



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

A Narration of the Traumatic Reminiscences in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness"



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ABSTRACT

A trauma is caused by an unexpected and unpleasant occurrence in the life of a person. The victim of an uneventful occurrence suffers from the trauma, which in-turn affects his memory and identity. Kazuo Ishiguro's works, especially his first novel, A Pale View of Hills and his short story, "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" deals with the traumatised narrators' narration of their traumatic past. Ishiguro's first person unreliable narrators are guilty of their past activities and they use the language of 'self-perception' and 'self-deception' in order to come in terms with their past traumatic memories. This paper made use of the traumatic theory developed

by Freud, Cathy Caruth and Pluralistic Trauma Theory for the critically appreciation of A Pale View of Hills and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness." Dominick LaCapra's concept of haunting presence and Julian Wolfreys's 'phantomatic' are relevant to understand the gothic features of A Pale View of Hills. This research article also attempts to appreciate Ishiguro's efficient usage of the narrative techniques and fragmented language in his works to depict the psyche of his traumatised narrators.

KEYWORDS

Trauma, Psyche, Gothic, Psychology, Memory, Reminiscence, and Precocious.

RESEARCH PAPER

The research article entitled, “A Narration of the Traumatic Reminiscences in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* and ‘A Strange and Sometimes Sadness,’” applies the principles of the trauma theory for the better understanding of the thematic concern of traumatic memories and the language of the traumatised in Ishiguro’s novel, *A Pale View of Hills* and his short story, “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness.” Hence, it is essential to know about the narrators, narrative techniques, prominent themes, and the language used by Ishiguro in *A Pale View of Hills* and “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness.”

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* and “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” deals with the traumatic memory of the unreliable narrators. The trauma is defined as “a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organization and perception of the external world” (Mambrol). The traumatic experiences affect the memory of a person, which in turn influences his perspective about himself and the society in which he lives. The whole identity of a traumatised person undergoes a drastic change. “Psychoanalytic theories on trauma paired with additional theoretical frameworks such as poststructural, sociocultural, and postcolonial theory form the basis of criticism that interprets representations of an extreme experience and its effects upon identity and memory” (Mambrol). The main feature of the traumatic narratives is they “analyze emotional suffering in texts as well as the language of loss, disruption, and fragmentation” (Mambrol). Naturally, the memory of the unreliable narrators will be fragmented and have a deceiving quality.

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the prominent contemporary authors, whose works have gathered the highest critical appreciations across the world. He is a Japanese- British author. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan on 8th November 1954 and at the age of five his parents decided to swift to England. He was educated in Britain and acquired the UK citizenship in 1983 after the publication of his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982).

Kazuo Ishiguro’s early works were the three short stories- “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness”, “Getting Poisoned” and “Waiting for J.” These short stories got published in *Faber Introductions 7: Stories By New Writers* in 1981. In 1982 his first novel entitled *A Pale View of Hills* was published. It has bought a huge success to Ishiguro, due to its subject matter and its narrative technique. The Royal Society of Literature presented Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize for *A Pale View of Hills* in 1982. This is the beginning of the most prestigious accolades bestowed upon Ishiguro throughout his writing career. *A Pale View of Hills* was translated into thirty languages across the world. He has published eight novels and a collection of short stories. Along with that he has also written screenplays for the television series and the films. He is also a lyricist and collaborated with well-known music composers and musicians. Ishiguro had received innumerable literary prizes like the Booker Prize for his novel *The Remains of the Day* and eventually in 2017 he became the recipient of a Nobel Prize in Literature.

a. The Evolution of the Trauma Theory:

Sigmund Freud's works *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) served as the foothold for the development of the trauma studies in 1990s. Freud argued in his early works that "traumatic hysteria develops from a repressed, earlier experience of sexual assault" (qtd. in Mambrol). He mentioned that the suffering of the traumatised person is not representable. He also stated that the repeated narration of the traumatic event and reliving the experience again is crucial for the recovery of the patient, "Traumatic neurosis is marked by the 'compulsion to repeat' the memory of the painful event with the hopes of mastering the unpleasant feelings" (Mambrol). Both the narrators of *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" had traumatic past and they revived those painful memories again and again in their minds to come to terms with their painful past. Etsuko, the narrator of *A Pale View of Hills* picture her daughter's suicide scene:

