



THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN NARRATIVE: A POSTMODERNIST STUDY OF KAZUO  
ISHIGURO'S *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS*

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ABSTRACT

The narrative is the art of storytelling or a method the writer adopts to give a story-specific artistic and emotional effect. A story is a sequence of events wherein the narrator unfolds them with time. The narrative technique is a strategy to assign meaning to a literary work. The paper explores the significance of rules concerning the narrative structure in the construction of memories by studying how human memory functions in narratives along with postmodern discourse in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000), which centres on an Englishman named Christopher Banks. The paper further studies the concept of false memories in postmodern detective fiction that somehow dangles on antidetective/antihero—the ghostly trace of the past, which haunts or brings the investigator down. The study provides a unique ethnocentric perspective of culture by critiquing different spatiotemporal coordinates, enabling humans to recognise different narrative strains. Overall, the paper throws light on the significance of memory in narratives.

**Keywords:** Memory, Unreliable, Narrative, Postmodernism, Detective

Introduction

The narrative is a ubiquitous practice, perennially present in every culture; its effect is so pronounced and pervading that a narrative is considered the primary vehicle and mainstay of knowledge, conventions, law, values, ideas, culture, etc. Benedetto Croce claims, "Where there is no narrative, there is no history" (qtd. in Altman 1). Human beings are sense-making creatures; they perceive, comprehend, recognise and make sense of the world through narratives. As a result, humans are tellers instead of viewers. The narrative is the basic human approach to assigning meaning to an event/incident, viewing it as a coherent whole. The narrative has been omnipresent since the beginning of the culture. It is the consistent form of human expression. Thus, the narrative is a part of human communication, as Roland Barthes states:

Here are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicle of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written...it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories enjoyed by men of different

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and even opposite cultural backgrounds: narrative remains largely unconcerned with good or bad literature Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (237)

The term 'narratology' first appeared in the work *Grammar of the Decameron* by the Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, who sought to employ Saussurean linguistics as a pilot study to analyse and interpret diverse cultural phenomena.

However, Barbara Herrnstein Smith claims that narrative is "someone telling someone else that something happened" (232). The statement depicts the narrative as a way of saying something to someone. Every human has a way of narrating stories. Besides, James Phelan revised Smith's statement as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (90). The lines illustrate in-depth reform, adding a sense of sensibility to the narrative. As a result, the narrative depends on a speaker who tries to convey a message. Furthermore, the narrative technique is an essential tool for writing literary texts. It is the backbone of any story. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham postulate the existence of narrative frames:

It [narratology] deals especially with types of narrators, the identification of structural elements in narratives and their diverse modes of combination, recurrent narrative devices, and the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told, as well as with the narratee—that is, the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narrative. (234)

Studying the narrative techniques leads to examining the narratives employed therein. The stories are shaped and defined by narrative techniques. Indeed, the narrative cannot be restricted to literary texts. The narrative is also used in oral literature and a storytelling tradition which survived many generations. Oral literature has variability wherein artists can change according to a proposed scenario. Walter J. Ong writes:

[D]espite the oral roots of all verbalisation, the scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention. (8)

The narrative technique is crucial to understand the implied meaning of the author. It is an essential part of reading comprehension. The author turns stories into knowledge or information concerning the events. Hence, many credible attempts have been made to define this interdisciplinary subject, which has subsequently enriched the field of narratology. However, the very nature of narratives renders it impossible to give a clear paradigmatic definition because every new definition of the narrative becomes another narrative, as potent and viable as the previous one. The definition of the narrative keeps on changing as per the evolving milieu. Thus, no conceptual consensus can be reached. The narrative can only be conceptualised as a means, not an end. When someone tells someone else that something happened, the telling part becomes more compelling and meaning-making than the happening part. It is the way a story is told that gives rise to connotations. It is not the story but the telling part that allows interpretive alternatives. Moreover, a new meaning can be generated from the same old story narrated in a different social milieu. Thus, history finds relevance in the present through narratives.

