

The Poetics of Trauma, Time, and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's Early Novels

IRIS RUSU

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's adherence to high modernist principles of composition is well documented: critics such as Patricia Waugh, Barry Lewis, Mark Currie, Yugin Teo, and Jason Tougaw have identified (high) modernist thematic and stylistic traits in his fiction. This article discusses Ishiguro's first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), arguing that his concern with traumatic memories and time is deeply rooted in the high modernist tradition. In both novels, the issues of collective and individual trauma and memory lead to cognitive displacement, the merging of memory with fantasy, and the bending of time. By employing the methodology and terminology of trauma studies, I aim to unpick not only Ishiguro's treatment of themes such as guilt, confusion, and unhomeliness, but also a narrative strategy that draws openly on the displacements, lyricism and unreliability that are shown to result from traumatic experiences and the conscious mind's inability to confront them.

Keywords: (Meta)modernism, collective and individual trauma, memory, lyricism, guilt, displacement.

In the preface to a collection of essays devoted to Ishiguro, edited by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes, Haruki Murakami states that a distinctive feature of Ishiguro's fiction is that all of his novels

are seemingly different: “from one to the next, they are put together in different ways, and point in different directions” (vii). Nevertheless, while each of Ishiguro’s novels seems different from the others, there are various elements that bear “Ishiguro’s unmistakable imprint” (Murakami qtd. in Matthews and Groes vii). This imprint transpires in his constant preoccupation with the themes of memory, trauma, and guilt expressed by means of Modernist rather than Postmodernist narrative/formal techniques.

This article will discuss Ishiguro’s early novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), highlighting the importance of time, memory, and place. It will show that the discussion of the aforementioned issues points towards High Modernist techniques and will prove that trauma studies and a modernist framework can go hand in hand in examining Ishiguro’s novels. I argue that Ishiguro’s early work is well suited for an analysis employing trauma studies methodology, especially theories of the second wave. The role of place will also be evidenced by applying various theoretical concepts pertaining to Modernism and Trauma Studies, such as the objective correlative or topophobia, to his work. This essay will show that the passing of time in Ishiguro’s two novels is symbolically reflected in the protagonists’ discourse, evincing guilt, shame, and traumatic memories that resurface in their unreliable topophobic narratives.

In the context of 21st century fiction, memory and trauma studies are topical fields of interest in the humanities, as scholars remark on the presence of a certain “trauma aesthetic” in contemporary writing (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 8). The two are “complementary and interrelated fields of study,” with trauma being considered “a pathological form of remembering” (Whitehead 878). The 1990s saw the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field, trauma studies, pioneered by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* on how trauma modifies our understanding of time and history. More recently, literary theorists and historians have been building on or going beyond the Caruthian trauma model.

The first wave of trauma studies scholars discussed trauma and literature in the context of Freudian theories, with emphasis on the fragmentation of the self and displacement. Caruth's Freudian model views trauma as unrepresentable and defines it as unknown, unassimilated (Caruth 124), yet ever-pervasive, being characterised by latency (17), pathological symptoms (59), dissociation (141), and an "infectious" quality (Freud qtd. in Caruth 17). These characteristics make trauma intergenerationally transmissible (Balaev, "Trauma Studies" 365). More recently, however, a new, pluralistic model that aims to go beyond "the shattering trope" (Balaev, "Trauma Studies" 368), i.e. beyond the Freudian dissociative model, has been developed by Michelle Balaev, Ann Cvetkovich, Greg Forter, Amy Hungerford, and Naomi Mandel. The second wave in trauma studies views trauma as an event disrupting one's "sense of self" as well as the "standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev, "Trends" 150). Thus, while perception and identity are, indeed, altered, new knowledge about the self and the world is formed, leading to what Balaev calls "reorientation of consciousness" ("Trauma Studies" 366).