I have found myself continually bringing to mind that picture — of my daughter hanging in her room for days on end. The horror of that image has never diminished, but it has long ceased to be a morbid matter; as with a wound on one's own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things. (Ishiguro, *Pale* 54)

In 1990s prominent scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman studied about the traumatic experiences narrated in the literary works. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) is one of the most prominent books in the trauma theory. Some of the others scholars followed by Caruth are J. Brooks Bouson, Suzette Henke, Deborah Horvitz, Michael Rothberg, and Laurie Vickroy employed the same Freudian principles about the trauma in their studies.

The Pluralistic model of trauma is relatively a new one and it suggests, "the assumed unspeakability of trauma is one among many responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature" (Mambrol). Ann Cvetkovich, Greg Forter, Amy Hungerford, and Naomi Mandel were some of the major critics followed the pluralistic model of trauma. The inner frame stories of *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometime Sadness" were narrated in the flashback technique by the unreliable narrators, Etsuko and Michiko respectively. Their traumatic past memories were set in Nagasaki, Japan during the Second World War and the period of reconstruction followed by it. Etsuko had lost her whole family and her fiancé in the atomic bomb. This caused her a great trauma, which made her to act as a disillusioned person. She played violin at night and talked quite senselessly after the loss of her family. Ogata-San an elderly character had looked after an orphaned Etsuko. He consoled the disillusioned Etsuko few years later, "You were very shocked, which was only to be expected. We were all shocked those of us who were left" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 58). But, she did not remember behaving erratically after few years. The unspeakableness of her trauma indicates the intensity of the shock she underwent after the Second World War.

b. The Role of Memory in *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness"

Memory is one of the most important thematic concerns in Ishiguro's works. He stated in an interview that, "things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own

ends, those things interest me more deeply” (Shaffer 14). His narrative technique has a certain poised quality in it and his plots are anything but dramatic. Yet, there is a hurricane of emotional play underneath the monotonous plots of Ishiguro. The focal point of his works lies in, “the emotional upheaval” (Shaffer 6). His narrative language hides more than it reveals. He said, “I was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection” (Shaffer 5). It can be said that Ishiguro’s works presents a new meaning and perspective as one goes on reads it multiple times. He takes special interest in his narrators. He expressed in an interview that, “I am interested in narrators who are trying to evade certain truths about themselves and about their pasts. They are, in other words, dealing with the language of self-deception” (Shaffer 23).

The role of a memory is prominent in depicting traumatic reminiscence, “memory is viewed as a fluid process of reconstruction rather than a storehouse, then the traumatic past is not retrievable in a cryogenic state but rather is created and recreated in moments of recollection” (Mambrol). Etsuko was well aware of the fact that her memory was not intact and there were loopholes in it, “It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today” (Ishiguro, *Pale* 41). *A Pale View of Hills* is considered as a historical fiction due to its setting and a psychological novel due to its representation of the traumatic experiences of the main protagonist, Etsuko. Ishiguro has dealt with the prominent themes like memory, generational gap, Americanization, suicide, stereotype, the position of women in the traditional Japanese society and traumatic reminiscences in *A Pale View of Hills*. He has displayed a great deal of maturity in dealing with the first person unreliable narrative technique and narrating the story in the form of the flashback technique in *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko’s statement defines one of the most important features of memory, she says, “Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here” (Ishiguro, *Pale* 156).

The outer frame story of *A Pale View of Hills* was set in the early 1980s. Etsuko was living in her country-house in England. She had lost her elder daughter Keiko, who had committed suicide. She was greatly traumatised by this event and blamed herself for Keiko’s suicide. Ishiguro talks about Etsuko’s state of mind in an interview, “She feels a great guilt, that out of her own emotional longings for a different sort of life, she sacrificed her first daughter’s happiness . . . But on the other hand, she does need to arrange her memories in a way that allows her to salvage some dignity” (Shaffer 6). Etsuko’s younger daughter Niki had come from London to visit her and to assure her that she was not responsible for Keiko’s death. Etsuko said that she did not need reassurance on such matters and she did not dwell on Keiko’s suicide or in the past:

“But such things are long in the past now and I have no wish to ponder them yet again. My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko’s interests very much at heart. There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again” (Ishiguro, *Pale* 91).

