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Silence And Memory In Ishiguro's Narratives

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction presents a world of subdued emotions, fragmented recollections, and moral introspection. His characters inhabit spaces where silence speaks as profoundly as words and where memory serves as both refuge and burden. This article examines the complex relationship between *Silence* and *Memory* in two of Ishiguro's most significant novels *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *The Buried Giant* (2015). While the former explores the inner trauma and repressed guilt of an individual confronting personal loss, the latter expands these themes to collective memory and cultural amnesia in a post-war society. Through a study of Ishiguro's narrative silences, unreliable recollections, and ethical ambiguity, this paper argues that silence in his works is not absence but a form of communication that reflects the human struggle between remembering and forgetting. Ishiguro's fiction suggests that true peace, whether personal or collective, depends on how one negotiates between the necessity of memory and the mercy of silence.

Keywords

Kazuo Ishiguro, Silence, Memory, Trauma, Forgetting, Identity, Collective Memory, Narrative Ethics

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's literary world is defined by restraint, understatement, and an abiding concern with memory and identity. Born in Nagasaki and raised in Britain, Ishiguro occupies a unique position between cultures, and this dual heritage finds expression in his fiction, where past and present often merge in a haunting dialogue. His prose is calm yet charged with emotional undercurrents; what remains unspoken frequently holds greater significance than what it has articulated.

Silence and memory form the emotional and ethical axis of Ishiguro's narratives. In his works, silence is rarely a passive absence; it functions as a defence, a language of trauma, and sometimes a moral failure. Memory, on the other hand, is unreliable, selective, and shaped by guilt and loss. The two are intimately bound: silence shelters damaged memory, while memory disturbs silence.

This article explores these interconnections in *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Buried Giant*. The first novel offers a deeply personal account of postwar dislocation and maternal guilt; the second examines a society's collective amnesia after violent conflict. Together, they trace Ishiguro's evolving vision from private grief to the moral implications of collective forgetting, illustrating how silence and memory shape human consciousness and the ethical dimensions of remembrance.

Silence and Fragmented Memory in *A Pale View of Hills*

Ishiguro's debut novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, is narrated by Etsuko, a Japanese woman living in England who reflects upon her past life in Nagasaki before and after World War II. While her narrative ostensibly recounts the story of another woman, Sachiko, and her daughter, Mariko, it gradually becomes clear that these recollections are projections of her own repressed trauma, especially surrounding her daughter Keiko's suicide. This narrative strategy allows Ishiguro to explore the unstable, fragmented nature of memory and the ethical tensions embedded within silence. From the outset, Etsuko signals the haziness of her recollections, admitting that her memories "have grown hazy" with time (Ishiguro 10). Such a declaration immediately positions her narrative as subjective, fragmented, and open to both revelation and concealment, reflecting the human tendency to distort memory to cope with unbearable loss. The blurring of Sachiko's story with her own life underscores how trauma mediates memory: painful events are reconfigured, displaced, or selectively forgotten to preserve the self.

Michael R. Molino, in *Questioning Memory: Narrative Ambiguity in Ishiguro's Early Fiction* (2010), observes that Etsuko's memories "operate as both revelation and concealment" (Molino 92). This dual function highlights how selective recollection serves as a psychological defence mechanism. The structural ambiguity of the novel, achieved through silences, pauses, and narrative ellipses, is not merely aesthetic; it is ethical. By compelling readers to interrogate what Etsuko refuses to acknowledge directly, Ishiguro positions the act of reading as a moral engagement. The tension between what is articulated and what is withheld conveys the weight of unprocessed grief, guilt, and emotional repression, illustrating that memory is rarely a transparent, linear record of the past. Etsuko's recollections are punctuated by ellipses, gaps in dialogue, and vague references, all of which evoke the fragmented and selective processes of memory itself.