In Ishiguro's early novels, this change in consciousness transpires in guilt, shame, confusion, and accountability, as well as topophobia (Robert T. Tally Jr.), i.e. an anxiety induced by a place that fosters the memory of trauma, redefining the experience (31-32). In both *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the narrators are faced with the difficulty of coming to terms with their past decisions. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko finds herself creating an alternate story, recounted to her younger daughter, Niki, that of Sachiko and Mariko, bearing striking similarities to her and her own elder daughter's, Keiko, who had committed suicide. Etsuko's guilt and shame resurface in her unreliable narration by means of her merging memory and fantasy. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono is caught in a self-woven "web of shame and anxiety" (Chisholm qtd. in Lewis 54) while he navigates his past in an attempt to explain his unethical wartime political and personal actions in post-war Japan. Etsuko's and Ono's memories (the ones that they share) imply they had played a

more significant part in the unfolding of the events that they narrate than they would have the reader believe. Their narrative unreliability indicates that they partly construct their memories, i.e. re-organise them in such a fashion that would offer a form of consolation and make not only their experience but also the consequences they have to face in the present bearable.

Spatial and temporal displacement/self-reorganisation expressed by means of unreliable narrators echoes the (High) Modernist paradigm. A comparison between Ishiguro's work and High Modernist literature has been aptly drawn by Patricia Waugh, who asserts that Ishiguro and the High Modernists share preoccupations that are made evident through common themes, motifs, and narrative strategies. Ishiguro's "depth" in his treatment of time and his exploration of consciousness prove, according to Waugh, that the novelist has clear affinities with High Modernists such as T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf (13). Moreover, Waugh questions Ishiguro's being considered a 'classic' international writer and categorises him as a *late* Modernist, arguing that his aesthetics foregrounds the Eliotic and modernist concepts of "impersonality" and the "objective correlative" (20).

Memory and trauma resurface in Ishigurian fiction through various digressions that take the form of (Modernist) stream-of-consciousness-like thoughts or flashbacks. Barry Lewis observes a special quality of "liquidity" in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*, which evinces certain "cinematic qualities" (60) such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, deft matches, and overlaps. Such liquidity – supported by Ishiguro's passion for music and lyrics writing – enables *An Artist of the Floating World* to move "nimbley between the past and the present" (Lewis 64). On the one hand, the digressions in the novel, as is the case with other Ishigurian fictions, such as *The Remains of the Day* (1989) or *The Unconsoled* (1995), facilitate the transition from, to quote Eliot, "time present [to] time past" ("Burnt Norton" 395). On the other hand, the more numerous the digressions, the more unreliable the Ishigurian narrator becomes. Such a pattern inevitably paves the way for discussions of the ways in which memory and trauma resurface in various narrative forms,

as well as how these two themes are illustrated by means of temporal “liquidity” and narrative unreliability. Adriana Neagu also detects a form of liquidity, i.e. a form of lyricism, in Ishiguro’s fiction. The scholar concludes that there is a “poematic symphonism” in “Ishiguro’s introvert prose”: “[f]rom a Bakhtinian point of view, of the hybridity of perceptual and multiperspectival levels manifest in the composite space of the novel, Ishiguro writes *poems in prose*, his imagination being primarily *lyrical*, steeped in a *metaphorical* mould” (270; emphasis mine). Lewis, too, identifies a lyrical or even musical quality evidenced by intertextual references to Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904) in *A Pale View of Hills*, a novel that “obstructs realist readings” (22-23). Ishiguro has written, as well as performed, lyrics; hence, such correlations are not only pertinent, but also pave the way for an intertextual analysis of Ishiguro’s work in relation to a Modernist form of lyricism.

In light of this, Lewis’s concept of “liquidity” can be interpreted as a form of lyricism specific to Ishiguro’s fiction. When discussing *A Pale View of Hills*, Lewis asserts that the novel has a “sinuous structure” and there is a form of “seepage between Etsuko’s present and her memories of the past” (36). This insight seems valid for other novels penned by Ishiguro, in which trauma and its memory affect the narrative process to various extents. This “sinuous structure” creates “silences, omissions and apertures,” Lewis concludes, as if “the text adheres to the prescription for haiku poetry, where the shard is greater than the whole. What is left out is as important as what is kept in” (36). The formal discipline involved in writing a haiku fascinated the Modernist poets, especially the Imagists, and arguably informs Ishiguro’s spare narrative technique.