In spite of assuring Niki that she had never blamed herself as responsible for Keiko’s death, Etsuko’s mind lingered around her past memories in Nagasaki, Japan. She was aware of

the fact that the dominant topic of Keiko's death was hovering in both their minds, "For although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko's death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 10).

Etsuko's traumatic reminiscences of the past served as the inner frame story of *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko had lost her whole family and her fiancé in the Second World War. An elderly retired school teacher called Ogata-San had taken an orphaned Etsuko into his household and later she was married to Ogata-San's son Jiro. Jiro was not an affectionate husband, but rather strict and distant. She remembered one particular summer in the reconstruction period of Japan after the Second World War, when she was pregnant with Keiko. She pretended to be happy about her pregnancy, but she had certain reservations about her unborn child. One of her acquaintance, Mrs. Fujiwara saw that Etsuko was still stuck in her past and was pessimistic about her pregnancy and her future. "You've everything to look forward to now, Etsuko. What are you so unhappy about?" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 77). Mrs. Fujiwara assured Etsuko that she would be a good mother. She gave a motherly advice to the despondent Etsuko to look forward in her life, "Your attitude makes all the difference. A mother can take all the physical care she likes, she needs a positive attitude to bring up a child" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 24-25).

Etsuko remembered her friendship with a woman called Sachiko and her ten year old daughter, Mariko and through their story she projected her own traumatic past. Ishiguro said in an interview, "the whole narrative strategy of the book was about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories" (Shaffer 5). Sachiko and Mariko had lost their family members and had a traumatic experience of the war. Sachiko narrated her experience of the war while she was staying in Tokyo, "Week after week it went on, it was very bad. Towards the end we were all living in tunnels and derelict buildings and there was nothing but rubble. Everyone who lived in Tokyo saw unpleasant things. And Mariko did too" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 73). She was depicted as a neglectful and a selfish mother and Mariko as a traumatised and an anti-social child. Sachiko often left Mariko alone and went out to spend time with her American boyfriend, Frank. Sachiko drowned Mariko's kittens in the river in front of her eyes, when she refuses to let go of her beloved kittens and move to America along with her and Frank.

Etsuko had met Mr. Sheringham, a British journalist and married him. They settled in England along with Keiko, who was Jiro's daughter. It was stated that Keiko was forcefully separated from Jiro and Japan. Etsuko and Mr. Sheringham had their own daughter. They named her Niki. Keiko grew up in England becoming socially distant. She left her mother's country-house and settled in Manchester and there she had committed suicide.

The important facts like- how can Etsuko force her own daughter, Keiko to move to England, when she was sympathetic towards Mariko being shifted from Japan to America? What happened to Sachiko and Mariko, did they migrate to America? Did Sachiko and Mariko really existed or they were the fictional character created by Etsuko to narrate her own story? These are the unanswered questions in *A Pale View of Hills*. Ishiguro confirms his main strategy was "to leave a big gap" (Shaffer 4).

c. The Haunting Presence of the Traumatic memories:

At the end of her narrative, Etsuko confessed to Niki about her role in Keiko's suicide, "But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 176). Etsuko was forever weighted down by her guilt for bringing Keiko to England against her wish, for separating her from her father in Japan. She held herself as responsible for Keiko's unhappiness and her suicide. Her guilt stayed within her and haunted her as a ghost.

The traumatic memories remain in the traumatised person for a lifetime and haunt them every now and then. Dominick LaCapra states that, "Something of the past remains, if only as a haunting presence or symptomatic revenant" (qtd. in Wolfreys 266). Wolfreys uses the terms "phantomatic or phantasmatic" (266) to describe the 'haunting presence' stated by LaCapra, in his article, "Trauma, Testimony, Criticism: Witnessing, Memory and Responsibility." The 'phantomatic' presence or the 'haunting presence' is found profoundly in *A Pale View of Hills*, this 'haunting presence' is caused by the traumatic reminiscences of Etsuko casts an eerie spell on the readers. Hence, *A Pale View of Hills* is also considered as a gothic fiction. Etsuko and Niki felt Keiko's haunting presence in her old room. Etsuko expresses:

"For I too had experienced a disturbing feeling about that room opposite. ...But it had been Keiko's fanatically guarded domain for so long, a strange spell seemed to linger there even now, six years after she had left it — a spell that had grown all the stronger now that Keiko was dead" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 53).

