

Maternal Ambivalence and Repressed Guilt: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

This article offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro, focusing on the themes of maternal ambivalence and repressed guilt in the narrator, Etsuko. It argues that Etsuko's fragmented and muted memories conceal a profound emotional struggle surrounding her maternal identity and her implied responsibility in the death of her daughter, Keiko. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's concept of guilt as an internalized moral imperative of the ego, alongside the theories of Melanie Klein and Nancy Chodorow on the contradictions of motherhood, the study argues that Etsuko's narrative strategies function as forms of psychic defence rather than neutral recollection. Freud's understanding of guilt as a pressure exerted by the ego helps explain Etsuko's self-monitoring and apologetic tone, even in the absence of explicit accusation. This article argues that maternal ambivalence occupies a hidden yet central role in Etsuko's tragedy, and that her repressed guilt fundamentally shapes both what she narrates and how she narrates it.

Keywords: psychic defence mechanisms, contradictions of mothering, splitting, trauma and repression, maternal guilt and psychological conflict.

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) offers a nuanced exploration of memory, trauma, and maternal subjectivity through the fragmented recollections of its narrator, Etsuko, a Japanese woman living in postwar England. Set against the historical backdrop of Nagasaki after World War II, the novel interrogates the instability of memory and the psychological consequences of displacement, guilt, and loss. Etsuko's narration, marked by silences, inconsistencies, and narrative gaps, reflects the workings of traumatic memory, where personal and collective histories intersect yet resist coherent articulation. Critics have emphasized the novel's engagement with unreliable narration and the ethical implications of remembering, particularly in relation to motherhood and the haunting absence of her deceased daughter, Keiko. By situating Etsuko's recollections within broader psychoanalytic and postcolonial frameworks, the text reveals how repression, ambivalence, and cultural dislocation shape both identity and narrative form. Ishiguro's novel emerges as a profound meditation on the limits of memory and the complex interplay between personal trauma and historical experience. Etsuko's recollection in the novel is indeed traumatic memory as narrated by an unreliable narrator who is haunted by what she cannot accept completely (Molino 324).

Literature Review

Scholars have widely examined memory, trauma, and narrative uncertainty in *A Pale View of Hills*. Michael Molino argues that the novel presents memory as fragmented and incomplete, emphasizing the difficulty of reconstructing traumatic experiences. He observes that Ishiguro's narrative relies on silences and omissions, where "memory fails to provide coherence, and these gaps become central to the representation of trauma" (Molino 327). The gaps in Etsuko's recollections reflect the psychological limits of narration and suggest repressed emotional conflict. Similarly, Anni Shen notes that Ishiguro's early fiction frequently features narrators haunted by unresolved memories. She argues that these narratives resemble ghost stories in which "absence, silence, and repetition signal the persistence of repressed memory" (Shen 358). Such techniques suggest that the past continues to intrude upon the present, shaping Etsuko's fragmented recollections and reinforcing the novel's atmosphere of psychological haunting.

Studies reveal that there is intricacy in parent relationships with child in the novel. Huang mentions that "the correlation between Etsuko and Keiko can be explained by the conflict between motherly care and individual rights" (Huang 6). Another thesis presented by Mustapha Marrouchi is that in the Ishiguro fiction, "migration tends to result in the experience of exile, guilt, and displacement" (Marrouchi 14). These critical aspects emphasize the role played by trauma, migration and family relations in the novel. However, the emotional conflict of motherhood and maternal guilt can be further understood through psychoanalytic theory.

Objectives of the Study

This article examines the troubled emotions Etsuko had towards motherhood. Her narrative depicts ambivalent feelings of love and anger with her children and profound conflicting feelings of guilt towards Keiko and her life decisions. It is analyzed in terms of psychoanalytic concepts of Freud, Melanie Klein, and Nancy Chodorow. The inner struggle of Etsuko is also connected with history and culture. The Nagasaki of the postwar period was rather lossful and traumatized, and Ishiguro himself is a Japanese who writes between Japanese and British cultures. The strange identity of a Japanese woman and then a migrant in England is strongly related to the problematic identity of a mother in Etsuko.

