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Reconsidering *A Pale View of Hills*
in Cinematic and Historical Perspective

RIA TAKETOMI
Kindai University, Japan

Abstract

This essay reconsiders Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* by situating the novel within the cinematic and historical contexts of postwar Japan, with particular attention to its representation of women. The recent film adaptation released in 2025, the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, offers a timely framework for re-examining the novel's engagement with postwar memory and gender. Although Ishiguro left Japan at the age of five and has lived abroad ever since, he has admitted in numerous interviews that his first two novels, both set in postwar Japan, are shaped by his memory, imagination, and speculation. He has also noted that he frequently watched postwar Japanese films, making it reasonable to assume that such media serve as important points of reference. With this context in mind, this essay first outlines the historical conditions of postwar Japan and then examines selected Japanese films that reflect the social realities of the period. Through these films, it identifies key themes, including the women who were recruited into sexual labor through deceptive government advertisements, the downward social mobility of women who lost family members, particularly fathers and brothers, the ways in which many were forced to abandon the aspirations they held in their youth, and the discrimination directed at these women, the poor, and *hibakusha*, those who had been exposed to radiation. Building on these insights, this essay contributes to a deeper understanding of *A Pale View of Hills*.

Keywords: postwar Japanese films, the Allied Occupation forces, American servicemen, Recreation and Amusement Association, *pan-pan*, *hibakusha*, discrimination

Introduction

In 2025, the world marked the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. In that commemorative year, Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1987) was adapted for the screen under the direction of Kei Ishikawa, starring Suzu Hirose as Etsuko and Fumi Nikaido as Sachiko, and was nominated for the "Un Certain Regard" section at the Cannes Film Festival. Ishiguro gave numerous interviews, including an interview with Naoko Kimura from *Yomiuri Shimbun Online*. Ishiguro remarked in this interview, "My mother was also a victim of the atomic bomb, but she did not want to talk about it at all, and even for my generation, speaking about such experiences was extremely difficult" (Kimura).¹ Ishiguro also cautioned that "if we continued to talk about these issues in the same way as before, younger generations may grow bored or feel that they had no personal connection, and shut themselves off" (Kimura), thereby highlighting the need to connect the past with present concerns.

This essay excavates the historical realities of the postwar Occupation in Japan that have long remained difficult to address directly, particularly the state-supported system under which some women were compelled to bear sexual sacrifice in the name of protecting the daughters of respectable families. Japanese films of the period, along with the film adaptation of *A Pale View of Hills*, illuminate the conditions that shaped women's lives during this time. The additions in the adaptation sharpen what the novel leaves unsaid, allowing us to deepen our understanding of Etsuko Ogata, later Sheringham, and to contribute to a more nuanced reading of *A Pale View of Hills*.

1. Women in Postwar Japan

After World War II, Japan came under the control of the Allied Occupation forces, led by the General Headquarters, or GHQ. During the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese troops had committed widespread and severe sexual violence against women in occupied territories. In light of this history, Japanese authorities feared similar assaults by American servicemen against Japanese women and consequently decided to establish facilities intended to “comfort” them. During the Higashikuni Cabinet, Fumimaro Konoe, the Minister of State, reportedly told Nobuya Saka, the Vice Minister of Home Affairs, that harm to ordinary women would provoke public unrest and therefore urged him to deal with the issue directly. Saka, in turn, advanced the so-called *Bohatei Ron*, or “Human Shield” theory (Duus 22-23). Under this theory, a letter signed by Masami Hashimoto, Director of the Police and Security Bureau, was sent to mayors across Japan on August 15, 1945, calling for the establishment of facilities known as the Recreation and Amusement Association (hereafter referred to as RAA). This directive was issued only three days after the Japanese emperor announced the end of the war and acknowledged Japan’s defeat.

According to Kiyoshi Kanzaki, “the number of Japanese women who were raped by American servicemen was 301 in 1946, 283 in 1947, 256 in 1948, and 312 in 1949” (76-77). Given the social conditions of the time, when women had little opportunity to speak out, these figures likely represent only the tip of the iceberg. To borrow Yuki Fujime’s words, “the beginning of the occupation meant the beginning of sexual violence against Japanese women” (326). As incidents of this kind increased sharply after the war, efforts to protect women and children intensified. Kyudai Mineo reports, “There were even regions where women and children were sent to remote mountain areas” (194).

