

## **Resonance of Vanished Empire: Cultural Memory and Nostalgic Revision in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World***

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### **Abstract**

*The academic approach to memory studies concentrates on analyzing how societies organize their relationship with the past. It extends beyond individual psychology to examine the structural and cultural forces that determine what is preserved and what is forgotten. This paper investigates how Kazuo Ishiguro's "An Artist of the Floating World" (1986) constructs and deconstructs cultural memory, demonstrating how nostalgic revisions of imperial Japan both protect and distort the past. Using Jan and Aleida Assmann's influential framework of cultural memory, the study suggests that Ishiguro's protagonist, Ono, employs selective recollection and self-deception to reconcile his involvement in a vanished empire with his present identity. The novel considers memory not merely as an accurate historical record but as an active process of cultural meaning-making, where personal recollections become intertwined with collective trauma and the decline of Japanese imperial power. Ishiguro's approach to memory surpasses simple psychological portrayal; his work exemplifies how literature functions as a space for creating cultural memory, balancing between communicative memory, which refers to lived experience, and cultural memory that exceeds individual awareness. The paper*

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*contends that the novel's fragmented, unreliable narrative mirrors the nature of cultural memory itself, illustrating how nostalgia serves both as a means of healing and as a way of distorting history in post-war Japan. Through textual analysis grounded in Assmann's memory theory, this research advances understanding of how literary works contribute to shaping national identity and renegotiating historical responsibility.*

**Keywords:** ishiguro, memory, nostalgia, imperial Japan, psychology

## Introduction

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field exploring how individuals and societies construct and contest their understanding of the past. It reveals that remembrance is a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by collective frameworks, institutional forces, and the needs of the present community. Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) is a significant work in this field, exposing how "pasts are reconstructed through present anxieties and narrative reinterpretations." Ishiguro interrogates "the reliability of memory and its connections to historical trauma and collective forgetting" (Guo 2510). The theories of Jan and Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann offer vital insights into how literary texts shape cultural identity (Zhdanov 427). They distinguish between "communicative memory," which persists across approximately three generations, and "cultural memory," which is preserved through symbols, rituals, and artistic forms (Wang 245). Ishiguro's novel exemplifies this distinction by demonstrating how the protagonist's personal recollections gradually assume cultural significance within the broader historical context of Imperial Japan (Călinescu 48). They distinguish between communicative memory, which persists across three generations, and cultural memory, which is embodied in symbols and art (Wang 245). Ishiguro's novel exemplifies this distinction by demonstrating how the protagonist's memories take on cultural significance within the context of Imperial Japan (Călinescu 48).

## Retrospective Narration and Fragmented Memory

The narrative of *An Artist of the Floating World* is presented through the retrospective voice of Masuji Ono, an elderly painter reflecting on his past as a propagandist artist during Japan's imperial period (Tellini 177). Ono's troubled consciousness illustrates memory distortion and self-deception, showing how individuals bury unbearable memories under layers of rationalization (Parlati 56). The novel's non-linear structure mirrors the dynamic nature of cultural memory, which evolves in response to present needs (Matović 182). As Aleida Assmann suggests, memory is a complex interplay of retained and abandoned past elements (Hubner 151). Ono's focus on his daughter's marriage prospects forces him to confront suppressed memories, challenging his self-image (Tellini 178). His struggle for narrative coherence reflects the broader cultural task of confronting a nation's lost greatness.

### **Nostalgia as Cultural Memory and Psychological Defense**

The concept of nostalgia operates as a central mechanism in Ishiguro's novel, per contra, the text persistently undermines simplistic readings of nostalgia as mere escapism or benign sentiment. Jan Assmann's theorization of cultural memory emphasizes that memory is fundamentally future-oriented, shaped by present concerns and adaptive to contemporary social needs, rather than constituting a faithful preservation of anterior events (Ferdinand 312). Through Ono, Ishiguro demonstrates how nostalgia for imperial Japan becomes a mode through which the protagonist negotiates the profound shame and disorientation of living in a defeated, colonized nation transformed by American military occupation and cultural influence (Tellini 179).

The artist's earlier status as a respected cultural figure, celebrated for artistic propaganda supporting Japanese militarism, has been rendered meaningless by historical catastrophe. Ono's nostalgic reconstruction of his past thus serves a psychologically protective function, allowing him to retain a sense of dignity and purposefulness in an era when his contributions have become morally indefensible and artistically irrelevant. However, Ishiguro's presentation of Ono's nostalgic revision is sufficiently complex and sympathetic that the reader cannot simply dismiss it as mere delusion or moral evasion. The novel, by positioning nostalgia as a fundamental human response to historical loss and cultural trauma, even as it exposes the ethical dangers and distortions inherent in such retrospective reconstruction (Guo 2514).