This study adopts a psychoanalytic literary approach to analyse the psychological dimensions of Etsuko's narration. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and Nancy Chodorow. The theory of guilt and repression by Freud can be used in explaining how the unconscious feelings are reflected in the memory and narration of the novel. The idea of Splitting and projective identification developed by Klein can be helpful in the explanation of the connection between Etsuko and the character Sachiko. Moreover, the sociological outlook of the motherhood by Chodorow gives an insight on the social anticipations and demands that form maternal identity. Through these theoretical insights, the paper analyses the psychological interpretations of the narrative decisions, silences and contradictions of Etsuko.

Theoretical Framework

The contributions that Freud made in the ego and the superego can be used in understanding why guilt is so strong and yet so difficult to identify. Freud believes that guilt may be unconscious as a moral pressure that is enforced by the ego. "The superego is the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of a striving toward perfection. The tension between the superego and the ego is experienced as guilt, and this sense of guilt persists even when no wrongdoing is consciously recognized" (Freud 84). The outcome is the development of an internal censor that condemns the self despite the fact that there is no external charge. A great part of this guilt may be repressed, and it manifests itself in self-excusing narratives, efforts to make amends or obsessive repetition. Such defences as forgetting, denial and distortion serve as defences to shield the individual against self-censure of overwhelming proportions.

Melanie Klein builds on the Freudian theory emphasizing the object relations early in life and infant reaction to anxiety. To deal with the fear, she holds that the infant divides experience into objects that are good and bad, which she maintains separated in the paranoid-schizoid position of love and hate. "The ego splits the object and the self into good and bad parts in order to manage anxiety. These split-off parts are then projected outward, allowing the subject to preserve an image of the self as good" (Klein 4). The bad or scary aspects of the self are then transferred onto others in the form of projective identification, therefore, leaving the subject to

associate himself with those aspects as though they were the bearers of this badness.

Based on psychoanalysis and sociology, Nancy Chodorow states that the production of mothering occurs inside certain social frames. Mothers in patriarchal cultures are supposed to sacrifice themselves to their children, sometimes sacrificing their own freedom, and also harshly judged when their children fail or fall ill. As she describes, “mothering comes up with ambivalence since women are required to be self-sacrificing but at the same time individually accountable to the results of the children” (Chodorow 209). Therefore, mothers are attached to their children and, at the same time, they can be angry, resentful, and trapped. This ambivalence tends to be repressed since the concept of the self-sacrificing mother does not give much space to the mixed feelings. “Women’s mothering produces a deep emotional bond with children, yet it also creates conflicts between dependence and autonomy. These tensions generate ambivalence, as mothers must balance their own identity with the demands of caregiving” (Chodorow 209).

The guilt of Freud, splitting and Projection of Klein and maternal ambivalence of Chodorow are the three strands that give tools, which are the primary ones to read the narration of Etsuko. Opponents of *A Pale View of Hills* have underlined that the novel has made the concept of memory intentionally wavering. “Ishiguro’s early narrators are haunted by unresolved pasts, and their narratives resemble ghost stories in which absence, silence, and repetition signal the persistence of repressed memory” (Shen 358). In a parallel way, Liyun Bai demonstrates how the recollection of the bombing of Nagasaki by Etsuko is being formed by what she refers to as a spiral literary rhetorical form of overlapping references to the war memories (Bai 240). The story circulates around some occurrences with no definitive resolution of the occurrence suggesting a trauma that is not to be spoken of.

Discussion

Etsuko as an Unreliable Narrator

Being a narrator, Etsuko seems modest and self-effacing. She tends to belittle herself and she insists that her memory can be faulty. But here this modesty acts as a defence too. As Michael Molino argues, “traumatic memory in *A Pale View of Hills* resists coherent narration, producing gaps, silences, and narrative isolation that reflect the narrator’s psychological distress” (Molino 329).

Earlier fiction by Ishiguro has been said to be influenced by ghostly presence as well as by narrators haunted by their own missing memories, which is a trend followed by Anni Shen to the unpublished ghost stories and film scripts of the author in his youth. Anni Shen observes that “Ishiguro’s early narrators resemble figures in ghost stories, haunted by unresolved memories and compelled to revisit the past through fragmented and unreliable narration” (Shen 358). Etsuko is characteristic of this trend. Her narrative is more of a nervous attempt to cope with rather than a complete confession. The manner of her memory its circumference, its blankness, its digressions over others, in themselves are manifestations of psychic conflict.