The RAA was hastily established by converting existing buildings, and women were recruited on a large scale from across the country. Katsuhiko Murakami states, “Newspaper advertisements carried the following wording: ‘Office staff and



Fig. 1. Photograph taken in 1946 by Koji Morooka

clerical workers wanted', 'a number of individuals proficient in foreign languages as well as general laborers', 'positions open to both men and women, with generous remuneration'" (47). Another advertisement read: "Seeking vibrant young women to serve at the forefront of international goodwill and national diplomacy" (Hirai, *Senryoka* 22), or "'Urgent notice: special recruitment of female employees. Food, clothing, and housing provided, with high wages offered; advance payments available. Travel expenses will be covered for applicants from outside the region'" (Murakami 48). The advertisement disguises the realities of sex labor, persuading them to once again serve the nation. It represents a morally corrupt form of recruitment.

Many women living in poverty across the nation, as well as those who had once belonged to higher social strata and possessed certain language skills, lost their fathers, brothers, and husbands in the war and were suddenly pushed into severe economic hardship, applied for these positions. Kazuko Hirai, who analyzed the registers and personal surveys compiled by local government

offices and public health centers in connection with the sexually transmitted diseases examinations (hereafter referred to as STD) report as follows:

The *pan-pan*² who gathered around U.S. military bases tended to be relatively young, with an average of 21.69, approximately two years younger than the national average of 23.8 reported in contemporaneous nationwide surveys. Rather than citing economic hardship as a direct cause, many identified problems within the family as their primary motivation, with “family discord” ranking first, surpassing “economic reasons,” which ranked highest in national surveys. In addition, a comparatively high proportion had attained higher levels of education, with 28.5 percent having graduated from the newly established postwar middle school system. (Hirai, *Nihon*)

In September of the same year, the RAA was established; it issued a statement defining its mission: “Upon the sacrifice of thousands of ‘Okichi of the Showa era,’³ these women were deployed as human shields to safeguard women of higher social standing, to protect and preserve the nation’s purity into the distant future, and to serve as an underground pillar supporting the foundations of postwar social order” (Fujino 173). Needless to say, the human shields referred to here, denote the women who were mobilized from within Japan. The RAA’s publication of such a statement rendered especially vivid the understanding of prostitution as a matter of national policy. Yutaka Fujino asserts that RAA’s operations were divided into these sections:

A Dining Services Division; an Entertainment Division (cabarets, cafés, bars, and dance halls); a Recreation Division; an Amusement Division (billiards, shooting galleries, golf, and tennis); a Performing Arts Division (entertainments, films, and music); and a Special Facilities Division (hot springs, hotels, sightseeing, and fishing). Within the Recreation Division, four subdivisions were established: the First Division (geisha), the Second Division (licensed prostitutes), the Third Division (bar

hostesses), and the Fourth Division (dancers and waitresses). (176)

One can easily assume how the Japanese government kindly treated the occupying forces. Sarah Kovner argues that “Far more common were sexual relationships between servicemen and Japanese women. In Japan, servicemen’s relationships with women included short-term sexual encounters, long-term affairs with one exclusive client (known as *onrii*, from the English word *only*),⁴ and relationships that servicemen and women sought to have recognized by the state in marriage” (56-57). *Only-san* refers to a woman who serves solely one man as his temporary wife. Some dreamed of becoming a real wife, but many were left behind when servicemen were sent back to their home countries.

However, the RAA business did not last long because of the spread of STDs among servicemen and mounting accusations in the United States. The RAA was forced to close in March of the following year. Abhishek Raj states that “Reports indicate that by early 1946, approximately 25% of the servicemen in Tokyo had contracted an STD. This alarming statistic prompted increased efforts to control the spread of infections, including the establishment of more rigorous medical protocols” (n. p.). Fujime further indicates that “women who lost their jobs in the RAA could not find a new path of living other than becoming street prostitutes, and they were called ‘women of the night’ or *pan-pan*; these terms spread nationwide with disdain” (327). The GHQ officially announced the abolition of the RAA system; however, the number of *pan-pan* did not decline. Fujino explains that this was because the GHQ excluded from its ban those who continued to solicit on the streets of their own accord (178). Kovner notes that “deregulated sex markets shaped the built environment and economy of Japanese cities” (74). In other words, the official announcement of the RAA’s closure functioned in practice as tacit approval of street-level commercial sex. Hirai further observes that “the public presence of *pan-pan* openly consorting with the servicemen of the Occupation forces intensified Japanese men’s

humiliation in the aftermath of defeat. . . . The image of their female compatriots walking arm in arm with the victors appeared as a symbol of betrayal” (Hirai, *Senryoka* 276-77).⁵

In time, new organizations emerged among street prostitutes, who came to define their respective *shima* or territories, with women in leadership positions exercising control over *pan-pan* within these areas (Murakami 119). As violence within these territories became increasingly visible and rates of STDs remained persistently high, the police, the GHQ, the Japanese government, and local authorities began to impose compulsory medical examinations. Fujime explains the situation as follows: “These actions were referred to as ‘catch’ or ‘roundups,’ but in reality, they involved humiliating forced detention and compulsory examinations carried out through military power and authority, constituting an institutionalized form of sexual violence” (328). Scenes from this period have served as the subject matter for numerous films.⁶ Kovner points out that “The toughness of sex workers and their sometimes tragic fates were perennial themes in postwar popular culture, especially in the ‘flesh culture’ (*nikutai bunka*) literary movement of the late 1940s and in the films of directors such as Mizoguchi Kenji” (78). The anxieties and social tensions that Kovner describes can be observed most clearly in postwar Japanese films.

