

## Memory and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of The Floating World*

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**Abstract:** The article is an attempt to examine aspects related to memory and identity, and its thematic centrality in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist Of The Floating World* (1986) with special references to the manner in which memory initiates the construction of identity. Kazuo Ishiguro concerns himself with memories and their problematic function in the process of forming one's identity. His narratives centre upon memories and their potential to digress and distort, to forget and to silence the past and above all to haunt the present. The protagonists of his fiction seek to overcome loss by making sense of the past through acts of remembrances. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the protagonist, Ono 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. In the emptiness of his waning life, he desperately sought relief from the desolation that he faced, and therefore he returns to his past (working to extract from it proof of his own significance) and hence to deny the unendurable emptiness and powerlessness of his life.

**Keywords:** Memory, Narrative, Identity.

The term 'memory' has been defined by a number of psychologists, philosophers and thinkers. Amongst them, Tim Woods and Peter Middleton who concern themselves with the workings of textuality and memory in literary texts elucidates: "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". (Middleton and Woods 2) Memory can create the illusion of a momentary return to a lost past and its operations also articulate the complex relationship between past, present and future in human consciousness. The important role memory plays in establishing a sense of identity can hardly be exaggerated. 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". (Birke 2) 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 the social relationships, Gergen describes memory as a "form of social skill" (Gergen 101) and memory according to Assman is a "backbone of identity" (Quoted from Birke 1). In a postmodern era, in which it is perceived as especially hard to attain a

satisfactory sense of personal identity, Nunner and Inkler states that autobiographical memory constitutes a stabilizing factor in what has come to be seen as a state of perpetual crisis of identity.(ibid) Ishiguro utilizes autobiographical/individual memory where his characters construct the past and it is denoted as a basis for identity and in relation to this, Dorothee Birke states that nothing could be more personal and more unique than one's own memories (ibid 24). In *An Artist of the Floating World*, narrative and memory allows forging meaningful links between past events and present life, to define the present self in relation to the past self and to assert development. In this way, narrative helps to structure memory and becomes an integral aspect of autobiographical memory, as Bruner notes: "We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing and so on". (ibid 3) Literature has manifold ways of taking up and transforming ideas and problems that are part of contemporary culture. In particular, literary works offer genuine contribution to the understanding of the mechanisms of memory's role in identity formation. They grant insights into the processes that are hard to observe that is, the workings of the human mind. As Finke has elucidated, literature provide a laboratory for the imagination in which concepts and assumptions about memory and identity can be staged, tested or taken to extreme (Quoted from Birke 3). In an essay entitled "The Literary Representation of Memory", Birgit Neumann opines: "Memory and the processes of remembering have always been an important, indeed a dominant, topic in literature. Numerous texts portray how individuals and groups remember their past and how they construct identities on the basis of the recollected memories. They are concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present, and they illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity. Such texts highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer's present – his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events".(Neuman 333) Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the many novelists that amply utilize memory as the focal point in his novels. One of the reasons that Ishiguro employs memory in his novels is to recreate Japan which had become a land of speculation for him. He states: "I wished to recreate this Japan – put together all these memories, and all these imaginary ideas I had about this landscape called Japan. I wanted to make it safe, preserve it in book, before it faded away from my memory altogether".(Shaffer and Wong 53) Through memory, Ishiguro searches deep in his mind for the flavours and colours that he was surrounded by, in an attempt to draw those facets into his writings. Significantly, his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* are set in Japan. However, despite this distinctive background, Ishiguro chooses not to write directly about himself. He finds it more productive to deal with characters who are unlike him. Distancing forces him to look at his subjects from the outside. It helps him to avoid the temptation to deal with material that is personally interesting, but artistically irrelevant. Nevertheless, this careful excision

of himself from his fictions has not prevented critics from reading them almost exclusively in terms of his Japanese origins (Lewis 8). When Ishiguro first became a public figure he suffered greatly from stereotyping by critics and reviewers, who could not resist 'compulsory analogies to Sumo wrestling, geisha girls and Toyotas' and nicknamed him the 'Shogun of Sydenham' (Lewis 8). This worked to Ishiguro's advantage to some extent, as it gives him a distinct marketable image, especially in a literary climate of the 1980s where there was an active search for non-native English writers.

The struggle and concern with identity has been inherent so much that in the mid-1980s, when Ishiguro's writing career was ascending, the British Council's short leaflets introducing British authors had under a photograph of Ishiguro a quote from him: "I consider myself an international writer". (Quoted from Wong 7) Over the years, this self-declaration has been reiterated by reviewers and academic critics of his novels, and while nobody has fully defined what it means exactly to be an 'international writer', the term is a convenient one that addresses both Ishiguro's obvious Japanese ancestry and the kind of broad themes with universal appeal that is found in his fiction. Salman Rushdie celebrates the latter aspect of Ishiguro's identity when he notes that Ishiguro employs a 'brilliant subversion of the fictional modes' in his discussion of large themes such as 'death, change, pain and evil'. (Rushdie 244) Ishiguro has consistently felt the need to explain his fictional inventions especially in order to respond to academic perspectives that are advanced by scholars like Bruce King amongst others, who attempt to solidify the concept of what constitutes an 'international writer'. Ishiguro wants the term to denote his literary goals and not his ethnicity alone and this would be prevalent to the perspective of identity. King focuses on ethnicity when he identifies Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta, Timothy Mo, and Ishiguro as the key figures of 'the new internationalism', and distinguishes such writers from commonwealth, third world, and other ethnic categories. According to King, they 'write about their native lands or the immigrant experience from within the mainstream of British literature'. (King 193) In Ishiguro's case, however, writing about his native land (Japan) is an act of invention, and he is not speaking from the perspective of an immigrant in either of the first two novels. For his part, Ishiguro, the writer with Japanese origins, is not writing about his own immigrant experiences in Great Britain, rather he focus upon the emotional turmoil of his protagonist's personal situation against the orchestrated background of nuclear devastation, so that he can appeal to a wide audience. Ishiguro does not regard his novels as academic exercises; neither does he wish to write without "communicating a vision". (Shaffer and Wong 83) The main focus of his writing is to rework or to undermine certain ideals or mythologies structuring individuals, communities, or their nations, mainly in an effort to regard the impact of such visions on people's actual lives. Ishiguro is not out to baffle, intellectualize, trivialize, or otherwise appropriate real human pain and happiness for its own sake, but he seeks to find new ways of expressing these in a discourse of fiction. In noticing that Ishiguro is of