Maternal Ambivalence and Keiko

The major knot in the emotional chain of Etsuko is the affection toward her daughter Keiko who is her first. Keiko is brought up in England and feels lonely and isolated and ends up killing herself. The story of Keiko presented by Etsuko is very thin. She provides some of the cursory scenes, states that Keiko could not easily settle in their new country, and then shifts swiftly to the other issues. The fact that she does not say anything about it is very conspicuous, particularly when we observe the extent to which she is able to recollect the previous summer in Nagasaki.

The recent research on the *A Pale View of Hills* has indicated that parent child relationship in the novel is characterized by the concealed competition and anxiety. The peer review indicates that there is tension between maternal instinct and freedom in parent-child relationships. Based on the theory of Karen Horney, one of the critics claims that both Etsuko and her former father-in-law Mr. Ogata are victims of parents' child conflicts that occur because of the generational distance and insufficient hostility that remained unresolved. This realization can make us understand that the relationship between Etsuko and Keiko is not only complicated by migration and cultural difference but also by something stronger.

On the facade, Etsuko is concerned and shows pity towards Keiko. Meanwhile, her voice is cold at times. She even points out that Keiko is moody and withdrawn as though these are her off-loads: that is just the way Keiko is. According to the work by Chodorow, such distancing is one of the measures mothers can take to defend a fragile sense of self in cases when mothers are overwhelmed by the needs of their children. Under the pressure of her constant caring and the threat of being accused of any failure, a mother can unconsciously disengage and transform the child into a stranger that she can recount the events of his or her pain but not experience the pain directly.

Migration, Guilt, and Maternal Identity

The fact that Etsuko has moved to England is another dimension. Critics have demonstrated that Ishiguro has frequently used migration and exile in his fiction, which he connects with crisis and guilt. According to Mustapha Marrouchi, the Japanese characters in Ishiguro are usually treated as guilty or exiled subjects marred by lack. The decision of the main character Etsuko to abandon Japan, to remarry the English man and the failure of Keiko to fit in England make the decision to bring a hidden accusation: did her one wish to have a new life betray her daughter? This question is too terrible, this is why it is not brought too close in the narrative of Etsuko. She does not talk a lot about guilt. She refers to Keiko as a person who was never really found, as though the death of Keiko was a tragic but natural thing. Freudian word, this is one of the ways in which the ego defends itself against a stern inner critic. Provided that the tragedy of Keiko is just a misfortune of character and time, Etsuko does not have to confront the fact that her decisions hurt her child.

Sachiko as Psychological Double

The character of Sachiko, the lone mother that Etsuko recalls in Nagasaki, plays an important role in comprehending the division and projection functions in the novel. Sachiko is living in poverty, her daughter, Mariko, and dreams of going out of Japan with an American man. She is very careless with the needs of Mariko and appears to be cruel at times. Etsuko observes this relationship with sympathy and disapproval.

It has not gone unnoticed by many critics that Sachiko bears a distorted image of Etsuko herself: both are mothers with one child, both of them consider the idea of leaving Japan with a foreign man, both carry with them troubled and anxious children. According to critics, the story develops Sachiko and Etsuko by means of mutual referencing across the layers of memory (Bai 236 - 249) as Ishiguro shapes the novel by structuring it around these overlapping reference levels of personal and postwar memory. We may append the fact that this coincidence goes even further into the sphere of the psychic structure: Sachiko permits Etsuko to split and project some of herself.

Sachiko carries the bad maternal impulses of Etsuko. She is hasty, egocentric, even violent with Mariko at times. It is then possible to make Etsuko feel herself the good mother in comparison: more relaxed, loving, more sensible. Somehow, the descriptions of Sachiko by Etsuko are not fixed. Sometimes she envisions the bravery of Sachiko and her inability to obey the norms of the oppression. Other times she criticizes her severely. This oscillation between admiration and denunciation is one of the typical characteristics of splitting.