Human memory is the mental process wherein one experiences and remembers things. It contributes to knowledge that one can share with someone. It is vital to how one perceives things in a social milieu. Memory is everything in which one lives and experiences. Hence, it recreates strong feelings by imitating moments from the past. David Matsumoto defines memory as the "lasting storage of information in the brain, which is currently hypothesized to involve processes of encoding, storage, and retrieval of the information" (303). Memory plays a tricky role when it fragments recollection; what one remembers may or may not be accurate to a lived experience. Thus, memories are constructive and reconstructive as per the different sociocultural environments. The subjectivity of individual memory is affected by the variability of time and space. It is based on the ability of the narrator to manage time and space in a manner that allows the selection of events. The narrative is typically understood as a representation, or a "construction, based on a sequence of events in the past, that

communicates something from the memory of the narrator” (Linde 2). Thus, disinformation regarding the possible experience may be used to distort/contaminate memory. Human memory is fragile; it frees individuals to retell the past in infinite ways.

### Memory in Narrative and Detective Fiction *When We Were Orphans*

*When We Were Orphans* begins in July 1930 with a first-person narrator named Christopher Banks, a young detective who lives in England. He is writing in 1930 about something that happened in 1923. He lives with his parents in the British colony of Shanghai. His father is an employer of Morganbrook and Byatt company which imports Indian opium to China. However, this act of opium import by the company was seen in a way that brought misery to China. His mother, Diana, calls the activities of the company “un-Christian and un-British” and “the sinful trade” (61, 70). Diana is crucial in the anti-opium campaign with Uncle Phillip, her business partner. When Christopher is nine, both his parents mysteriously disappear one after another. Uncle Phillip sends Christopher back to London. Christopher becomes a detective in England. He meets Sarah Hemmings, an orphan. Eventually, he returns to Shanghai after decades to search for his parents. He gets caught in the Second Sino-Japanese War. He tries to find his parents in a house. Finally, Christopher learns that his mother has been seized by a Chinese warlord Wang Ku, and his father died due to typhoid. Wang Ku turns out to be the sponsor of Christopher’s education in London. Twenty years later, Christopher finds out about his mother, who is in Hong Kong. He goes to see her, but she does not recognise him.

Detective stories are about the investigation, which operates around puzzles. The detective objectively interprets incidents, moves from disorder to order, and puts things together to solve unexpected events. There are mainly two kinds of detective stories: country house mystery and hardboiled. The former refers to a detective who superhumanly explains crime. In contrast, the latter is a detective who personally invests in crime (i.e., culminates in violence and cannot explain crime rationally). Hardboiled demonstrates no faith in solutions, making it one of the characteristics of postmodern literature. *When We Were Orphans* is a hardboiled detective fiction that revolves around an investigator who invests in crime.

However, Christopher relies on memory to discover his parents, who vanish under suspicious circumstances. Christopher is the first-person narrator who unfolds his memory to describe former events. While remembering specific incidents, he often attaches an impression with statements, demonstrating the unreliable nature of human memory. Christopher describes Uncle Philip’s manner when Wang Ku, a Chinese warlord who wields much power in Shanghai, comes to take his mother:

[M]y feeling was that there was something definitely odd about Uncle Philip that day. I do not know why, but I got the distinct *impression* that on this occasion, Uncle Philip was not on ‘our side’; that the intimacy he shared with the plump Chinese man was greater than the one he shared with us; even – and quite possibly this was merely my fancy – that he and the plump man exchanged looks as the car drove off. As I say, I cannot point to anything solid to support these *impressions*, and it is more than possible I am projecting back certain perceptions in the light of what ultimately occurred with Uncle Philip. (118; my emphasis)

This recollection of events depicts the way Christopher views things. His memory of the past changes, and so does the cause and effect of events, making him an unreliable narrator. He is aware that human memory can be an unreliable source of information. Moreover, it is crucial to understand Christopher’s memory which further reconstructs certain past incidents. Christopher seems to understand the nature of his memory wherein he attaches the impression. These impressions are not universal, as everyone reacts in a different manner. Therefore, Christopher, while riding on a bus with Sarah Hemmings in London, reflects:

For the truth is, over this past year, I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories – of my childhood, of my parents – have lately begun to blur. A number of times recently I have found myself struggling to recall something that only two or three years ago I believed was ingrained in my mind forever. I have been obliged to

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accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images. (67)

The lines precisely illustrate an unreliable narrator in depth. Christopher suggests the unpredictable nature of human memory in the postmodern state wherein one cannot entirely trust empirical evidence. Christopher himself is not sure about his findings. Hence, it becomes impossible to unravel the mystery of his parents. However, he is a repetitive detective in England but has no evidence about the whereabouts of his parents. He does not trust his memory. Nevertheless, it is the only evidence of his missing parents. Christopher, when his father speaks to him about a better man, reflects, "Eventually, I did settle on one memory from very early in my life, from when I could have been no older than four or five – a memory which even then, when I was nine years old, had already grown hazy in my mind" (85). The lines depict the function of human memory. Ishiguro uses Christopher's memory to shape the novel. Thus, the narrative itself mimics the way in which memory functions. Ishiguro, in an interview with Graham Swift, says, "Memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception" (23). The lines depict the narrator's mechanism, wherein recalling the past reveals certain deceptive ideas.

Ishiguro questions the notion of classic detective fiction by subverting traditional genres like ratiocination, country house mystery, and sensation novels to promote hardboiled, which revolves around the unsentimental style of crime writing. Furthermore, hardboiled is a story that does not provide a central solution, making crime a symptom rather than a disease. Christopher goes back to Shanghai to further investigate the whereabouts of his parents. Ultimately, he enters a house where he believes his parents may have been imprisoned. A bombshell devastates the house as he discloses, "My memory of these moments is no longer very clear. But I have a feeling it was at this point, just after I stared through the glass at the woman's stump, that I suddenly straightened and began to search for my parents" (272). The lines outline Christopher's search to find out about his parents. His parents were not there in the house.

Christopher regards a detective as a superhuman capable of logically solving a case. However, he lacks classic detective traits, making him another normal human being with no extraordinary power. He becomes a detective due to some guilt which seems to be associated with his past in Shanghai. Nevertheless, the classic detective solves the crime objectively, whereas Christopher is not objective about his parents. Christopher's parents unintentionally influence his career choice. Consequently, he becomes a detective due to his childhood memories, unconsciously developed habits, and desire to find his parents. It suggests that his past is instructing him at a deeper level, wherein his identity depends on the whereabouts of his parents. Therefore, using memory as a tool in a hardboiled is a part of the investigation. It is not a physical tool but a psychological one that seduces, manipulates, and demands things. Moreover, human memory is not a tape recorder that cannot lie or manipulate. Christopher's past destroys his search, wherein empirical evidence is not reliable enough to solve the mystery of his missing parents. There is a rupture in time and space, which reflects in the way Christopher thinks about the past. Thus, the postmodern detective genre is more about a private investigator who is playful, incoherent, and fragmented.

## Conclusion

Though there have been detective stories in history, it is clear that classic detective fiction is not the best example to explore the unreliable nature of human memory in narratives. Hence, human memories are unreliable illustrations of the past, in which memories may be inaccurate by the force of the narrative logic that shapes them. Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* deals with the complex nature of human memory in narratives wherein Christopher's past is primarily constructed by a mind eager for coherent meaning. As a result, it challenges authenticity in a way that explains the changeable nature of human memory. This is made evident by the fact that over the last century, human memory can be manipulated by specific narrative techniques that may spread misinformation about the experience, further distorting and contaminating actual incidents. Additionally, human memory comes down to a point wherein it cannot hold the authenticity of the past. Thus, literary representation of human memory must be tolerant of inaccuracy and confabulation to capture the authenticity of what memory is in narratives.

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