to others, and poised to reckon with the future.\textsuperscript{14}

After the war, when Ono realizes that the tide of thought has turned against him, he pretends that he is not concerned about prestige, but he admits to being wrong in supporting the Nationalists. His influence however is put into question by slips in his narrative. Ishiguro expresses his interest in such characters:

\begin{quote}
I’m very interested in people who have a great desire to do something of worth, something to distinguish themselves, but who, maybe in the end find that they don’t have it in them to be more than ordinary.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Ono’s narration is replete with manipulations and elisions that seek to belie this ordinariness. As Ishiguro has pointed out, Ono’s diary entries allow Ono to make slight changes he can modify as he goes.\textsuperscript{16} Wong suggests that when Ishiguro lets his characters unknowingly reveal their flaws, those characters are able to salvage dignity, “a quality important to the author’s version of how people accept and deal with failure in their lives”.\textsuperscript{17} The identity crisis faced by Ono in \textit{An Artist of the Floating World} and Stevens in \textit{The Remains of the Day} is summed up by Scanlan as:

\begin{quote}
Ishiguro’s narrators, both old men looking back from the postwar period of their involvement with fascism in the 1930s, in some ways resemble the unreliable narrators of older fiction. But Ishiguro uses them to explore the extent to which identity is socially constructed, and the consequent instability of selves formed in a traditional culture when that culture dies.
\end{quote}
Identity in these novels is not an essence but instead depends on a social context that has changed so radically as to leave characters floating in an unfamiliar world. Through his first-person narrators, Ishiguro dramatizes the connections between public history and an ‘I’ dependent for definition on its circumstances, suggesting that the inconfident and marginalized self of the posthumanist world view is drawn to find authority in totalitarian politics.  

At the end of the novel, Ono however discovers that a large portion of his life had been wasted. Through the character of Ono, Ishiguro explores how rearranging and reshaping of memory enable an individual to finally accept the painful truth about oneself. And this is what Ishiguro deems as dignity. He notes:

He[Ono] keeps having to admit this and admit that, and in the end he even accepts his smallness in the world. I suppose I wanted to suggest that a person’s dignity isn’t necessarily dependent on what he achieves in his life or in his career; that there is something dignified about Ono in the end that arises simply out of his being human.

In The Remains of the Day, Ishiguro thematises memory by constantly reminding the readers that the narrator is attempting to recall. Lowenthal remarks that “all awareness of the past is founded on memory” and such awareness is fundamental to establishing identity. Freud’s model of archaeological excavation which illustrates that memories are believed to exist ‘somewhere’ and waiting to be rediscovered by the remembering subject and uncontaminated by subsequent experience and time’s attrition has been challenged by recent theories of memory and Ishiguro’s novels also challenge this notion and presents memory to be highly foible,
fragmented and unreliable. In this novel also, Ishiguro produces two distinct narratives of Stevens’ life: set in two time periods – the past between the world wars and the present as Stevens undertakes his holiday. The narrative incorporates both Stevens’ knowledge of and his blindness to the events he recounts. Like Etsuko and Ono, Stevens also casts himself as both progenitor of a virtuous life and victim of inexplicable physical or historical circumstances. Like Ono, he comes to believe fully in his version of events; unlike Ono, Stevens eventually reveals that this mask is too great a burden to bear and he is depicted as almost crying at the end of the novel. Stevens, like Ono before him, does not have much confidence in his story. Mark L. Howe states that:

Both memory and self[identity] are dynamical systems, neither remain static during the interval between event encoding and autobiographical recall. In fact, both the content of memory and the element that constitute the self are thought to change as function of new experiences, knowledge, and reorganization of what already exists. Interestingly, such changes can include the creation of false memories about past events, false memories that tend to be constrained by our self concept. In particular, false memories about our past are more easily thought to be authentic if they are consistent with our cultural view of ourselves.23