Projective identification reaches even further: in transferring her disowned desires into Sachiko, Etsuko subsequently becomes responsive to Sachiko as though they were in fact hers alone and Sachiko was merely an inseparable part of her. Indicatively, the desire by Sachiko to run to America with her lover is similar to the action taken by Etsuko to England. By making the plan of Sachiko reckless, Etsuko makes her own similar choice purge herself, implicitly. In the event that the decision Sachiko made by putting her child at risk is clearly selfish, Etsuko can remind herself that she was careful with this act of migrating to another country, that she was reasonable, and she needed to do it.

In such a manner, the story of Sachiko allows Etsuko to play a motherhood drama safely. The reader however is encouraged to observe the doubling at work and to wonder to what extent the seeming recklessness of Sachiko is a part of the repressed side of Etsuko.

Repressed Guilt and Narrative Patterns

“Repressed material does not remain inactive in the unconscious. It continues to influence mental life and returns in disguised forms such as dreams, symptoms, and indirect expressions. The ego attempts to defend itself against these impulses, the repressed inevitably finds ways of reappearing. In this way, unconscious guilt

persists and shapes behaviour without conscious awareness” (Freud 54). This return can be seen in *A Pale View of Hills* in a number of ways. First, there are the repetition of the images of water, light, and desolate landscapes. Bai says that a collective trauma associated with the atomic bomb is elicited by the pale perspective of Nagasaki that the novel provides, in particular, the views along the river and the pictures of a doomed city. These pictures have a personal meaning to Etsuko as well. The water and emptiness are indicative of purification and drowning, forgetting and being engulfed. Pale view is a view which cannot support too much clearness.

Second, Etsuko is careful with the euphemism and understatement. The language used by Ishiguro has been observed by critics to tend to artificially defuse crisis by using polite language, and therefore readers have to make an effort to discover the depth of the situation. In the case of Etsuko, the next peaceful voice bumps the violent events. When she remembers about the death of Keiko, she does not use specific description because it is like using hard words that can transform the guilt into the absolute truth.

Third, there is a discontinuity of the story when Etsuko could be forced into acknowledging guilt. Once she has brought up a painful topic, she can divert to minor domestic topics or to general observations on post-war Japan. This trend is in line with what Molino qualifies as the manner traumatic memory interrupts the prospects of contextualization, leaving blank spots in which normal narration cannot occur. However, it is what is in these blind spots, principally the actions themselves of Keiko and Etsuko that imply that we are indeed handling guilt and not just the trauma being passively received.

“The ego develops mechanisms to defend itself against the demands of the superego and the impulses of the unconscious. These defensive processes reorganize thoughts and memories, allowing the individual to reduce anxiety and maintain a tolerable self-image. Yet the tension between the ego and superego persists, revealing itself in indirect forms of behaviour and narration” (Freud 56). The Freudian interpretation, the ego in this case is involved in defensive activity, the reorganization of the memories, to make Etsuko be able to live with herself. The narration is a means to bargain with superego. By narrating some variant of the events whereby she appears considerate, humble, and never expressly meanness, Etsuko aims at a self-exoneration. Nevertheless, even the tension of this performance gives away that there is something left to be done.

Postwar Trauma and Cultural Displacement

The ambivalence of Etsuko is not only individual, but it is based on her past and cultural context. Nagasaki, as Bai reveals is described as a city, in which personal memory has been deep-seated with the nuclear disaster and with the loss of collectivity in postwar Japan. “Nagasaki in *A Pale View of Hills* is represented as a scarred landscape where personal memories intertwine with collective trauma, and the aftermath of the atomic bombing continues to shape individual identity” (Bai 238). According to the novel, the postwar Japanese society Etsuko lives in is torn

between denial and memory and attempts to reconstruct with some silent shame and grief. In the given environment, women are to maintain female traditional values of wifehood and maternity, despite the fact that the old order is now unproven in defeat. “the narrative revisits postwar Nagasaki through fragmented recollections, reflecting both the effort to rebuild and the lingering silence surrounding collective loss and trauma” (Bai 240).

Even Ishiguro writing on Japan and England has been labeled as some kind of translational realism where the images of both countries are built and mythified. Her decision to relocate to England puts Etsuko in a global society where identities are negotiated and reimagined in a constant manner. This instability prompts her feeling of responsibility to more than one set of norms. In Japan, she is expected to be a good daughter according to the law and a mother, in England, she is evaluated to be an immigrant and a care provider in a new social system. In any case, failure appears inevitable.