### **The Floating World and the Collapse of Imperial Identity**

Ishiguro's treatment of the vanished empire operates on multiple registers simultaneously. At the literal level, the novel documents the material disappearance of the aesthetic and social structures through which Ono constructed his identity. The "floating world" of the title refers to the aesthetic movement of Edo-period Japan, a tradition of celebrating transient pleasure and refined sensuality. However, the novel's use of this literary and artistic tradition becomes deeply ironic when applied to Ono's later career as a propagandist for a militaristic state. The floating world, traditionally associated with impermanence, beauty, and leisure, becomes contaminated by association with the permanent institutional violence of imperialism and war. As Jan Assmann emphasizes, cultural memory functions through the activation of symbolic systems and aesthetic forms that encode collective experience and identity (Assmann, "Jan Assmann's Concept" 31). In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro demonstrates how these symbolic systems become unstable when the historical realities they emerged have been fundamentally transformed. The traditional artistic vocabulary through which Ono learned to understand himself can no longer sustain its original meanings; the cultural memory within which his artistic achievements gained significance has been destroyed by historical forces beyond individual control (Călinescu 50).

### **Complicity, Cultural Amnesia, and Historical Responsibility**

The novel's depiction of Ono's involvement in imperial violence challenges straightforward nostalgia as a reading strategy. Ishiguro prevents readers from dismissing Ono as either a hero or a victim (Tellini 180). Instead, Ono is shown as a collaborator who believes his art served higher cultural goals, while secretly aware of the suffering inflicted by Japanese militarism on colonized peoples and by his own country. The novel illustrates Aleida Assmann's idea of the link between personal and collective memory: Ono's nostalgia is tied to how societies select which historical events to remember, mourn, or repress (Wang, "Downward Compatibility" 24). His defense mechanisms, forgetting, reinterpreting troubling events as necessary or culturally motivated, mirror nation-level "cultural amnesia," letting societies overlook trauma to function (Youngman et al. 456).

### **Generational Divide and the Transition of Cultural Memory**

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro explores cultural memory through the generational divide between Ono and his daughter, Noriko. Her pragmatic acceptance of American influence contrasts with Ono's nostalgic view of Japan's imperial past. This reflects Assmann's concept of the shift from communicative to cultural memory, as Noriko's generation knows the empire primarily through inherited narratives rather than personal experiences. Ono's anxieties about Americanization and his daughter's marriage illustrate his struggle to accept this transition. The novel depicts a conversation or mutual incomprehension between generations with different relationships to the same historical past.

### **Narrative Unreliability and collective memory construction**

Ishiguro's narrative technique embodies the unreliability that characterizes cultural memory's operations. The text is structured as Ono's retrospective first-person narration, presenting events from his present perspective while also offering recollections of past conversations, events, and impressions that frequently contradict one another (Parlati 58). The reader gradually becomes aware that Ono's account cannot be fully trusted; memories seem to shift, important information is withheld or minimized, and the protagonist's interpretations of his own motivations and historical situations appear self-serving. This narrative unreliability functions not as a flaw in Ishiguro's construction but as its greatest achievement: the novel's form enacts the fundamental characteristics of how memory actually operates, particularly how cultural memory transforms individual experience through selective emphasis, defensive reinterpretation, and the pressure of present needs (Matović 185).

Maurice Halbwachs' foundational work on collective memory, upon which the Assmanns build their theoretical framework, emphasized that memory is always socially constructed, shaped by the groups within which individuals live

and the frameworks those groups provide for interpreting past events (Tamm 146). Ono's recollections, examined through this lens, emerge as deeply social productions: the meanings he assigns to his past experiences are constantly being reshaped by his present interactions with younger-generation family members, by contemporary Japan's relationship to American culture and economic power, and by his anxieties about the meaning his life will be judged to have possessed (Tellini 186).

### **Trauma, historical catastrophe, and memory formation**

The novel's engagement with trauma and historical catastrophe situates it within what many scholars identify as Ishiguro's central preoccupation across his oeuvre: the psychological and social aftermath of historical disaster (Guo 2516). The atomic bombing of Nagasaki and the broader devastation of Japanese military defeat constitute the unspoken but omnipresent historical context within which Ono's entire narrative unfolds. While Ishiguro does not directly narrate the war or its immediate aftermath, the presence of this catastrophic history shapes every dimension of Ono's present consciousness and his retrospective efforts to find meaning in his own life (Parlati 59). In this respect, Ishiguro's treatment of memory and trauma participates in what Catherine Malabou and other contemporary theorists identify as the relationship between neuro-literature and the representation of traumatic experience, the way that literary texts can access dimensions of consciousness that have been fundamentally altered by historical violence and trauma (Trimarco 148). Ono's fragmented, unreliable consciousness becomes a vehicle through which Ishiguro communicates the psychological reality of surviving historical catastrophe: the mind that has experienced or been implicated in collective trauma cannot return to a state of pre-traumatic innocence, nor can it fully integrate the knowledge of destruction into a coherent self-narrative.