Therefore, Ishiguro presents in Stevens how memories are not mere reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions and this further denotes that Stevens remembers the past according to the needs of the present identity. However, in examining his past with his fragile memory, Stevens is able to come to term with his own identity. Although he is just a butler, he
desperately wants to contribute to something ‘larger’ and work honestly for a great man like Lord Darlington. As Ishiguro notes:

He[Stevens] gets a lot of his sense of self-respect from an idea that he is serving a great man. If he were someone who didn’t care at all about how his contribution was being used, then he wouldn’t end up a broken man at the end. He is driven by this urge to do things perfectly, but that perfect contribution should be, no matter however small a contribution it is, to improving humanity. That is Stevens’s position. He’s not content to say, “I’ll just get by and earn money so that I can feed myself”.24

Stevens at the end of the novel finally learns who he really is and with the aid of his memory he has finally accepted his identity. Ishiguro states several times in an interview that the ability to accept life with all its flaws and failures, the kind of identity that are formed with memory, rather than focusing on the rebellious spirit, has helped people in moving on with their lives.25 Stevens’ search for dignity is finally achieved at the end when he admits the mistakes he had done.

The role played by memory in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me go* is different from *A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* where in these novels, memory was something to be searched through very warily for the crucial wrong turns, and for the sources of regret and remorse. On the other hand, in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go*, Banks’ and Kathy’s memories are more benevolent. They are principally a source of consolation. For Banks, his childhood memories or his nostalgic yearning for childhood days with his mother and father becomes a source of inspiration. Therefore, the constructive character of memory is depicted in *When We Were Orphans* where Banks’ memory becomes the driving force in his life. Similarly in *Never Let Me go* Ishiguro foregrounds the fact
that identity resides in memory, not in the body. Kathy’s time runs out and as her world empties one by one of the things she holds dear, what she clings to are her memories of the same. In contrast to the narrators of *A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* who confessed openly to flawed memories and then worked transparently to disclose gaps, even when they were cognizant of efforts to conceal the less flattering aspects of their lives, the narrators of *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me go*—Banks and Kathy—operate with a more unusual subtlety. W. Wolfgang Holdheim describes a process of “narrativity as knowledge” where characters in a text—in the process of constructing a text, as these first-person narrators do—undergo a gradual reordering of cognition, a reshaping of understanding, and a re-evaluation of meaning. “Contingency” is a concept elaborated by Holdheim to describe how individuals’ anticipation of events to transpire depends on chance, uncertainty, or fortuitousness beyond their immediate control:

> Contingency has always been considered a basic category of human duration, and in the constant reassessment of what is acceptable we recognize that incessant shaping of the fragmentary, that continuization of the discontinuous that is the very earmark of lived time.\(^{26}\)

In order to continue living and to organize the fragmentary identity, Ishiguro’s thus narrators return to their past.

illustrates that the painful past cannot be remade but memories of the past can help in the understanding of how events have evolved, which is essential for the acceptance of an identity. At the same time, throughout his oeuvre, Ishiguro has depicted the fragile, foible, selective and unreliable nature of memory which foregrounds the complexity for one’s search of identity. It is the nature and function of this unreliability that gives Ishiguro’s work a distinctive, and powerful, contemporary resonance, and that has driven much of his critical reception. Kathleen Wall correctly notes that *The Remains of the Day* both facilitates and frustrate the discovery of truth, and that the text: “deconstructs the notion of truth, and consequently questions both ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ narration and the distinctions we made between them”.27 Ishiguro has presented his protagonists, namely, Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Banks, and Kathy H. as ordinary figures in extraordinary times and places. They narrate complex and ambiguous stories that reveal, in their haunting and incurious incompleteness, the traumatized, the fragmented sense of identity of the narrators themselves. The troubled form and direction of their memory and narrative reveal the difficulty of reconstructing an identity that is shattered by personal suffering in the midst of a wider catastrophe. Typically, the events of their original trauma, which are at once personal and general remain absent or occluded from the account, beyond description or precise recall. Universal themes of love and loss are interwoven as the narrators struggle against processes of misremembering, forgetting and suppression, to construct for themselves a story that draws together either the fragmented elements of their own identity, or a coherent account of the traumatic historical events. Ishiguro’s fiction illustrates that remembering the past with the help of memory is not a case of restoring an original identity, but a continuous process of ‘re-membering’ of putting together the disconnected events in order to come to terms with one self
and eventually with one’s own identity. Ishiguro also commented on his use of storytelling in his novels:

I am interested in storytelling in the sense of … how individuals come to terms with their past and decide what to do next … What are the tools by which we tell these stories? What exactly are these stories that we tell ourselves? … Are we trying to be honest or are we trying to deceive, or comfort ourselves?²⁸

In exploring these questions, Ishiguro’s novels evoke a delicate evocation of universal human concerns where his protagonists have engaged themselves in a “quest for consolation” that is “universal”.²⁹ Throughout his oeuvre, Ishiguro states that “international books are rooted in a very small place”,³⁰ a statement that explains much of his fiction. He is an international writer not because his works have been set in Japan, United Kingdom, Europe and China, but because of his ability to concentrate on the very small spaces of the characters that inhabit those settings and Mathew Beedham also astutely opines that Ishiguro is an international writer because his novels “peer into the experiences of so many of us in so many places”.³¹

However, Ishiguro’s narrators of A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of The Floating World, The Remains of the Day and When We Were Orphans are nonetheless situated at precise points of imperial crisis and collapse, whether in post-war Japan or in the country houses of Britain and it is significant how the problems of their narratives can be brought into clearer focus through analysis of the ways in which the stories they narrate involve the construction of historically specific identities. Their identities are destroyed not only by the unspeakable catastrophic event, but also by the processes and institutions of nationhood, government and ideology that determine, and then mediate such events. However, Ishiguro has analysed that in his novels he
presents not the conventional “historical text”. It is therefore in this connection that Ishiguro’s work is related to what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” interrupting the discourse of history to reveal the ideological essence of all its representations. Ishiguro’s portrayal of history questions the extent to which public history bypass private memory and thus shows how differing versions of the past can be reconstructed in examining the history of the nation.

*A Pale View of Hills, An Artist of the Floating World, The Remains of the Day and When We Were Orphans* engaged historical context which led critic like Barry Lewis amongst others, interpret Ishiguro’s fiction as an attempt to emphasize upon his Japanese ethnicity. But a deeper study of Ishiguro’s fiction shows that history and politics are explored primarily in order to plumb the depths and shallows of the characters’ emotional and psychological landscapes. Significantly, Ishiguro has adopted a new technique to explore what preoccupies him and thus abandoned incorporating the history of the nation in presenting the crisis of identity in *Never Let Me Go*. However, despite what appears as radical shifts in the subject mood, Ishiguro remains faithful to his task of presenting characters who are caught in circumstances beyond their immediate control but through which they begin the arduous process of reconsidering and understanding their complicated lives. Therefore in this sense, what preoccupies Ishiguro is the psychological defenses and the “emotional arena” most broadly construed: the “suppression of emotion”, the idealization of the self, and the ways in which individuals self-protectively mix “memory and desire”.

Significantly, 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 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 by the language that they use. The study has also concluded that always in his writing there is a depiction that people reflect their past 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 to serve one’s own end. With each successive work, Ishiguro captures the elusiveness of human consciousness and the manner in which people justify losses as well as failures. His characters reflect their past in terms of establishing a kind of identity which they would want to have, but eventually arrive at the conclusion that they have lived a failed life. Consequently, his characters locate their own selves within the narratives 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 memories) in order to keep moving forward. The futility of their plight, 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 remains integral in the formation of identity.
NOTES


9. Ibid.


16 Ibid. 9.