Dominic Dean has suggested that, “the fiction by Ishiguro tends to make use of the migrant narratives to address crises of belonging and the allure of escaping into fantasy or conspiracy” (Dean 1120). Etsuko does not engage in overt conspiracy theories, even so, she tends to hold on to her own myths in order to shield herself against self-blame: myths about the nature of Keiko, about the recklessness of Sachiko and about the unavailability of some losses. In this regard, her narrative reveals that social and political displacement may intensify psychic conflict, particularly to mothers who have to bear the future of their children, as well as their own held-in resentment.

The psychoanalytic interpretation of the ambivalence and guilt in Etsuko leads to an ethical question: what is it like to listen to a narrator who conceals herself?, the novel does not just criticize Etsuko. The understanding of mothering being influenced by a stressful and a rather incoherent cultural message introduced by Chodorow helps us treat Etsuko with sympathy. The ambivalence does not arise out of a single failure in her since it has increased with the burden on mothers being heavy and unequal. Psychoanalysis here is a tool that does not just expose the defences but also a means of appreciating the human cost of the defences.

Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Maternal Ambivalence

In the psychoanalytic perspective, *A Pale View of Hills* emerges as an inconspicuous examination of maternal ambivalence and repressed guilt and their influences on both the inner life and the narrative structure. The internalized guilt theory that was believed by Freud can explain the tone of self-monitoring and the need to compose a story that will please an inner critic by Etsuko. The concept of splitting and projective identification brought forth by Klein is useful to explain the nature of Sachiko as a doubling that carries the disowned desires and the bad maternal drives of Etsuko. The picture that Chodorow provides regarding mothering as a locus of conflict between love, duty, and the want to have autonomy is the reason why Etsuko is both loving to Keiko and also protective. The modern criticism

about Ishiguro has pointed out the importance of unreliable memory, trauma and ghostly haunting during his earlier years when he wrote, the importance of post atomic Nagasaki and collective loss, concern of parent child relations and the quality of translation of his prose that destabilizes established cultural identities. Using these insights and the psychoanalytic theory, it is possible to indicate that title, the pale view, is the view of the scarred landscape, it is also the view of motherhood through the mist of repression.

The Etuko story does not fully confess anything, although, it does give the outlines of what the woman is not capable of saying. Her story makes the readers wonder how love and suffering, parental affection and neglect, guilt and guilt can be co-existent in the same mother body and how guilt can be denied through a process of re-enacting in the memory. In this respect this novel of Ishiguro is not an ethical discourse, not silent moral discourse, but is a terrifying passage about dark conscience.

As the analysis demonstrates, there are several valuable insights into the story, as well as the psychological state of Etsuko. To start with, the discontinuous nature of the story indicates the functioning of repression and traumatic memory. The hesitations and holes in the narration of Etsuko shows that some of the memories are too painful to address directly. Second, the character of Sachiko is serving as a psychological drama of fears and maternal anxieties of Etsuko herself. This doubling allows Etsuko to disown some parts of her identity that she can hardly accept. Third, maternal ambivalence is in the focal position in determining the emotional landscape of the novel. The emotions of Etsuko to Keiko are full of love, guilt, frustration, and lack of emotional closeness. Lastly, the novel shows how individual guilt is connected with historical and cultural displacement. The psychological dispute in Etsuko is caused by the trauma of the postwar Nagasaki and the experience of migration.

Conclusion

Psychoanalytically, *A Pale View of Hills* provides an implicit discussion of maternal ambivalence, repression and guilt. The unconscious guilt is the theory by Freud that describes the self-observation tone of the narration of Etsuko and the way she attempts to create a narrative that shields her against moral self-judgment. The theories of splitting and projective identification put forward by Klein help to understand that Sachiko is a double that bears the disowned maternal passions of Etsuko. The motherhood theory of Chodorow also brings out the conflict of emotional demands on mothers by the social expectations. Combined, these points indicate that the unreliability of the narration in Etsuko is not only a stylistic means but also a psychological one. Her story tries to compromise between the memories and denial, the love and hatred, the responsibility and self-defence. This way, the novel by Ishiguro offers the highly impressive depiction of the emotional battles that remain unaddressed in motherhood and post-traumatic and post-migration impacts.

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