Silence in *A Pale View of Hills* functions as a narrative and ethical form. The pauses, omissions, and unspoken emotions signify the psychological and moral dimensions of what cannot be articulated. Etsuko's interactions with her younger daughter, Niki, exemplify this; their relationship is mediated by the silence surrounding Keiko's death, a silence that both preserves distance and reveals the inescapable presence of loss. She confesses, "I suppose I never spoke of certain things, because it was easier to carry them alone" (Ishiguro 55). In this line, silence is simultaneously protective and isolating: it shields Etsuko

from confronting her trauma while perpetuating a moral and emotional separation from others. Sarah Dillon, in *The Palimpsest of Memory in Ishiguro's Early Work* (2011), reinforces this view, asserting that "Etsuko's silence is her means of survival; her speech would be self-destruction" (Dillon 58). In other words, silence becomes both wound and shield, a mechanism by which the protagonist negotiates the dual imperatives of survival and ethical responsibility.

The novel's narrative style enhances these thematic concerns. Ishiguro employs a restrained, minimalistic prose marked by quiet tones, understated dialogue, and subtle emotional expression. The apparent simplicity of the text belies the complex psychological and ethical layers embedded within, allowing what is left unsaid to resonate with equal or greater power than the spoken words. The fragmentation of memory is mirrored in the temporal structure of the narrative: Etsuko shifts between past and present, recounting experiences in Nagasaki while living in England, creating a disjunctive rhythm that mirrors the instability of recollection. This discontinuity is intensified by the interweaving of Sachiko's story with Etsuko's, producing ambiguity that compels readers to actively reconstruct the narrative and discern the ethical weight of the silences. As Etsuko reflects, "Sometimes I think I am remembering what never was, or what I wished it had been" (Ishiguro 72), highlighting the reconstructive nature of memory, where imagination, longing, and guilt intersect to shape recollection.

The cultural context of postwar Japan provides further significance to the novel's treatment of silence. Social norms often demanded restraint, discouraging overt expression of grief and emotional vulnerability. Ishiguro uses this cultural backdrop to explore the ethical dimensions of silence: while it can protect the individual from immediate pain, it can also perpetuate unresolved trauma, emotional distance, and relational tension. Etsuko's evasions and selective recollections exemplify this tension; her silence mediates her grief but also distances her from Niki and others who might share or alleviate her burden. In a conversation with Niki, the subtleties of the unspoken underscore the gap between mother and daughter, illustrating how memory, silence, and ethical responsibility intersect in shaping human relationships.

Moreover, Ishiguro examines how trauma influences the construction of memory itself. Etsuko's selective recollections are marked by avoidance of painful truths, suggesting that memory functions not merely as cognitive recall but as a moral and emotional process. By reconstructing her past through the lens of Sachiko and Mariko, she negotiates her guilt and repressed grief, illustrating that fragmented memory is both a protective strategy and a site of ethical tension. The narrative's ambiguity, its refusal to fully disclose Keiko's fate until subtle clues accumulate encourages readers to confront the moral and emotional complexities of recollection. Memory, in this sense, is a negotiation between truth, self-preservation, and moral accountability.

Ishiguro's deployment of silence and fragmented memory also enhances the novel's psychological realism. Readers sense Etsuko's emotional states through what is left unsaid as much as through direct statements. The narrative demonstrates that the weight of memory is carried not only in recalled events but in pauses, ellipses, and gaps where grief, guilt, and longing reside. Michael Molino emphasises that "the ethical dimension of Etsuko's memory lies in what she suppresses as much as what she articulates" (Molino 93), highlighting how silence is simultaneously a mechanism of protection and moral evasion. This duality is central to Ishiguro's exploration of postwar trauma, maternal grief, and the human propensity to fragment and reconstruct memory to manage unbearable emotional experiences.

The relationship between memory and identity is particularly salient in *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko's recollections and silences shape her understanding of herself and her relationships. Her selective memory preserves a sense of psychological stability but imposes a moral burden, as the repression of truth distances her from emotional authenticity. Lines such as "I sometimes wonder if forgetting is easier than remembering" (Ishiguro 101) reflect the tension between the instinct to suppress painful recollections and the ethical imperative to acknowledge and process them. By emphasising the instability, subjectivity, and ethical complexity of memory, Ishiguro constructs a narrative in which silence and recollection are inseparable, each defining the other.