Kenji Mizoguchi released a film entitled *Yoru No Onna Tachi* [*Women of the Night*] in 1948. The story centers on the protagonist, Fusako (played by Kinuyo Tanaka),⁷ who lost her husband in the war and her child to disease.

At the beginning, Fusako lives modestly as a mender in her husband’s household together with her mother-in-law, brother-in-law, and sister-in-law, and cares for her young child suffering from tuberculosis. After learning that her husband died during the war and that her child subsequently passed away, she leaves her husband’s household, and her living circumstances undergo a drastic change. She starts working for Kuriyama Shokai as a secretary to the president, an acquaintance of her late husband, but the title is merely nominal, and she becomes his mistress. She then

finds her sister, Natsuko, who went missing during the war and is now working as a dancer at a cabaret.⁸ They begin living together in Fusako's apartment. However, Kuriyama soon makes advances toward Natsuko and betrays Fusako. When Fusako discovers their affair, she leaves the apartment and starts standing on the street as a prostitute. Feeling remorseful, Natsuko looks for her sister in the red-light district. One night, while searching for Fusako, the police "catch" the women on the street and mistakenly place Natsuko on a truck for venereal disease inspection, taking her to a medical facility. She meets Fusako there. Fusako looked totally different from how Natsuko remembered her in the past. Mizoguchi presents the trajectory of many women at the time who lost their husbands and, having to support themselves, had no other choice but to become prostitutes.

Kimiko Tanaka, who worked as a comfort woman at the RAA, published a memoir entitled *Onna no Bohatei [Soldiers' Girls]* in 1957. The following year, a film with the same title was released, directed by Haku Komori. Although the film includes fictional elements, it is based on Tanaka's experiences. For this reason, it provides valuable insight into the historical and cultural conditions of postwar Japan.

The protagonist, Fumiko (played by Kinuko Obata) lost her family during the Second World War and moved into her uncle's place. One day, her best friend Yoshiko visits Fumiko's house and stays overnight. After they fall asleep, in the middle of the night, Fumiko wakes to her friend's scream and discovers that her uncle is attempting to rape her. Yoshiko runs out of the house. Fumiko yells at her uncle and goes outside to look for her. However, walking alone at night exposes her to extreme danger. She is raped by two men.⁹ Fumiko leaves her uncle and becomes involved with a wealthy married man, living for a time in his secondary residence. When the relationship is discovered by his wife, Fumiko is abruptly expelled from the house and forced to seek employment. She finds an advertisement for the RAA. The advertisement stated "high pay, transportation expenses covered, English speakers preferred," and contained no wording that explicitly indicated sex labor. However,

Fumiko suspects that the work would involve something akin to serving American servicemen. Unlike Fumiko, some women genuinely believed that the job was for the nation and later became mentally unstable or committed suicide. Fumiko becomes a top earner. Later, she works at different facilities, and as she changes workplaces, conflicts arise over territorial boundaries. One day, while she is fighting with the leader of a group, Lieutenant Brown, who happens to pass by, intervenes and stops the fight. This encounter leads Fumiko to become Brown's *only-san*, and they later have a child. Fumiko dreams of traveling to the United States with him and their child, but Brown is killed during the Korean War.

The film portrays the circumstances under which a young woman in postwar Japan could easily be drawn into working as a comfort woman, and how her life changed after becoming a serviceman's *only-san*. It also depicts how those who had served in the RAA were subsequently treated coldly by society and subjected to discrimination and social isolation.

Kanojo to Kare [She and He] (1963) directed by Susumu Hani, explores social stratification and the isolation of housewives in danchi housing. The protagonist, Naoko (Sachiko Hidari), lives in *danchi*, or conglomerate apartment complexes, where residents display discriminatory attitudes toward nearby impoverished communities. Orphaned by the war, Naoko returned from China, and married Eiichi, marking her entry into this socially stratified space. Women in the complex spend their days exchanging gossip and rumors and direct discriminatory attitudes toward nearby impoverished communities. Children from these poor communities are subjected to bullying by other children. After witnessing a fire in a nearby slum, she reconnects with Ikona, her husband's former friend, now living in an impoverished district with a blind girl, Hanako, and a dog. He makes a living by collecting scrap metal. Naoko invites Ikona to visit her apartment, but when he does, he commits theft and refuses to admit it. When Eiichi hears the story, he confronts him, accompanied by Naoko, but the residents of the slum curse them and drive them away.