Etsuko and Niki were unable to sleep properly at night because of the bad dreams. Their dreams were the projection of their trauma of losing Keiko. Niki says, "I haven't slept very well lately. I think I'm getting bad dreams, but I can never remember them properly once I wake up" (Ishiguro, *Pale* 55).

d. The Traumatic Reminiscence in "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness"

Michiko is the narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's short story, "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness." She was a middle aged Japanese widow staying in England around 1980s just like Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*. Both the narrators are similar in more than one ways. *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" are the collections of the traumatic reminiscences of Etsuko and Michiko respectively. Etsuko and Michiko were currently residing in England, which forms as the outer frame story in *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness." But, the major part of the novel and the short story is the traumatic reminiscences of the narrators, which they experienced in Japan during the Second World War and the period of reconstruction (1945-52). These memories of the past form the prominent feature of *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness." The inner frame story is told in the form of flashback memory narrative technique in both the novel and the short story. Michiko has two daughters, her first daughter was married and was expecting a child and her second daughter Yasuko was named after her friend in Nagasaki, Japan. She was engaged to be married. Michiko was in a better state of emotion than Etsuko, because Etsuko was traumatised by her first daughter, Keiko's suicide and her second daughter, Niki is leading an aimless life in London.

Michiko was distracted from the past three months by the memories of her friend Yasuko's traumatic death in the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. These traumatic reminiscences were triggered by Yasuko, her daughter's visit three months back. In both *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" the unreliable narrators make the use of their unreliable memory to narrate their traumatic memories. Michiko stated:

Of course these things are years in the past now and there must be much I have forgotten. And yet a handful of scenes come back to me quite vividly. I cannot remember their precise places in time, except that they all took place during the last year of the war, during that hard dry summer. (Ishiguro, "Strange" 3)

Michiko remembered about the last summer of the Second World War. She had a friend called Yasuko, a gentle lady of a fine character. The times were hard during those days and they both worked in the factories. Michiko's family was not mentioned and she was close with Yasuko's father Kinoshita-San. Yasuko was engaged to Nakamura-San, who had been to the war. A day before the atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Michiko and Yasuko went to a park in the evening. A strange eerie event took place in the park and Michiko is traumatised by it deeply and even at the present she is haunted by it. Michiko described the incident in the park about Yasuko's strange face and behavior:

My memory of her is not clouded with nostalgia, nor does it bring me pain. Rather, it brings me an oddly disturbing kind of sorrow, a strange and sometimes sadness I find hard to place. I often recollect her face, the way I saw it that night, and I think perhaps it was a premonition not just of the atomic bomb, but that Yasuko has seen something at that moment-something in my own face. I often wonder what she would be doing now had she lived (Ishiguro, "Strange" 14).

Michiko and Etsuko were the middle aged ladies living alone in the country-side England and were more than happy to be left alone with their reminiscences of their past in Nagasaki, Japan. Michiko says, "It quite suits me to live alone in my pretty English house. This is a quite area and the neighbours are pleasant" (Ishiguro, "Strange" 14).

Conclusion:

Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* deserves to be called as his first precocious novel, due to its thematic concerns and the narrative techniques. The traumatic reminiscences of the narrators in *A Pale View of Hills* and "A Strange and Sometimes Sadness" are better understood with the application of the trauma theory. The trauma study has helped in understanding the disturbed psyche of the traumatised individuals in the literature. In the postmodern era, it continues to spread its branches into the various other literary theories. Therefore, its scope extends into different realms of literary theories:

The field of trauma studies continues to develop and adapt the foundational poststructural approach as well as incorporate new perspectives from postcolonialism, feminist theory, ethnic studies, and ecocriticism in scholarship that examines trauma's significance in literature and society" (Mambrol).

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