Ishiguro’s lyricism is also visible in his treatment of trauma in his novels. According to Balaev in her article “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” (2008), the trauma novel revolves around the interplay between language, experience, memory, and (metaphoric) place, conveying profound individual or collective loss and/or fear. The theories of the second wave do not exclude Freudian elements but rather build on them and question the extent to which they can

be applied ad litteram to literary theory. For instance, Lewis identifies a form of “placelessness” in Ishiguro’s novels and argues that the main themes in his novels are the discrepancy between the individual and the collective, the utopian vision of home, and “the sense of homelessness” (5). The scholar associates this homelessness with the Freudian notions of displacement and the uncanny (*Unheimlich*), i.e. the unhomely: Ishiguro’s narrators are “exiles, displaced persons, lone rangers in their memories and imaginations” (6). Displacement is a key concept when discussing Ishiguro’s work, especially in the context of memory and trauma studies. The Freudian connotation of “displacement” implies the existence of “inner events which cannot be verified” (Lewis 17), i.e. traumatic events which cannot be accessed, and which therefore derail the characters’ sense of time and history, fragmenting the self. I argue that rather than employing the Freudian definition of displacement, one might turn to Balaev’s theories on the trauma novel instead. Balaev’s model, being pluralistic, deems the idea of a shattered self as a consequence of trauma reductive, rendering the self “binarily dependent on a linear re-enactment of a traumatic experience” (“Trends” 163).

The trauma novel, in Balaev’s definition, “conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels” (“Trends” 150). Such bereavement or fright ignites new perceptions of the world, leading to a “transformation of the self,” which is a defining feature of the trauma novel (“Trends” 150). Rather than being a fixed entity that then fragments and suffers from displacement, perceiving trauma as a repetitive and timeless event known through somatic symptoms, the self in Balaev’s model undergoes a re-organising process. Traumatic experience is no longer perceived as frozen in time and separate from ‘normal’ experiences and the only remedy is no longer tied solely to language (the talking cure or abreaction). The new wave goes beyond the pathological paradigm and towards surpassing a binary (either/or) definition of trauma. In Balaev’s theories, the self is reorganised, relational, and relative to a specific place, i.e. “socially contingent and connected to a place of inhabitation and meaning” (“Trends” 163). Hence, the self is not

necessarily displaced but rather in a continual “inquisitive state” (164), while the trauma narrative evaluates the meaning of experience by means of dynamic recalling in order to reconstruct personal as well as social knowledge. Such a process translates into a “transformative journey” that the traumatised protagonist undertakes, leading to a “change in consciousness” which is not necessarily redemptive (Balaev, “Trends” 164).

Redemption is instrumental in discussions of Ishiguro’s novels, as his protagonists seek some form of atonement that would ease their sense of guilt and shame. In his book *On Shame*, Michael L. Morgan follows Helen Lewis’s classic study of shame and pathology in differentiating between guilt and shame: “guilt is focused on specific bits of behaviour or precise actions, while shame is aimed at the self as a whole, globally” (45). Thus, guilt is about what we have done, but shame resurfaces in relation to who we are. Furthermore, in his chapter on emotional reaction and moral response, Morgan briefly discusses *An Artist of the Floating World* with reference to Ono’s reaction upon hearing about the suicide of the president of a company, who killed himself out of shame for his support of the totalitarian Japanese government in World War II. Miyake, Ono’s prospective son-in-law, deems this gesture noble and apologetic, interpreting it as an act of assumed responsibility, as “an apology on behalf of us all to the families of those killed in the war.” He goes on to say that there is “much relief around the company,” allowing the employees to move on and forget their shameful past: “It was a great thing our President did” (Ishiguro, *AFW* 55). Contrastingly, Ono considers it to be extreme and wasteful:

‘Why, really,’ I said, ‘that seems rather extreme. The world seems to have gone mad. Every day there seems to be a report of someone else killing himself in apology. Tell me, Mr Miyake, don’t you find it all a great waste? After all, if your country is at war, you do all you can in support, there’s no shame in that. What need is there to apologize by death?’. (*AFW* 55)

Morgan further inquires what the appropriate reaction to such shame would be, once denial is overcome. Ono openly defends himself in his reaction to the news, stating that there is no shame in supporting one's country when at war, implying that one should do so regardless of the costs. This discussion is an objective correlative for the shame that Ono feels, which he cannot consciously admit to, not even to himself.