Despite this, Naoko continues to care for Ikona and Hanako. Eiichi disapproves yet remains largely indifferent, occasionally treating Naoko in a patronizing manner, as when he gives her spending money before leaving on a business trip. Naoko's gestures are characterized by an almost exaggerated childlike quality, combined with a sense of vulnerability. During Eiichi's absence, when the blind girl falls ill with pneumonia, Naoko takes her to the hospital and then brings her into her own apartment to recover. Yet Naoko herself does not understand the reasons for her actions.

Tadao Sato analyzes this film as one that "questions the thinness of human relationships in modern urban life, particularly as seen in *danchi* living" (9). It can be agreed that emerging social stratification began to shape people's ways of thinking, leading them to avoid involvement with those outside their own social group. However, the film also reveals a deeper dimension. Naoko, as an orphan, is fundamentally deprived of stable emotional bonds. She constantly seeks attention and behaves in ways that reflect a desire to be loved.

These three films reveal the male gaze and the regulation of female sexuality, each offering a distinct representation of the same postwar social wound. Hikari Hori offers the following perspective on the rise of films that took such women as their subject matter:

This binary opposition between bodies that serve male pleasure and bodies associated with purity can be understood as a projection of the male sexual double standard onto women's bodies. Moreover, during the Occupation period, Japanese women's bodies came to reflect an additional division – whether they were perceived as belonging to American servicemen or to Japanese men – thus resembling the boundaries of national territory. In the late 1940s, when *pan-pan* primarily referred to prostitutes who served American servicemen, their bodies were framed as symbols of spaces occupied through defeat and were perceived as physically compromised by venereal disease and sexual relations with foreigners. (50)

Hori further points out that it is the desire of Japanese men to reclaim their power of domination over Japanese women by appropriating the domineering gaze cast by American servicemen of the occupying forces upon women of the defeated nation and entering into a relationship of complicity with that gaze. She also contends that this desire established a mechanism through which masculinity, temporarily unsettled by defeat and the ensuing U.S. occupation, attempted to reassert itself through the management of women's sexuality (53). The gendered dynamics Hori identifies unfolded within a broader structure of political and military asymmetry during the Occupation. This configuration began to shift with the economic recovery that followed the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. As Yoshitaka Mizushima observes, "the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 swept away Japan's postwar economic stagnation, bringing a wave of special procurement demand. The Japanese economy quickly regained its vitality" (212). As economic stability returned, forms of male authority were gradually reasserted, particularly within the domestic sphere. *A Pale View of Hills* unfolds within this historical context.

2. Perspectives from the Film Adaptation of *A Pale View of Hills*

When *A Pale View of Hills* was published in 1987, many scholars suggested that Sachiko and Etsuko might be the same individual or function as doppelgangers, arguing that Etsuko employs Sachiko as an imagined character to narrate her traumatic past. However, Ishiguro denies them in the interview with Don Swain saying that "There probably was another person called Sachiko way back in the past, but when she is telling Sachiko's story, I mean she's not telling the story because she is fascinated by Sachiko intrinsically. It's because she sees in what happened to Sachiko something that happened to herself" (99). With the release of the film adaptation of *A Pale View of Hills*, followed by the publication of *Eiga Toi*

Yamanami no Hikari Shinario Bukku [The Scenario Book of the Film *A Pale View of Hills*] (Ishikawa and Ishiguro), the period in which the story is set and the ages of the characters have become clearly defined, rendering Etsuko's actions far easier to understand than in the novel itself. The film specifies that Etsuko's remembered summer in Nagasaki takes place in 1952 and the present scenes in England in 1982, which means she is twenty-seven years old at the time of her pregnancy with Keiko.

In this section, I extract and examine scenes absent from the original novel to analyze Etsuko's past. As portrayed in many postwar Japanese films, discrimination against atomic bomb survivors remained intense in Nagasaki during this period. Etsuko lives in a conglomerated apartment, a symbol of high social status, whereas Sachiko is a single mother who has moved to Nagasaki to escape war-torn Tokyo and resides in a poor district. She dreams of emigrating to America with the American serviceman Frank. Sachiko represents one of the women referred to as *only-san*.

Through a telephone conversation between Niki, who was born to Etsuko and Mr Sheringham, a British journalist, and her boyfriend, David, the viewers learn that she lives in London, works as a journalist and writer, is planning to write a book entitled *Nagasaki: A Family Story*, and that David is married. In this exchange, David appears careless in conflating Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the latter being central to Niki's roots, and places greater emphasis on the marketability of her writing than on their personal relationship. Although they seem to have discussed their future, and Niki withdrew from university as a first step, David shows no indication of divorcing his wife. After the conversation with David, Niki goes to her mother and asks, "it's a good opportunity to ask you about it [Nagasaki]. You never really told me why you left" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 38); initially hesitant, Etsuko gradually begins to speak about her past.

