



A symbiosis of memory and identity in the selected works of Kazuo Ishiguro

¹ Dr. Dusmanta Kumar Pattanaik, ² Dr. Jayaprakash Paramaguru

¹ Assistant Professor, NIIS Institute of Business Administration, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

² Associate Professor, VSSUT, Burla, Odisha, India

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro, the Nobel laureate from Japan, has nevertheless displayed the gulf between memory and the representation of memory in his illustrious literary oeuvre. His literary works display how memories and stories serve as the windows through which people understand and get understood. The enriched mindscape both makes and unmakes memories. Memory is a powerful tool transcending the limitations of human condition as perceived in contemporary literature. Despite the temporal or spatial distance, it enables the past appear once again in the present. It not only recalls, but reorganizes the past and presents in the present. However Memory in Ishiguro's works acts as a point of convergence of the past, present and future. This juncture of assimilation both creates and recreates the self-identity which is never a constant entity, but a Flux and flex whose only constant is change. Nevertheless the equation between Memory and identity is like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to butterfly.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Self -Identity, Temporal, Kazuo Ishiguro

Introduction

The works of Kazuo Ishiguro reveal that the narrators employ memories to construct an understanding of both themselves and others. That art of connecting the past with the present having an eye on the future goes on to define, redefine, and refine identity. In 'Genocide and the Poetics of Memory', Herbert Hirsch states: "Similar to this, Ishiguro's works demonstrate how a sense of personal identity is based on consistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the experiences of the past and the present. It is widely acknowledged that building one's identity or sense of self through narrative has its worth. The tales one tells about herself and compares to other human lives". (149).

Identity is a construct which is constructed through tales and is built on the assumptions about the manner in which memory works, is activated and reflects on the past. The protagonists in Ishiguro's novels carve their identities from past experiences narratives. But identity is never the constant being or a stagnant object. Rather it is the process of becoming or a continuous flow.

Kazuo Ishiguro also believes that "the self is a continually rewritten story" (Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*, 210). In *Floating World*, Ono's reminiscence and narration are triggered by his urge to construct a sense of impending importance and a strong sense of self. In the book 'Never Let Me Go', 'When We Were Orphans', Christopher Banks and Kathy H rest on their past years to have a better view of estrangement as they have an identity crisis due to the current scenario. Knowing who we were helps us establish who we are. Those who bring in more of their history into their present, take care to enhance the present with intense memories of the past residues.

The narrator in Ishiguro's story heightens the worth of human life. Events which occurred in a state of innocence are recollected. According to Freud, memories are "retranscribed". Freud uses the term "Nachtraglichkeit" which Jean Laplanche has termed as "afterwardness". As memory deals with what is known, it also takes into its gamut what was not known then too. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Nicholls have defined "Nachtraglichkeit" as a technique of dissecting narrative and its historical backdrop. Trauma is defined as "creating an implied history of the modern subject". The development of the self is a flux, a continuous process rather than the exact recovery of an original identity. Any person will get stuck between "being" and "becoming", "knowing" and "not knowing". Ishiguro opined that people fail to see beyond their immediate periphery, to not recognize the true essence of their period.

"An Artist of the Floating World" depicts the inability of normal human beings to see beyond their immediate conditions for which one is controlled by his present conditionality. Ono, a painter who gained fame during the upsurge of Japanese military nationalism, must realign his past to come in terms with his present. He is honest enough to admit his mistakes without an iota of reluctance. Acknowledging one's fault is a better proposition than camouflaging it. Though there is admission of his fault, still he behaved in good faith at the time and sincerely believed that he was serving his nation by endorsing it. Such honest admission of guilt rather renders

self-satisfaction and dignity. Ono has made his attempt to carve out a unique, defined and true identity of his own through all these things. But to “articulate the past historically does not mean to acknowledge everything of the past which is not recognized by the present.” Understanding the flow of life has been made simpler by restructuring his unremarkable background. Ono’s reflections and memories help him accept his life and inspires him to rearrange the events of his life into a substantial one despite all its drawbacks.

Ishiguro also throws light on his worries concerning individuals searching for truth in their lives. But as truth as always accompanies hard facts of life to digest, they find different ways to escape from the truth itself. In “The Remains of the Day” Stevens employs his memory to re-script the history of his life. His reminiscence of a graceful way of life which no longer exists. As per Deborah Gurth “A memory is a whole dynamic since it brings back to reconstruct the meaning of the past. (Gurth, 147)”. Steven’s physical journey in “The Remains of the Day”, signifies “extension of self” on the mental as well as emotional plateau. The temporal travel should zero in on the past, present and future course of events. A sense of continuity and rhythm of connectivity prevails throughout the periods of change and development. This is apparent in Steven’s assessment of the present mental sojourn into the past and anticipation of the future. Even with a feeble memory Stevens is unable to conceal the fact that he is still troubled by the decisions made in the past. Steven’s story depicts his intense desire to narrate things from his own distinct perspective to structure a consistent identity. He is compelled to choose between the futility of his present and the futility of his future to pursue a will which will enable him to stick to a sense of validation with regenerated hope. Stevens banks on his reminiscence and reflection to focus on his day which is in his hand. The fictional works of Ishiguro reflect the experiences of life which were not understood then but at present are realized to be important.

In “A Pale View of the Future”, Etsuko constructs her own narrative by using two different temporal orders. The equation between Etsuko’s past and present is asserted by the assessment by Ogata-San. Even madness also depicts a self-understanding which needs confirmation from someone else. Ogata-San’s feedback, like other remarkable characters from Etsuko’s past, reflects her own efforts to remember. When Etsuko seeks the memory of incompleteness, she seems to get it intuitively, feels her connectivity with other people. Her memories make her recollect the past events as well as people, trace the several residues of the past and put them into appropriate perspectives. Ishiguro wanted to portray his narrator as someone whose personal turmoil was yet to be resolved. The statement “even though the world has beginnings, ends and potentiality, novels have not” endorses this line of thought. The author displays how Etsuko’s tale must stay unresolved to have the eerie effect it has.

Ishiguro’s line of argument throughout his works is that identity is a product of “constantly reorganized memories”. Memory operates through the threads of the narrative connecting the dots between who the characters are and who they think they are. His works show that life is nevertheless as creative construction and constructive creation as there are many points of convergence between the life of an individual and the stories he/she tells about. So self cannot be tagged as an entity that one can stick to, rather it can be defined as a complex mental perception which one makes out by several mental processes, including remembering.

Human beings are blessed with an instinctive impulse to communicate their feelings and experiences through storytelling and remembering. The narrative stresses the dynamic, self-creative quality of human thought, the impact of stories in creating and re-creating personal identity. There is an inherent chemistry between experience and narrative, connecting the narrative self and the narrated one. As human beings our identity and character are modified by our narratives. Memory and narrative have a role to play in shaping a person’s sense of identity as Ishiguro’s narrators try to render meaning to their existence through recollection and reflection although these narratives rest on a sense of structure. As per Foucault “continuous history is the essential correlative to the subject’s original purpose as well as the ability to effectively communicate.” In this regard the self becomes a continuously rewritten story. Characters of Ishiguro, especially Christopher Banks from “When We Were Orphans”, does not have the continuity in history required to project consistent identity for which he is compelled to depend on the recollections or memory of others to put his own stories in order.

In “When We Were Orphans”, Ishiguro has depicted a character whose life is affected by the disappearance of his parents.

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