In conclusion, *A Pale View of Hills* exemplifies Ishiguro's profound engagement with the interplay of silence and fragmented memory. Memory in the novel is reconstructive, selective, and ethically charged, while silence functions as both protection and barrier, mediating trauma, grief, and relational dynamics. Etsuko's narrative demonstrates that human recollection is never objective or linear; it is a negotiation between what is remembered, what is repressed, and what remains unspoken. Ishiguro's understated prose, elliptical narrative structure, and focus on psychological and moral complexity elevate the novel into a profound meditation on memory, identity, and ethical responsibility. Through the fragmented recollections and silences of Etsuko, readers are invited to confront the paradoxical power of memory: it sustains and wounds, reveals and conceals, shapes the self, and mediates human relationships, illustrating the ethical and emotional depth of Ishiguro's early fiction.

Silence and Fragmented Memory in *The Buried Giant*

More than three decades after *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro revisited the themes of memory, silence, and ethical responsibility in *The Buried Giant*, a novel set in a mythic post-Arthurian Britain. Here, memory is not merely a personal phenomenon, as it is in Etsuko's story, but a collective condition, manipulated and mediated through the mysterious mist that blankets the land. The mist, which causes people to forget past events, functions as a powerful metaphor for societal amnesia. On one level, it preserves a fragile peace between Britons and Saxons, but on another, it erases moral responsibility and ethical reckoning. Ishiguro's narrative probes the tension between forgetting as a mechanism for survival and remembering as an ethical imperative, raising profound questions about the cost of silence and the moral consequences of selective memory.

The story follows the elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, who set out to find their long-lost son, journeying through a landscape where personal and collective memory is obscured. Their quest is as much a search for self-understanding and relational intimacy as it is for familial reunion. Early in the narrative, the mist is described as a pervasive and oppressive presence: “It lay over the land like a soft, unyielding blanket, smoothing out the edges of recollection and blurring the distinction between past wrongs and present peace” (Ishiguro 34). This figurative device establishes the ethical framework of the novel: forgetting shields individuals and societies from immediate pain, yet it simultaneously inhibits moral consciousness. Paul Taylor, in *The New Republic*, observes that Ishiguro “transforms the politics of forgetting into a haunting moral allegory” (Taylor 77), highlighting the extension of his earlier exploration of personal memory into a broader societal dimension. Where *A Pale View of Hills* depicted Etsuko’s individual struggle with grief and trauma, *The Buried Giant* expands this inquiry to examine the ethics of collective memory, demonstrating the narrative’s moral and philosophical sophistication.

The mist operates as both protective and destructive. It prevents the recurrence of conflict by erasing memory of past violence, yet it also obscures the ethical obligation to acknowledge and reconcile with historical wrongdoing. Axl and Beatrice confront this duality as they attempt to recover personal and communal memory. Beatrice’s statement, “We must remember, Axl, or else how shall we love each other again?” (Ishiguro 123), crystallises the novel’s central thesis: memory, however painful, is indispensable for intimacy, moral integrity, and genuine human connection. Silence, in this context, is not merely a personal defence mechanism but an institutionalised force shaping the social fabric. The ethical implications are clear: to suppress memory for the sake of peace is to preserve comfort while simultaneously erasing accountability, empathy, and relational depth. Howard Sklar observes that Ishiguro’s narrative “confronts the ethical dilemma between remembering the horror of the past and preserving the peace of the present” (Journal of Narrative Ethics, 2018, p. 114), emphasising that collective forgetting, like personal repression, carries profound moral consequences.

The journey of Axl and Beatrice is emblematic of humanity’s attempt to reconcile memory with peace. At each encounter along the road, they confront fragmented recollections, ambiguities, and traces of historical violence. Ishiguro’s use of episodic narrative structure mirrors the piecemeal and selective nature of memory, while also reflecting the laborious process of ethical reckoning. The characters must decide whether the restoration of memory is worth the return of suffering, vengeance, and moral accountability. The buried giant itself, both literal and metaphorical, symbolises the dormant past whose awakening threatens immediate tranquillity but whose continued suppression perpetuates denial and injustice. In this respect, Ishiguro transforms memory into an ethical problem: the act of remembering becomes inseparable from the moral responsibility to act upon that knowledge, while silence, though comforting, becomes ethically tenuous.