The film begins as Etsuko sets her husband, Jiro, off at the door. She then opens the closet and takes out a wicker bag. Inside the bag are an art magazine, photographs, postcards, and other personal items. She sits by the windowpane and begins reading the

magazine. The subtitle of the art magazine says, “Special Feature: Twenty-Three Years of the Academy Awards.” As an aside, the Academy Award for Best Actress in 1952 was awarded to Vivien Leigh. Leigh was a leading British actress and became internationally famous for her role as Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, emerging as an iconic figure of beauty and female independence. Etsuko pauses on that page, her eyes lighting up as she reads the headline, “Learning Fashion from Screen Stars.”

At that moment, housewives living in the apartment hang out their laundry and, casting sidelong glances at a passing jeep, loudly engage in the following exchange:

Housewife A: (With a sneer) Look, here comes *America-san*.¹⁰

Housewife B: Oh.

Etsuko looks out of the window.

Housewife B: Ugh. How disgusting. She’s taking him into her house again.

Housewife A: Wearing such flashy clothes.

Child: What do you mean by *America-san*?

Housewife A: You don’t need to know! Hurry up and go to school. It’s nothing, go on. (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 22)

This scene evokes the social atmosphere of the period, when housewives express disdain for women who appear to have intimate relationships with American servicemen. Unlike the other housewives, Etsuko watches Sachiko with a favorable gaze. Dressed in strikingly fashionable clothes, Sachiko exhales tobacco smoke and smiles at the serviceman. She then wraps her arms around his neck and embraces him.

Etsuko’s first contact with Sachiko occurs when she witnesses Mariko, Sachiko’s daughter, being bullied by boys in the neighborhood. The boys are standing around Mariko and verbally abusing her. Then, Mariko suddenly bites one of the boys on the foot. The boys are taken aback and run away. Etsuko, who is visibly pregnant, carefully approaches Mariko. Mariko bears a keloid scar on her arm, indicating her exposure to atomic bomb

radiation. Etsuko then accompanies Mariko to her house, where she speaks with Sachiko for the first time.

In the scene of their first conversation, Sachiko invites Etsuko to tea, and Etsuko asks whether she came from Tokyo, noticing that she does not speak with a Nagasaki dialect. Sachiko replies that she did come from Tokyo, though from the countryside, and explains that she had lived in Nagasaki before the war, in the Shiroyama district. Etsuko clenches her hand, showing signs of unease. Sachiko says, "The area was blown away by the atomic bomb, so things were really hard for a while. There was a time I swallowed my pride and did whatever I could" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 50). Etsuko immediately asks, "So, you met him at the time?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 50). Sachiko gives a frantic look and responds, "Who?" Clearly shaken, Etsuko mumbles, "... with your friend ... You know" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 50-51). Etsuko is reacting to Sachiko's remark that she swallowed her pride and did whatever she could. Perceiving Etsuko's reaction, Sachiko responds with a laugh, saying, "You seem to have a terrible misunderstanding, Etsuko. Frank, your so-called 'friend,' is someone I met while working as an interpreter at the base" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 51). Etsuko then immediately apologizes, overlapping Sachiko's explanation with, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to" Sachiko then says, "It's okay, I'm used to it" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 51). This scene suggests that Etsuko perceives Sachiko as an *only-san*, an assumption that unconsciously slips from her mouth and is immediately followed by a sense of shame.

Sachiko tells Etsuko that she is planning to go to America with Frank. She also remarks ironically, "Of course, you've heard of a place like that. . . . In America, anything is possible. For us women, especially, it's almost like paradise. In the future, Mariko will be able to work properly there, and who knows, she might even become an actress" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 51-51). Upon hearing the term "actress," Etsuko suddenly lights up and says, "That sounds wonderful" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 52). Sachiko then repeats the same phrase. This repetition is significant, as the expression reappears later in a conversation between Etsuko and

Niki in the latter half of the film. When Niki asks, “Why did you come here [to England]?”, Etsuko initially explains that it was because she met Mr Sheringham, but then admits, “It was for Keiko. . . . I thought England was full of possibilities, and Keiko would have more of a future here. . . . She might have been a pianist, flying all over the world.” Niki responds, “That sounds wonderful,” and Etsuko repeats, “It really does sound wonderful . . .” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 104-105). This phrase is identical to the scene Etsuko recalled earlier. In the present, Etsuko repeats the word “wonderful,” fully aware that dreams are not easily realized and are inherently fragile, using it to replace a sense of emptiness. Niki further asks Etsuko, “You wanted to leave Nagasaki, to leave Japan, didn’t you? . . . What is it you wanted to be free from, Mum?” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 105). Etsuko does not reply to this question; instead, she recalls the day when she visited Mount Inasa with Sachiko and Mariko.