### **Cultural memory and imperial propaganda**

Ishiguro's protagonist, Ono, deserves attention within memory studies for his active role in Japan's imperial cultural production. As *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono initially celebrated pleasure and refinement but later redirected his talents towards state propaganda to glorify military ambitions. This shift exemplifies Jan Assmann's view that cultural memory is constructed to legitimize power. Ono's nostalgic reflection on his career represents a renegotiation of his involvement in these power structures, as he seeks to recover dignity despite collaborating with a regime engaged in violence.

The geographic and spatial dimensions of memory structure Ishiguro's novel in ways that align with Assmann's emphasis on "memory spaces" and the role of material sites in anchoring collective recollection (Hubner 154). The Tokyo neighborhood where Ono has spent his life, with its temples, restaurants, and streets associated with particular artistic movements and social relationships, constitutes a memory landscape in which his personal history becomes

inscribed and through which cultural memory is materially embodied. However, this landscape is itself in the process of transformation, as post-war Japanese modernization and Americanization reshape Tokyo's spatial organization. The physical city becomes an archive of contested memories, with older structures and sites persisting alongside the new institutions of post-war Japan. Ono's walks through Tokyo trigger memories while simultaneously confronting him with evidence of historical change that his nostalgic narrative struggles to accommodate. The novel demonstrates, in accordance with Assmann's theoretical insights, that memory operates through the activation of spatial and material dimensions, that places themselves function as mnemonic devices and that the transformation of physical space constitutes a form of memory erasure (Wang, "Exploring the Approaches" 188).

### **Individual memory and national identity formation**

The novel's exploration of how individual memory becomes embedded in collective historical consciousness connects directly to Ishiguro's broader significance within literary memory studies. Whereas writers who treat memory primarily as a psychological or autobiographical matter, Ishiguro consistently demonstrates how personal recollection becomes implicated in larger processes of historical meaning-making and national identity formation (Guo 2512). *An Artist of the Floating World* reveals that Ono's struggle to maintain a coherent self-narrative is simultaneously a struggle to maintain a coherent narrative of Japanese identity and historical continuity. The vanished empire haunts not only his personal past but Japan's collective relationship to its own history. The generational conflicts dramatized in the novel, the anxieties about cultural transmission, and the tensions between tradition and modernization, all of these personal and familial matters become indexes of broader transformations in how a defeated, colonized nation can reconstruct its relationship to its own past without denying responsibility or collapsing into permanent shame (Tellini 189).

In this sense, Ono emerges as representative of his entire generation: figures who must somehow continue living in a nation whose identity has been fundamentally destabilized by military defeat and foreign occupation, who must find ways to preserve some continuity with their past selves and their cultural heritage while simultaneously acknowledging that the historical world within which they developed has been permanently destroyed.

### **Nostalgia, storage memory, and cultural loss**

Nostalgia in the novel serves as a complex form of cultural memory, functioning as both individual psychological defense and collective social practice. Aleida Assmann's distinction between functional memory, necessary for societal function, and storage memory, the broader cultural archive, clarifies how nostalgia can alter the status of historical materials in cultural consciousness (Youngman et al. 458). For Ono and his generation, imperial

Japanese culture has moved from functional memory to storage memory, where nostalgia in *An Artist of the Floating World* seeks to reactivate cultural traditions that are no longer relevant. However, Ishiguro illustrates the futility of this endeavor, as the past cannot be reclaimed; the conditions that granted it significance have vanished. The novel's tragedy lies in the clash between Ono's nostalgic yearnings and historical reality, highlighting the irrevocable loss of the framework that once gave meaning to those traditions (Călinescu 54).

The question of historical responsibility and ethical reckoning runs throughout the novel, highlighting Ishiguro's unique approach to memory compared to more sentimental nostalgia. Ono's reminiscences reveal an awareness that his artistic propaganda may have inadvertently supported a military apparatus responsible for immense suffering. This troubling knowledge is not overtly expressed; instead, it simmers beneath Ono's rationalizations, surfacing during moments of vulnerability. This narrative feature illustrates the complex relationship between trauma, memory, and ethical responsibility. While the historical trauma of Japanese militarism can't be fully captured in Ono's nostalgic narrative, its unacknowledged presence shapes his recollections, exposing the reader to his self-deception and the broader ethical implications of how individuals and societies remember their complicity in historical violence.

