

Reordering the Self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

- C. Lalrinfeli

Abstract: The article is an attempt to denote the aspect that memory shapes the present existence. It takes interest in how the chief protagonist in Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, makes an attempt to reorder her self in terms of establishing a permanent and coherent identity by narrating the past events. Daniel L. Schacter, deduces: "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 to the primary texts by Kazuo Ishiguro. In the novel, the chief protagonist, Etsuko uses her memory to overcome loss and reorder her self. Narration is the only source for Etsuko as she attempts to order her self. However the past cannot be changed and it is only through her narration that she orders her life as it is and by which subsequently she gains an ordered existence.

Keywords: Memory, Narrative, Identity.

Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) has depicted the life of a Japanese woman who struggles to come to terms with her own self and tries to figure herself anew through her interpretation by going back to the past. Subsequently, in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, the characters seek to overcome loss by making sense of the past through acts of remembrances. Paul Connerton, in his book *How Societies Remember* (1989), notes that experience shapes the present. According to him an individual's identity is constructed through past events and the remembering of those past events (Connerton 3). Subsequently, Kazuo Ishiguro's treatment of memory is in tune with this. The characters reorder their past in order to come to terms with themselves and to establish a coherent identity. Etsuko in Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, uses her memory and reorders her past in order to overcome a loss and her memory is subsequently shaped in order to come to terms with her own self and to establish a coherent identity. Etsuko reorders her past in an attempt to make sense of the trauma of the present.

The novel opens with Etsuko, a middle aged Japanese woman and the first person narrator, receiving her second daughter Niki at her country house in Southern England. Forgetting is used as an essential symbol of memory. Etsuko does not want to be reminded of the past. She notes, "I – perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past..." (Ishiguro 9). The reason for this, is that her elder daughter has committed suicide by hanging herself in her rented room in Manchester.

The death of Keiko is at the same time the cause for her younger daughter Niki's five days spring visit. This visit functions as the frame for Etsuko's memories, and is set in the early nineteen eighties. Although she did not want to discuss the death of Keiko and admits that "Such things are long in the past now and [she] have no wish to ponder them yet again" (Ishiguro 91), but at the same time the death of Keiko "was never far away, hovering over [them] whenever [they] talked." (Ishiguro 10). Even though Etsuko denies the fact that her story is about her suppressed feelings on the death of her daughter as well as a sense of personal failure, it is obvious that she narrates her story in order to overcome her painful past. Brian W. Shaffer notes that Etsuko's "real" story is told exclusively by indirection...these circumstances are precisely what her narrative, at least indirectly, is all about. (Shaffer 16). Subsequently, Etsuko has to recover her sense of self which she had lost due to her daughter's death and had to reorder the past in order to establish a coherent existence. Thus, Etsuko's memories go back to one summer in post-war Japan before she came to England some two decades earlier. Cynthia F. Wong deduces:

The return to the past is prompted by an intense and personal emotion in the present moment of narration; each foretells in the opening of the respective texts of a futile, but necessary effort to reconfigure the events owing to subsequent emotion which the reader will identify as their shame about the past. Each return to a past which might atone for the present. Even a failed memory might allow each to re-examine significance in the new context and to account for the solitude of that past. (Wong 129)

Consequently, Etsuko is without structure or significance. Her daily life has always been empty and undistinguished, marked primarily by "standing at the windows, looking out into the darkness" (Ishiguro 10). She does not do a great deal and leads a very easy life by occupying herself with small chores while otherwise wasting her time away.

Reflecting upon her life, Etsuko realizes that her role as a mother has not granted her a permanent identity or a sense of importance. She had abandoned her first husband and her second is now dead. For most of the novel, and the sections that take place in Nagasaki, Etsuko is pregnant, and is thus, neither childless, nor a mother. In the portion of the text which is set in England, she has had two daughters, but she lives alone and thus is, effectively childless. One daughter is dead and the other has moved away and by maintaining a strict discipline, has forbidden Etsuko to play the role of mother in her life. Keiko's death has presented for Etsuko a complex and painful challenge. She maintains that the death of Keiko and the question of her responsibility are long in the past now and she has no wish to ponder upon them yet again, (Ishiguro 91) but she is simultaneously overwhelmed by the need to wrestle with the matter. She asserts:

My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable and I know I always kept Keiko's interest very much at heart. There is nothing to be

gained in going over such matters again. (Ishiguro 91).

In spite of her reluctance to face reality, Etsuko feels that she needs to wrestle with the painful past in order to come to term with her own 'self', which is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself. Mark Freeman deduces:

The very act of making sense of ourselves and others, is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself. (Freeman 21)

Subsequently, Etsuko in her narrative filters her memory through the character of Sachiko and Mariko, with whom she blurs her own identity and that of Keiko respectively. She distances herself from her historical past and rewrites an account of her life. Cynthia F. Wong notes that as the narrative evolves and as details become paradoxically more clear and murky, the reader discovers that Etsuko remembers the 'friendship of no more than a matter of some several weeks one summer many years ago' (Ishiguro 11) in order to explain to herself as to what happened to Keiko. The details of Sachiko's life seem to mirror and foreshadow aspects of Etsuko's own life and her return to this period initially seems to help her mourn for Keiko. (Wong 27)

Although the extent to which Sachiko and Etsuko overlap remains unsure, it is clear that the character of Sachiko serves as a vehicle through which Etsuko can examine her own history and guilt while maintaining a certain distance. In attributing aspects of her own past to the story of Sachiko, Etsuko rewrites her story in order to create an acceptable version of her own 'self'. Thus Etsuko can carefully filter her memory of her past, while examining, altering and ultimately approving them before acknowledging them as her own. In an interview, Ishiguro deduces: Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself. (Gregory Mason 337)