At the ropeway ticket stand at the foot of Mount Inasa, Etsuko buys tickets for herself, Sachiko, and Mariko and purchases a toy pair of binoculars. She gives the binoculars to Mariko. When they reach the top, Etsuko and Sachiko meet a group of foreigners. Sachiko walks side by side with one of the American women, speaking fluent English, while Etsuko watches from behind. They converse in English as follows:

American Woman A: I’m from a small town near Boston in Massachusetts.

Sachiko: Oh, really? Wasn’t *Little Women* also set in that area?

American Woman A: Yes, as a matter of fact, it was.

Sachiko: I’m so jealous! *Little Women* is my favorite. What brought you to Japan? (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 108)

From this conversation, one can reasonably assume that Sachiko belonged to a wealthy family and had enjoyed reading English novels before the war. In addition, there is a scene on the observation deck overlooking the city of Nagasaki, when Sachiko says: “I have always dreamed of becoming an actress, ever since I was a little girl. I wanted to go to America and become a movie star.

I loved studying English. I used to read an English edition of *A Christmas Carol* that my father bought for me from overseas. But eventually, I was unable to continue my study. My husband forbade me from studying English” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 114). As mentioned in Chapter One, many housewives in the postwar Japanese films are portrayed as obedient women under their husbands’ control. Sachiko is one of them, as she accepted her husband’s intentions. When Sachiko confesses her personal past, Etsuko, seemingly stimulated by it, begins to recount one of her own stories.

Etsuko: Sachiko, there’s something I need to tell you – something I haven’t told you yet.

Sachiko: (Talks over Etsuko) I know. I know you where there that day, right?

Etsuko:

Sachiko: I know. We have so many things in common. So many.

Etsuko: Yes, we do.

Sachiko: Don’t worry. If you are worried about the child, don’t be. Mariko’s all right, you don’t see any problems with her, do you?

Etsuko: If you say so, Sachiko, you encourage me.

Sachiko: Besides . . . Etsuko, don’t use your child as an excuse. Women need to open their eyes.

Etsuko: You’re right. We went through many horrible things during the war, but we are full of hope.

Sachiko: Yes, Etsuko. We have hope – so much hope.

Mariko is looking through the binoculars. (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 114-115)

Etsuko confesses that she, too, had been in the Shiroyama district when the atomic bomb fell, thereby admitting that she is a *hibakusha*. Atomic bomb survivors were often subject to discrimination, treated as though they were carriers of disease.¹¹ From the deck, Etsuko and Sachiko seem to imagine themselves leaving Nagasaki behind and moving toward a wider horizon of future possibilities, projecting their hopes onto England and America. One further point should be noted. Mariko, who stands

between Etsuko and Sachiko looking through her binoculars, is clearly not gazing out over the city. Instead, she is looking at her mother's back. This visual detail may suggest that the two mothers who look out over the city are more interested in seeking the light of their future lives than in attending to their daughters. For Etsuko, going to England functions as a means of justifying her past choices, which viewers come to understand as acts of self-preservation. Here are two episodes that demonstrate Etsuko's drive for self-preservation.

One evening, Etsuko hears the sound of a violin and looks into the guest room, where she finds Ogata playing her violin. Noticing her facial expression, Ogata apologizes, saying that he should not have touched it. The sound immediately brings back for Etsuko the day the atomic bomb was dropped. She shakes her head, starts to tremble, and says, "That day . . . I was only able to save this [the violin]. (Trying not to cry) But the children . . ." She then bursts into tears (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 86). At the time, she was working as an elementary school teacher. Etsuko carries a profound sense of survivor's guilt, as the violin evokes memories of the screams of the children trapped in the fire, which continue to haunt her. It is clear that she prioritized saving the violin rather than attempting to rescue the children. Nevertheless, she repeatedly cries out that it was her fault, as if waiting for Ogata to respond, "About the children. . . . It wasn't your fault. It was not your fault" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 86).

Another similar structure appears in Etsuko's exchange with Niki near the end of the narrative. Etsuko confesses that she was responsible for the death of Keiko. She begins to speak quietly: "I knew from the start, I knew that even if we came here, Keiko wouldn't be happy. But I made the decision all the same" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 147-48). Niki suddenly denies this by saying, "You did everything you could for Keiko" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 148). Niki lays her head on Etsuko's shoulder and repeats, "It's not your fault that Keiko died" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 149). Although Etsuko never explicitly asks for reassurance, these scenes suggest

that she longs for exoneration from a third party and seeks retrospective moral validation.