Ono's narrative is a continuous effort to overcome his denial of immoral past decisions, and so is Etsuko's in *A Pale View of Hills*. Towards the end of the novel, when Sachiko and Mariko are about to leave with Frank, Sachiko's new partner, Etsuko stumbles upon Mariko, who is worried about their departure. As Etsuko (inadvertently or not) tries to reassure the girl, she lets a "we" slip rather than a plural "you":

'You mustn't speak like that,' I said, more calmly, 'He's very fond of you, and he'll be just like a new father. Everything will turn out well, I promise.'

The child said nothing. I sighed again.

'In any case,' I went on, 'if you don't like it over there, we can always come back.'

This time she looked up at me questioningly.

'Yes I promise,' I said. 'If you don't like it over there, we'll come straight back. But we have to try it and see if we like it there. I'm sure we will.' (Ishiguro, *PVH* 172-173)

Both Ono and Etsuko hide, to various extents, from the traumatic experiences that they had gone through: Ono was a puppet in the war propaganda, while Etsuko was not able to make the right choices for her family. They are both trying to reconstruct their memories of those times in such a light that would provide them with some form of illusive consolation. By close-reading Ishiguro's work, it becomes evident that second wave trauma studies can reveal objective correlatives for trauma and its topophrenic aftermath.

Place in novels depicting trauma is vital, as it allows for new ways of examining cultural and social relationships that influence

“the narration of loss” (Balaev, “Trends” 165). Place, as defined by Balaev in her model, is of great relevance to Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. Balaev defines a “place” as “a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meaning from it” (“Trends” 159). The scholar’s definition echoes Yi-Fu Tuan’s, who, in his seminal 1977 book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, states that a place is “a special kind of object . . . a concretion of value . . . an object in which one can dwell” (12). Thus, place in the trauma novel is a “facet of perception” that organises memories, feelings, and meaning at the intersection of nature and culture in order to “construct meaning and inform both individual and collective identity” (Balaev, “Trends” 160).

In both novels, the settings, these topophrenic “lieux de mémoire” (Pierre Nora), inflict an uneasiness on the protagonists. These environments, keepers of traumatic memories, collide with the narrators’ denial, confusion, and their inability to achieve consolation with the passing of time. In *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the settings become objective correlatives for trauma, reflecting the narrators’ traumatic past and the aftermath of their poor life decisions. For instance, in two episodes in chapters seven and eleven in *A Pale View of Hills*, the post-Nagasaki wasteland gains metaphoric significance as Etsuko’s unreliable narration unfolds, pointing to displacement/self-reorganisation, as well as inability to cope with guilt and shame. In chapter seven, Etsuko, Sachiko and Mariko go on a trip to some hills in Inasa, near Nagasaki. They ramble and go on the cable car, and, for the first time, the characters seem “at ease with themselves and with each other” (Lewis 36). Then, when Niki is packing to return to London in the last chapter, her mother gives her a calendar and remarks on there being a picture of some hills over the harbour in Nagasaki. Etsuko goes on to mention that they had gone on a trip there once, implying the event had special connotations, and, when asked to develop, she refers to her having been there with her other daughter, Keiko, who had committed suicide:

‘Oh, there was nothing special about it. I was just remembering it, that’s all. Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars.’

I gave a laugh and turned to Niki.

