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WAR AND AMNESIA IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S
AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD AND THE UNCONSOLED

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the elements of amnesia in the post-war period in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Unconsoled* (1995). Kazuo Ishiguro as an expatriate writer from Japan who moved to England tries to evaluate his past in Japan which was an active participant in the World War II and post war-period. Wars, in the form of World Wars I and II have left uncanny scars in the memory of the people and world respectively. The war-bound traumas are still felt in our contemporary world. These two mentioned novels probe into how war effects on memory and creates amnesia among the artists. *An Artist of the Floating World* discusses how an artist (painter) suffers due to post-war trauma in his mind and lost his memory whereas *The Unconsoled* discloses the amnesia of the pianist in the middle European unknown city. Hence, this paper questions the trauma of war and its effects on memory. In this regard, the paper evaluates the importance of memory in the artistic world within its assessment of the post-war influences on memory, particularly amnesia.

Keywords: war, amnesia, memory, childhood, trauma

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War always brings either victory or failure in the human history. Many countries have suffered due to trauma created by the wars and their aftermaths in the socio-political, cultural and psychological domains. War zones have witnessed multiple fractures and disturbances bringing along a massive death rate, anguish, regret and human losses. In the twentieth century two world wars, Cultural Revolution, wars among many countries have faded the memory which is called as amnesia. In the writing of Kazuo Ishiguro, one can find the predominance of memory and amnesia. All the countries which have involved in the wars have only bad memory and lost all the good things including man and nature. It is very dangerous that some so called developed countries are in one or the other way taking the lead for war and it was true in the past that most of the countries took active participation were developed countries. In both World War I and World War II, Germany, England, France, Italy and America had actively played the role and demolished many countries. They were not just the wars but, they also encouraged other developing and underdeveloped countries to take active participation. So the so-called developed countries, Asian underdeveloped and developing nations took an active ground in the wars. Their involvement heavily impacted upon the inclusive progress and welfare.

Kazuo Ishiguro is a prolific contemporary novelist and the short story writer who writes profusely about memory, amnesia and their varied faces. He is considered to be one the most important modern British novelists of the twentieth century. In all his eight novels, his preoccupation with the theme and concept of

memory in its multifarious forms the pillar of his novels and he delves into how it gets thought different kinds of traumas and its implication on human life. Having migrated from Japan and settled in England, he looks back to Japan in his beginning novels and further he moves to England and China in the later novels. He has dual identities and memory as he is being migrated from Japan and settled in England. For him, memory is always faded due to wars which can be seen in his all novels. Hence amnesia plays the crucial role in his novels. In the selected writings for this paper, both the protagonists, Ono, in *An Artist of the Floating World* and Ryder, in *The Unconsoled* have lost their memory due to wars and they are constantly searching for their past: Ono recalls his past with his artistic life and war whereas Ryder, a famous pianist who arrives in a central European city to perform a concert. Kazuo Ishiguro as an artist, has shifted from Asia to Europe, he has to find comfortable to perform himself well as Ryder suffers to concert well in an unknown European city. In the same way Ishiguro suffers which may be not agreed by him that has the problem at European city to survive. But he unknowing narrates these in his novels. It can be seen in *The Remains of the Day* as the protagonist Mr. Stevens undergoes many problems with the colonial mindset people to satisfy them well. He also manages well but lost his father. These all happen due to wars. Especially two major wars that demolish world in order to establish the identity of developed countries.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono, a painter and in *The Unconsoled*, Ryder, a pianist have suffered due to the wars. Both have a different memory and amnesia: Ono has easily recollected his past whereas for Ryder, it is highly impossible to recollect anything of his past. It indicates that both of them experience problem with remembering the past which is fractured due to trauma of wars. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, it is due to politics of the war and right wing dominance, the artist life has broken and lost his memory.