When Etsuko recalls the past account of her daughter's death, she has always reminisced the same scene. One evening, Sachiko comes to Etsuko's apartment and asks for help in finding Mariko. They go beyond the sign that reads "No Entry" and proceed further ahead. The camera lingers on the muddy rope that clings persistently to Etsuko's feet. Sachiko begins talking about herself, saying, "Etsuko, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. . . . It's finally been decided. In two or three days, we're going to America" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 92). Etsuko responds, "So soon?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 92). Sachiko presses on, asking, "Don't you have anything else to ask – like why we're going, or who we're going with?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 92). She goes on insistently, "I really don't feel ashamed at all. There's nothing I have to hide" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 92-93). Etsuko brusquely tells Sachiko that they should concentrate on finding Mariko first and that they can talk afterward. This scene suggests that Sachiko is deeply ashamed of herself, concealing that shame beneath her words. Etsuko returns to the present after recalling the episode in which she heard Sachiko's remark. As Hiroshi Ikezono explains, "Etsuko appropriates Sachiko's words to rationalize her later actions" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 44). The scene also reflects Etsuko's own sense of shame at having sacrificed her daughter in order to realize her dream of going abroad, a past she has similarly sought to conceal.

On another evening, Etsuko notices a woman dressed in what appears to be black mourning attire crossing the bridge toward Sachiko's hut. Feeling uneasy, Etsuko runs to Sachiko's. At the entrance, she finds Sachiko packing. Etsuko asks whether a woman has come to visit, but Sachiko insists that no one has. She then busily explains that she is leaving for Kobe that night and will go on to America after meeting Frank there. Confronted with Etsuko's unexpectedly curt response, "Are you going to wait for him for a long time in Kobe?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 140). Sachiko begins to speak as if to herself, saying, "We don't have

any hope in Japan. But you see, Etsuko, once we get to America, everything will work out" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 140). Sensing Etsuko's growing suspicion, Sachiko abruptly stops packing and says, annoyed, "You think I'm stupid, don't you? I understand perfectly well myself. Even if I manage to get to America, I know how difficult things will be after that" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 140). Sachiko acknowledges that she must rely entirely on Frank, who she knows is not trustworthy. Almost as if speaking to herself, she explains, "If I stay here, I'll only grow old. You know what life is like living here, don't you?" Etsuko asks, "But what about Mariko? (She stands up and presses Sachiko) Tell me, what about Mariko? What are you going to do about her?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 141). However, Sachiko refuses to listen, insisting that a child will simply have to manage somehow. Holding a kitten tightly against her chest, Mariko protests, "I'm not going to America. I don't want to go," and adds, "You said I could keep it." Sachiko tries to reason with her, "Frank said no, didn't he?" Yet Mariko only repeats, "I wish Frank were dead" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 141-142). Sachiko forcibly packs all the kittens Mariko has been raising into a wooden box that she won as first prize at the festival. Shouting at the crying Mariko as she clings to her, she violently plunges the box into the river with both hands, killing the kittens. As has often been discussed among scholars, this scene overlaps structurally with the earlier story Sachiko tells of a woman she and Mariko saw in Tokyo, a woman who drowned her baby and later took her own life by cutting her throat. The scene of killing the kittens can be interpreted as Sachiko attempts to sever her ties both to Nagasaki and eventually to her daughter. For Mariko, the kittens are not merely animals; they function as a substitute family, one she has chosen to care for herself, and constitute a small, private world of attachment that exists outside her mother's control. Through this act, a form of killing, Sachiko arguably creates a situation from which there can be no return. Sachiko (Etsuko) prioritizes her own desire even at the cost of sacrificing the life of what is most precious to Mariko (Keiko), thereby rendering her decision to cross to America (England) irrevocable.

Disturbed by what Mariko has witnessed, she runs away from her mother toward the river. The film then cuts to present-day England, where Niki is sorting through a cardboard box while working on her family memoir. Inside are several objects that link past and present: a cat teaser, the toy binoculars Etsuko gave Mariko on Mount Inasa, a teacup from the tea she shared with Sachiko, and an English copy of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, which Sachiko had said was a gift from her father. The film interweaves scenes of past Nagasaki and present-day England, cutting back and forth between Etsuko running after a child and Niki slowly turning the pages of an album. When Niki pauses, beneath one of the photographs is a small handwritten label reading "Keiko, age of five." What becomes clear to the viewer here is that "Keiko," who appears in the photograph, has the same face as "Mariko," the girl spoken of in Etsuko's memories. In other words, while a woman named Sachiko may indeed have existed, it is unclear whether Mariko ever existed. Even assuming that Mariko existed, the Mariko narrated in Etsuko's recollections is, in all likelihood, Keiko whose voice has been displaced onto the name "Mariko." Etsuko believes herself responsible for Keiko's death and is unable to speak of her directly; instead, the film gradually reveals that Etsuko has been recounting her memories of Keiko to Niki through the figure of Mariko, and this truth slowly comes into focus on the screen.