The novel also illuminates what Jan Assmann identifies as the mimetic dimension of cultural memory, the ways that memory operates through embodied ritual, performance, and the recreation of lived practices rather than exclusively through textual representation (Assmann, "Jan Assmann's Concept" 34). Ono's present life, his daily walks, his conversations with old friends and acquaintances, his involvement in neighborhood activities, all of these constitute a form of mimetic memory through which the traditions of the floating world aesthetic continue to structure his existence even after the historical and political circumstances that once validated those traditions have vanished.

However, this embodied memory becomes increasingly disconnected from any institutional support or social validation; it persists as personal ritual and individual practice rather than as a socially shared cultural performance. The younger generation's apparent indifference to these traditional practices and aesthetic values represents, in Assmannian terms, a break in the mimetic transmission of cultural memory (Wang, "Visual Construction" 248). Where once these practices and aesthetic values would have been transmitted across generations through familial instruction, artistic training, and social expectation, that transmission has been interrupted. Ono's embodied memory thus becomes an anachronism, a form of cultural memory that no longer achieves collective significance because the institutional and social structures necessary for its continuation no longer exist (Hubner 156).

### **Literature as cultural memory production**

Ishiguro's novel contributes significantly to literary memory studies by demonstrating how narrative fiction provides an essential vehicle for exploring the operations and functions of cultural memory that historical and sociological approaches cannot fully capture (Guo 2513). The subjective interiority of Ono's consciousness, the contradictions and revisions that characterize his account, the gaps and silences that structure his narrative, all of these literary dimensions enable representation of how memory actually functions in human consciousness and social practice in ways that more objective historical documentation cannot achieve. The novel reveals that cultural memory is not something that exists independently, waiting to be discovered and represented; rather, it is actively produced through acts of narration, through the stories that individuals and societies tell about their pasts, and through the selective emphasis and deliberate omissions that characterize all historical representation (Matović 187). Ishiguro positions himself as a writer who understands that the construction of cultural memory is necessarily an ethical and political project: the stories we tell about history, the past events we choose to emphasize or minimize, the meanings we assign to historical actors and actions, all of these constitutive elements of cultural memory have consequences for how individuals understand themselves and how societies understand their obligations to their own members and to those harmed by their histories (Tellini 191).

### **Acceptance, loss, and the work of cultural memory**

The novel's final sections, in which Ono confronts the explicit rejection of his values and the determination of the younger generation to pursue their lives according to different principles, demonstrate his gradual acceptance of historical change even as he continues to mourn the loss of the cultural world that once validated his existence (Parlati 61). This resignation, marked by a kind of tragic dignity rather than simple defeat, suggests that Ishiguro understands cultural memory not as a realm in which individuals can ultimately exercise control or impose their preferred meanings, but rather as a contested terrain shaped by forces beyond individual volition. The vanished empire will continue to haunt Japanese consciousness and cultural identity even as the nation and its people move forward into a new historical era.

For Ono personally, the floating world that once seemed eternal and transcendent becomes revealed as historical and transient; it becomes the kind of thing that memory can only touch through nostalgic longing, never through active practice and social validation. The artistic and cultural traditions through which Ono constructed his identity have become definitively historical objects of memory and study rather than living guides for present action. Although, the novel suggests that this very transformation into history and memory is not

entirely tragic or destructive. The work of memory, the effort to understand the past and one's relationship to it, constitutes a genuine and necessary human activity even when it leads to painful confrontation with self-deception and historical loss. Ishiguro's protagonist, through his struggles to maintain narrative coherence in the face of historical catastrophe and personal shame, enacts what memory studies scholars identify as the essential labor of cultural memory: the attempt to make meaning from historical experience and to transmit understanding across the ruptures and discontinuities that characterize historical change (Călinescu 56).

### **Conclusion**

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* examines cultural memory through Masuji Ono's fragmented consciousness, portraying nostalgia as a psychological defense and a tool for collective meaning-making in the context of historical trauma (Tellini 192). By using Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, the novel highlights how artistic tradition, political ideology, and personal recollections intertwine as identities become morally ambiguous (Zhdanov 430). It depicts memory as a generational struggle between those who experience the imperial past and those who interpret it selectively (Proietti 140). Ishiguro's fragmented narrative reflects how memory is shaped by social needs and asserts that while nostalgia can't restore the past, understanding and preserving memory are essential, ultimately emphasizing that cultural memory is about creating meaning and identities amid complexity and moral ambiguity (Guo 2514).

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