Japanese ancestry, it may be relevant to approach his fiction in terms of cultural paradigms, and at the same time, it cannot be escaped from the attention that he is a writer who writes sensibly and insightfully about grand human concerns. Ishiguro believes that within the realm of memory and identity, he will be able to denote aspects related to human concerns and the subtle indication of hope and human endurance appear in all of his novels. Having worked as a social worker in Glasgow and London in the 1980s, Ishiguro probably shaped his understanding of human awareness and suffering, and these are 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. In *An Artist of the Floating World* Ono has made choices in his past and so he has to face the consequences in the present. Tim Woods and Peter Middleton emphasize that: "The past is now widely believed to depend upon memory, personal and social, traumatic and repressed, involuntary and planned". (Middleton and Woods 82). Memory thus becomes the mediator between the present and the past. It is now widely believed that memory is the foundation of personal identity, and that anything that damages it will threaten the self. Daniel L. Schacter observes: "Extensively rehearsed and elaborated memories come to form the core of our life stories - narratives of self that help us define and understand our identity and our place in the world". (Schacter 299) These elements have been predominant markers that remain central in *An Artist of the Floating World*. In the novel, Ishiguro depicted memory as a means of establishing identity. At the same time, the aspect of memory with all its foggy texture in terms of suppression, distortion, and unreliability is also explored. Due to the lack of perspective to see beyond his environment, Ono, a painter who rose to fame during Japan's heights of military nationalism in the 1930s, has to reorder his past in order to come to terms with that period, or as he puts it: "with the mistakes one has made in the course of one's life" (Ishiguro 125). Ishiguro explains that he wanted to construct a character who is really no longer a part of the present world in which he found himself. Ono has made a decision to support national imperialism when it was already gaining ground and reveals that he is blind to the perspective in which the younger generation now regards him. As he represents the events of his past, however, Ono is forced to embellish the details of his actions and utterances in order to prove that one rests on an unwavering adherence to honorable principles. Overlooking the inaccuracies and hypocrisies that result from his doing so, Ono, in the first section of the narrative works to confirm that an examination of his past will reveal only that which is admirable. But as the narrative progresses, it is revealed that his actions severely challenges the notion that Ono's career deserves vindication and instead indicates that it was purely "a negative influence, an influence now best erased and forgotten" (Ishiguro 123). Subsequently, Ono replaces the absolute worthiness of his past deeds depicted in his narration with an

absolute acceptance of their deplorability. He suddenly announces that he is prepared freely to admit he made mistakes that much of what he did was ultimately harmful to the Japanese nation and that his was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for Japanese people. Unable to ignore that the world now condemned his past deeds, Ono suddenly finds it to his advantage to admit to having committed great wrongs. Ono, now therefore centered on an active acceptance of responsibility of his past deeds, an acknowledgement that his decisions were ill-founded, but with the insistence that, although he had since been proven wrong, at the time, he acted in good faith and believed in all sincerity that he was achieving good for his countrymen. The narrator strives to structure and present this new reading of his past as noble, while asserting that there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes that one has made in the course of one's life particularly when such mistakes are made in the best of faith. He narrates: "I am not too proud to see that I was a man of some influence who used that influence towards a disastrous end" (ibid 192). If the events of his life and particularly his participation in the imperialist movement have been merely contingent rather than deliberate and determined, Ono might have unthinkingly participated in a disastrous, destructive campaign. Through his narrative, Ono has striven to establish that he in fact possesses a distinguished, lasting and well defined identity. In reordering and newly composing his past, Ono has hoped to extract from the dark corridors, from the blurred sensations, the merging lantern – lit images and echoing sounds, a sense of identity and clarity, concrete evidence that he has achieved something of real value and distinction in his life.

However, the scattered unconnected events of Ono's past never are linked together in a coherent web of significance, or bound within a dark outline. The identity that Ono constructs for himself within his narrative, the identity in which his past has made a significant mark that will not fade, are like his paintings, insular divorced from that very outside world on which he hopes to have had an impact, and which he claims to portray. Ishiguro observes that Ono's story is about 'the need to follow leaders and the need to exercise power over subordinates, as a sort of motor by which society operates', and that the novel "might be look at it not as a Japanese phenomenon but as a human phenomenon" (Shaffer and Wong10). Denial of a painful version of one's past amounts to the kind of effacement that philosopher Walter Benjamin describes as an inherently dangerous one for evolving societies: for one "to articulate the past historically" does not mean to recognize it the "way it really was" and that "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns the past threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 255). Ono's erasure of the stains of his past leave indelible traces however, and his narrative portrays that the reconstruction of his inglorious past has helped in understanding the events of his life. As Maurice Blanchot states: "In order either to confess or to engage in self analysis, or in order to expose oneself...to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide" (Blanchot 64). At the end of his narrative, Ono is able to express a "genuine gladness" with

regard to the disappearance of his world and the rebuilding of his city. His memory and narratives enable him to reorder the events of his life into a meaningful one and helps him in accepting his life and his identity with all its flaws and failures.

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