The circumstances of Sachiko's life bear a remarkable similarity to the pregnant Etsuko – when forced to choose between the desire of her seven year old daughter to remain in Japan as well as her own desire to flee the country with an English speaking foreign man. This fleeting presence in Etsuko's life of a woman whose history mirrors her own allows her to conflate their experiences. This conflation allows Etsuko to put Sachiko on trial in place of herself; it allows her to examine her own role in her daughter's suicide, and to probe the question of her own guilt and the extent of her own responsibility from a safe distance. It also allows her to test various interpretations and readings of the past before insisting upon one into her newly constructed account of her own history. Etsuko seems at first determined to acquit herself, to confirm that she made good choices with regard to her daughter and because she had always acted always with Keiko's interest in mind, Niki's assurance that her mother is "the last person anyone could blame" (Ishiguro 11) has become for Etsuko a possibility that, she wishes to avoid. Brian W. Shaffer denotes: This is precisely what Etsuko herself would like to believe but cannot, her

guilt from removing Keiko from Japan being anything but absolved. (Shaffer 25). As such, memory plays a vital role in the life of Etsuko through which she seeks order. Unable to face the painful reality, Etsuko reorders her 'self' through the character of Sachiko which puts together the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. Cynthia Wong deduces: Etsuko remembers in order to forget and reconstruct the past in an effort to obliterate it. (Wong 127)

Thus, the real story of Etsuko is told indirectly in the narrative. In an interview, Ishiguro notes the way Etsuko uses her 'own narrative'. She "talks around" with what is really bothering her, employing a "language of self-deception and self-protection... she tells another story altogether, going back years and talking about somebody she once knew. Thus, the entire strategy of the book is about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories. (Gregory Mason 338, 337). While projecting her guilt onto Sachiko, Etsuko attempts to "avoid punishment and self blame by inventing plausible excuses and alibis" for her misdeeds. (Shaffer 24) Conclusively, Etsuko reorders her past in terms of establishing a permanent existence in order to accept her own self, all the while, so that the new interpretation can emerge for an enlarged understanding. Mark Freeman notes:

A condition of self-understanding is possible only when the past is re-written, such that new interpretations are made to emerge and there exist the possibility for an enlarged understanding. (Freeman 88).

Etsuko, through her narrative, does not attempt to render the past unconvincingly, but rather to reorder and construct the past. Narration thus becomes, at least partly, a therapeutic process. Again Mark Freeman notes:

Only when memories are appropriated into the fabric of the self – which is to say – only when one commences to rewrite the self by incorporating one's memories within the context of plausible narrative order – can they be coincident with a measure of psychic healing. (Freeman 171).

At the end of the novel, Etsuko, as an artist, has established an ordered existence in her narration, but Etsuko, as a person, has still lived a painful life. Cynthia F. Wong rightly notes that in an effort to understand how death overtook Keiko, Etsuko returns to her own past, which is filled with signs and premonitions of potential pain and loss. From this, she seeks self- integrity and forgiveness at a historical moment when such qualities of human strength were in short supply. (Wong 37) Etsuko has been rewriting her life in terms of a literary work, while steadily reworking and revising it even as she interprets. The narrative is replete with symbols and appears oddly well constructed, but its character is in many ways inconsistent with its purported air of spontaneous reminiscence. Incidents that at first might create an impression of randomness that are indicative of the narrator's passivity and lack of control are in fact marked by a deliberateness, and an aptness. For

instance, the incidents in which a piece of old rope catches itself around Etsuko's ankle and inspires in Mariko great apprehension, jarringly repeats itself in the scene in which Mariko and Keiko merge. (Ishiguro 83,84) While incidents seem to reveal an uncontrolled disorder in the narrative of Etsuko at first, indeed it creates an ordered literary construction. In reassuring a double for her daughter that she will be happy leaving Japan, Etsuko approaches the girl with a rope, and offers her the tool with which Keiko will eventually kill herself. The scene becomes a neat symbol for Etsuko's responsibility with regard to her daughter's suicide, but at the same time; it also seeks to displace that responsibility. Etsuko reorders her 'self' and admits the mistake she had done by taking Keiko to America which brings about Keiko's suicide. Narration is the only source for Etsuko as she attempts to order her self. She looks back upon her life in order to identify herself as a good mother and tried hard to conceal the fact that she fails as a mother. However, she cannot change the past and it is only through her narration that she orders her life as it is and by which subsequently she gains an ordered existence. Thus, in creating her narrative and in constructing an account of herself, Etsuko has erected a structure thereby in which she gave form to her orderless life.

Works Cited :

- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. New York: Vintage International, 1982. Print.
- Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. 1989. Print.
- Freeman, Mark. *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Mason, Gregory. "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro". *Contemporary Literature*, 30/3 (1989). 335-47. Print.
- Shaffer, Brian W. *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina. 1998. Print.
- Schacter, Daniel L. *Searching For Memory: The Brain, The Mind and The Past*, New York: Basic Books, 1996. Print.
- Wong, Cynthia F. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Tavistock: Northcote House. 2005. Print.
- Wong, Cynthia F. "The Shame of Memory: Blanchot's Self Dispossession in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*" in *Clio*, vol. 24, No. 2, Winter. 1995. Print.