‘No, there was nothing special about it. It’s just a happy memory, that’s all.’ (Ishiguro, *PVH* 182)

The hills over Nagasaki become an objective correlative for Etsuko’s merging fantasy and reality, which is, in turn, a coping mechanism, one Lewis considers dissociative, that she has developed in order to be able to live with the guilt she feels about forcing Keiko to leave Japan.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the protagonist’s house, as well as other places of social encounter, such as the workshop, also gain bleak metaphoric meanings once Ono’s personal history unravels against the collective one. The novel opens with a detailed description of Ono’s house, a central symbol, a place bestowed upon the protagonist by the family of a prestigious figure due to Ono’s reputation before and during the Second World War. The house, once imposing and lavish, now stands in partial disarray, echoing Ono’s own personal situation and social standing:

Today, if I took you to the back of the house, and moved aside the heavy screen to let you gaze down the remains of Sugimura’s garden corridor, you may still gain an impression of how picturesque it once was. But no doubt you will notice too the cobwebs and mould that I have not been able to keep out; and the large gaps in the ceiling, shielded from the sky only by sheets of tarpaulin. (Ishiguro, *AFW* 12)

The house highlights the stark contrast between Ono’s former and current social status: he used to be highly respected and admired for his propagandist art, which now brings him shame on both personal and social levels, as he cannot successfully arrange a marriage for his younger daughter. The cobwebs and mould that he could not “keep out” are evocative of his own actions that he could not help doing, as well as of his shame that he can barely contain.

The cobwebs and dust layering the house are evocative of Ono's own attempts to filter his memories in a form of self-reorganisation.

While Lewis's Freudian approaches to Ishiguro's treatment of trauma inspired by the novels' modernist elements is pertinent, the new trauma model theorised by Balaev seems to be more suitable for a close reading of Ishiguro's early novels, as it does not restrict the theoretical discourse to the pathology of trauma. As trauma is both a personal and cultural experience tied to place, the reorientation (or reorganisation) of the self implies a re-evaluation of the protagonist's relationship with society. A theoretical framework that includes cultural and topographic elements entails further research into the relationship between as well as the relevance of guilt, shame, accountability, and the passing of time when analysed in relation to traumatic experience. Moreover, Balaev's model is better-suited for discussions of the aftermath of traumatic events, as it focuses on the reconstruction of traumatic experience through active, rather than latent, reminiscing, as well as on the place of trauma and its aftermath.

Ishiguro's modernist narrative liquidity and lyricism, employed to convey traumatic experience or, rather, its aftermath, are evocative of, for instance, Eliot's "Waste Land" and his poetics. Spatial and temporal "reorganisation" in Ishiguro's novels makes for unreliable narrators that tend to fabulate, to various degrees, their memories of traumatic events. An approach that includes concepts pertaining to trauma studies proves that Ishiguro's modernist concern with time and memory is tightly linked to a sense of shame and guilt and his characters' inability to be consoled: for his narrators, "[a]ll time is unredeemable" (Eliot, "Burnt Norton" 375).

Works Cited

Adiseshiah, Siân, and Rupert Hildyard. *Twenty-First Century Fiction: What Happens Now*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

- Balaev, Michelle. "Trauma Studies." *A Companion to Literary Theory*, edited by David H. Richter, John Wiley and Sons, 2018, pp. 360-371.
- . "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2008, pp. 149-166.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Eliot, T. S. "Burnt Norton." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. D, edited by Nina Baym et al., W. W. Norton, 2012, pp. 395-399.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. Faber and Faber, 2021.
- . *An Artist of the Floating World*. Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Lewis, Barry. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester UP, 2000.
- Matthews, Sean, and Sebastian Groes. "Introduction." *Kazuo Ishiguro*, edited by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes, Continuum, 2009.
- Morgan, Michael L. *On Shame*. Routledge, 2008.
- Neagu, Adriana. "International Writing? Kazuo Ishiguro and the Introvert Identities of The Novel." *English*, vol. 59, no.226, 2010, pp. 269-280.
- Tally, Robert T. Jr. *Topophilia: Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination*. Indiana UP, 2019.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. 8th ed., U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Waugh, Patricia. "Kazuo Ishiguro's Not-too-late Modernism." *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, edited by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011, pp.13-29.
- Whitehead, Anne. "Trauma and Memory Studies." *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, edited by Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2011, pp. 878-883.