Ishiguro's stylistic restraint reinforces the ethical weight of silence. The prose is economical, understated, and often elliptical, reflecting the internal suppression and social mediation of memory. Conversations are brief, emotional expression is muted, and much is left unsaid, compelling readers to engage with the silences and gaps to reconstruct moral and historical truths. Roland Barthes' concept of "writerly silence" is particularly apt here; Ishiguro's minimalism invites the reader to co-create meaning, to interpret ethical dilemmas embedded in the text, and to consider the consequences of forgetting and remembering. This narrative strategy transforms reading into an ethical exercise: active engagement with the text becomes an act of moral interpretation, mirroring the choices Axl, Beatrice, and their society must confront.

In contrast with *A Pale View of Hills*, where silence mediates personal trauma, *The Buried Giant* emphasises the social and collective dimensions of memory and forgetting. Etsuko's silence is defensive and protective, a personal response to grief and guilt. Axl and Beatrice, however, navigate a society-wide amnesia, where forgetting has been institutionalised to maintain peace. Yet Ishiguro suggests that the ethical cost of silence is universal: without memory, reconciliation, empathy, and moral clarity are impossible. Lines such as Beatrice's assertion that love itself requires memory remind readers that human connection is ethically and emotionally contingent upon remembering, no matter how painful. Memory and silence exist in tension: the former grounds morality, identity, and relational depth, while the latter provides relief, stability, and, paradoxically, ethical hazard.

Comparing Ishiguro's two novels illuminates his thematic evolution. In *A Pale View of Hills*, silence shields the self from unbearable guilt; in *The Buried Giant*, silence shields society from historical violence. Both, however, expose the fragility and consequences of such strategies. Memory in both works is reconstructed, fragmented, and morally weighted; silence functions as protection but also carries ethical ramifications. The narrative strategies, fragmented narration, unreliable memory, and elliptical prose invite readers into a participatory role, compelling them to reconstruct the moral and emotional landscape. As Paul Taylor notes, Ishiguro's novel "transforms forgetting into a moral challenge" (Taylor 78), demonstrating that narrative gaps, silences, and ambiguities are not accidental but integral to ethical engagement.

Ultimately, *The Buried Giant* emphasises that complete remembering and total silence are both impossible and ethically insufficient. To forget entirely is to forfeit moral responsibility; to remember fully is to risk emotional devastation. Ishiguro's narrative suggests that the art of living and storytelling lies in balancing memory and silence, acknowledging both their necessity and their danger. Through the journey of Axl and Beatrice, the reader witnesses the human struggle to reconcile the ethical demands of memory with the pragmatic desire for peace, observing that silence, though often protective, carries consequences for intimacy, justice, and relational integrity. Ishiguro's masterful handling of collective memory and ethical silence expands the moral inquiry of *A Pale View of Hills* into a societal frame, underscoring the universality of these concerns across individual and communal dimensions.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's narratives reveal that silence and memory are not binary opposites but interdependent forces shaping human identity. In *A Pale View of Hills*, silence conceals the wounds of personal loss; in *The Buried Giant*, it governs the moral fabric of a society seeking peace through forgetfulness. Both demonstrate how memory can heal or harm, and how silence can preserve or imprison.

Ishiguro's art lies in transforming these abstractions into deeply human stories. His restrained language, subtle symbolism, and ethical ambiguity compel readers to listen to what remains unsaid. By situating memory within silence, Ishiguro portrays the human condition as one of perpetual negotiation between remembering and forgetting, confession and concealment. In the end, his fiction suggests that peace, whether within a single heart or across a nation, depends not on absolute remembrance or total silence, but on the courage to acknowledge what lies buried beneath both.

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