An Artist of the Floating World (1986) examines the memory of an aged artist, Masuji Ono who tries to recall his life as an artist in the inter war period in Japan. His memories are filled with unrealistic narratives as he has lost himself in the disorder of life in the war time. As the earlier novel of Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*, this novel also talks about the problems of war, how it created many trauma in human mind. Ono after the retirement from his job as an artist owns a house in Nagasaki which is near to city. He has lost his wife and son in the war and remains with his two daughters: elder daughter marriage is over and looking for marriage of her younger daughter, Nariko. The novel narrates as his grandson reminds him by asking many questions. Michael's Ondaatje in his novel *The English Patient* (1993) pasteurizes the war victim in an Italian camp who also lost his memory and suffers due to amnesia. An unnamed English Patient struggles to recall any thing about his past. Here in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Ono has the same problem of amnesia.

The novel begins with the introduction to his house and places he stays. Ono invites the reader to the house as he is looking forward to narrate the whole story:

If on a sunny day you climb the steep leading up from the title wooden bridge still referred to around here as the Bridge of hesitating, you will not have to walk far before the roof of my house becomes visible between the tops of two ginkgo trees. Even if it did not occupy such a commanding position on the hill, the house would still stand out from all others nearby, so that as you come up the path, you may find yourself wondering what sort of wealthy man owns it (7).

This indicates how Ono has the suffering of loneliness in the post war period and how he is looking for someone to tell his past which is collected in him. He needs someone to tell all his past as he is not happy about his past where he had committed the mistake in changing his arts towards fascist approach. He regrets for being the past of government which is fascist in its approach to art and aesthetic. Any government which does not have a democratic approach towards arts creates social trauma. In the same way, during the period of inter war period, the Nagasaki society and people suffered due to loss of life, education and no hope of future.

Ono recalls his life with students who also helped him to buy the house. He was a very good teacher who teaches the painting with a lot of love in it. So his old students come to help to buy his new house in Nagasaki after his retirement:

Nevertheless, for a year or so, whenever I heard of a suitable house for sale, I would remember to make enquiries. It was one of my pupils who first brought it to my attention that Akira Sugimura's

house, a year after his death, was to be sold off. That I should buy such a house seemed absurd. And I put the suggestion down to the exaggerated respect my pupils always had for me but I made enquiries all the same, and gained an unexpected response (8).

It also pictures the memory he has towards his house, because he is looking for his future life in this house with his two daughters and a grandson. Though his memory folds in fast but it comes out from the same house. Ishiguro though has migrated to England from Japan at the age of five, he reminisces his house where he spends his early childhood. For everyone, childhood memory is a source of inspiration for future.

In the country which is rebuilding her future after the war, it has the blurred memory due to trauma created by war: the people are confused about their future and job. Subsequently, Ono spends most of his remaining days in just attending the friends, talking to his grandson, watering the garden and recalls his past.

Whereas in *The Unconsoled*, Ryder struggles with amnesia due to the claustrophobia in an unknown central European city which has created fear of closed place. So, he finds it difficult to recall and perform the concert about claustrophobia. The Claustrophobia is a common mental disorder in the post war trauma-world and it is difficult to manage the stage show as a celebrity. Hence, the celebrities have to perform in the phobic mode of atmosphere. Due to the Claustrophobia, they often fail to perform better in the life. This reveals in the novel *The Unconsoled* when Ono narrates about his time in guest house:

She began to talk about the house. As she did so, I tried to recall something of the phone conversation to which she had just referred. After a while, I found a faint recollection returning to me of listening to this same voice - or rather a harder, angrier version of it - on the end of a telephone in the not-so-distant past. Eventually I thought I could recall almost a certain phrase I had been shouting at her down the mouthpiece: 'You live in such a small world! (35).

It shows how he tries to recall his past which does not easily happen to him. But he tries to get the things he has lost. But he fails to do it as he suffocates himself due to Claustrophobia. Ono always regrets for his amnesia which has to overcome. The protagonist, Ryder is also suffered with the claustrophobia as he has fear of much closed places in that unknown city in the central Europe. For a crime person it is common issue, but not having any crime and suffering with the claustrophobia is a mental disorder in the most developed countries due to insecurities for artists especially for liberal artists. Mr. Ryder recalls his memory as below:

I emerged from the elevator to find the lobby far livelier than before. All around me, guests were lounging in armchairs, leafing through newspapers or chatting together over cups of coffee. Near the reception desk several Japanese people were greeting one another with much jollity. I was slightly bemused by this transformation and did not notice the hotel manager until he had come right up to me (19).

Ryder is here in this city not only to perform the concert, but to address the artists who have been neglected and horrified by the fundamentalists. It is the problem of all major artists and movement, even in the Plato period; artists were being threatened due to their creativity experiment on society. Many painters have been murdered in many kingdoms after having painted the queens 'photograph. The good example of murdering of an artist is the poem "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning: the king murders his wife as to painting of her beauty by an artist. It indicates the conduciveness of an artist who painted with a keen interest and labour and honoured the death.

But here the issue is not murdering of the artist but the murder of the memory due to trauma of intolerance in the society. Nowadays intolerance is being discussed more throughout the world. In India too, artists and thinkers have been murdered recently which remains without solutions. The death of Kalburgi and Dhabalkar is a mirror of this kind of intolerance towards artists and intellectuals in India. This trauma has created claustrophobia among all artists in India. It is same in *An Artist of the Flouting World* novel. When Ono has to leave his art for trauma of WWII in Japan, he too faces the difficult to recall his past and could not recall with his grandson.

Amnesia can be seen in the protagonist's omnipresent narratives throughout the novels. Both of them have begun with the narratives of past. All most all novels of Kazuo Ishiguro deal with memory and amnesia due to trauma of war or trauma of real life incidents. In *The Pale View of Hills* the protagonist, Estuko suffers due to war and lost her past:

I know it was a terrible thing that happened here in Nagasaki, she said, finally. But it was bad in Tokyo too. Week after week it went on, it was very bad. Towards the end we were all living in tunnels and derelict buildings and there were unpleasant things, there was nothing to rubble. Everyone lived in Tokyo saw unpleasant things (73).

Estuko recalls her life in the post-war Japan. For her it not only brings the sad past but the lost of past in which she lived. The whole Japan underwent trauma which could not repair once again. Bombing on Nagasaki created chaotic hegemony in the societies of Japan. *The Remains of the day* articulates the question of suffering in the situation of trauma.

Ono talks about his life in the wars and how his contemporary Japan has been changed due to wars and refers to the implications of the authoritarian Government. The problem of ageing can also be seen in *An Artist of the Floating World*. As an artist Ono has suffered with recollecting of his past. Ageing is common problem at this movement in the globe. He always cherishes his time with his grandson though there was trauma of war:

Ichiro was fascinated by the large amount of space in our house. In any case, he seemed not to share our fondness for sitting on the veranda, preferring instead to run at great speed up and down its length, sometimes sliding along the polished boards. More than once, he had come close to upsetting our tea tray, but his mother's requests that he sit down had so far (14).

The most important fracture for mind and memory is tension that created by threaten to death for artists. Their life is always in muddle due identity: thyselves identity which is very personal and identity with society which is not real but they have to prove everything that they are doing better in arts otherwise they are being neglected. If once the artist is neglected he is under the depression that he will fail in his life to perform better. Memory and amnesia relate the autobiographical elements of author, as Ishiguro migrated from Japan to England at very young age, his memory becomes amnesia, all his experiences go down and there is no proper memory.

Ono revisits his own days during the war period in Japan. He regrets as he was part of fascist Japanese government. His childhood floated due to war and its disturbance on the society and people:

I was very young when I prepared those prints. I suspect the reason I could not celebrate the floating world was that I could not bring myself to believe in its worth. Young men are often guilt ridden about pleasure, and I suppose I was no different. I support I thought to pass away once time in such places, to spend one's skills celebrating things so in intangible and transient, I suppose I thought it all rather wistful, all rather decadent. It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity (150).

Both *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Unconsoled* discuss how war brings the amnesia among people. *An Artist of the Floating World* narrates the story of amnesia in Ono, who lost his identity in the war times whereas *The Unconsoled* elaborates the story of man who lost his parents in the war period comes to Shanghai to find his parents. But he also suffers from amnesia as war deletes his memory. Both the novels disclose the evilness of war and its implication on memory. How memory transformed into amnesia is a major issue that is examined in the novels. The issues like love, childhood, memory loss, recovery of memory and identity are evaluated in this paper in the most appropriate way. It is always to have unforgettable past, one has good memory which is tranquillised in peace. But war demolishes the memory in the protagonists as both of them have come out from war at childhood and problem with memory and amnesia.

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