The scene once again returns to Etsuko running along the riverbank chasing after Mariko. When she comes to a stop, the sound of fighter jets reverberates overhead. Etsuko looks up at the sky. Lowering her gaze, she notices the back of a child sitting curled up on a boat. Approaching the child, Etsuko asks, "What are you doing in a place like this? Why are you sitting here?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 145). The child turns around and says, "I don't want to go. I don't want to go to England" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 145).¹² Etsuko moves closer to Mariko and reassures her, saying, "It's all right. We'll manage somehow." Mariko then notices what Etsuko is holding in her hand and becomes frightened.

Clutched firmly in Etsuko's hand is a rope. The conversation then continues as follows:

Mariko: (Looking frightened) What do you have in your hand?
For a moment, Etsuko does not understand what the child is referring to. She then realizes that she is holding something like a rope in her left hand.

Etsuko: This? (Instinctively) It just caught around my sandal, that's all.

Mariko: But, why are you holding that thing?

Etsuko: (Overlapping) I told you. It got caught around my foot. Keiko, what is wrong with you?

Mariko rises, her face tight with fear.

Etsuko: Why are you looking at me like that? You don't have to be scared.

Mariko looks frightened.

Etsuko: Why are you looking at me like that?

Mariko's expression remains unchanged. (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 146)

Etsuko's expression gradually stiffens, giving the unsettling impression that she might wrap the rope around Mariko's neck and strangle her. The rope that Etsuko claims was "caught around her foot" is likely the same rope that had previously been tightly wound around her ankle. The motif of finding a child on the riverbank appears earlier in the film; they search along the same stretch of riverbank, where Mariko has run away and is later found lying on a boat. In the earlier scene, when Sachiko discovers Mariko in the boat, she immediately runs toward her and embraces her. By contrast, in the later scene, Etsuko merely calls out to the child, as if she already knew she was there. This indicates that Etsuko may have been aware that the child tended to come to the boat whenever something distressed her.

When looking back at Nagasaki during this period, many people were living amid the "abnormal conditions" that followed the atomic bombing. The sound of fighter jets inserted into this scene evokes an atmosphere of lingering turmoil and implicitly

suggests that Etsuko's life is shaped by postwar abnormality. The overwhelming pressure she endured may have led her at times to perceive Keiko, who stood in the way of her departure to England, as an obstacle. The scene thus points to Etsuko's repressed murderous impulse toward her daughter. Sensing her mother's hostility, Keiko is traumatized, and this trauma may later have oriented her life toward death.

Immediately afterward, the film returns to present-day England. Etsuko awakens to the cry of a cat. As she rises, she glimpses a cat, which disappears into Keiko's room, where light is spilling out. Having been asleep on the living-room couch, Etsuko gets up and, as if guided by the cat, enters Keiko's room.

In Keiko's room, Niki is looking through an album. One photograph shows Etsuko and Keiko smiling at the camera. Another one shows Etsuko holding a baby [Niki], with Mr Sheringham and Keiko standing on either side of her; the date written on the back is November 20, 1958. Noticing that Etsuko has entered the room, Niki wipes away her tears. The film gradually discloses, through a flashback, that it is not Sachiko but Etsuko who works at Fujiwara's *udon* shop. Early in the film, Etsuko recounts that Sachiko threw a glass of water in the face of a customer who insulted Mariko by saying, "What're you going to do if you're infected by radiation, huh?" However, this act was in fact Etsuko's own. She throws a glass of water in the face of a customer and curses him, declaring, "There's nothing here for filthy wretches like you" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 66 and 149). It is Etsuko who speaks fluent English with an American woman on Mount Inasa. The figures riding the streetcar on their way home from the festival are Keiko and Etsuko. Inside the streetcar, Keiko happily tells her mother, "I won first prize" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 150). Seeing her daughter's joyful expression, Etsuko cannot help but smile and replies, "Yes, how wonderful!" (150). Keiko then looks out of the streetcar window, where she notices a woman dressed in black. The woman's face abruptly fills the frame, revealing her to be Etsuko in the present, watching the pair with tears in her eyes. The woman

dressed in black appears twice in Etsuko's recollections: on the day she sinks a wooden box containing kittens into the river, and at the moment in which she stands outside the streetcar on the way home from the festival. These are surely unforgettable moments for Etsuko. In recollecting these moments, Etsuko imagines herself clad in black mourning attire, the garment functioning as a visual manifestation of her guilt.

3. Conclusion

As discussed in Chapter One, many Japanese women in the postwar period struggled with poverty, and some were compelled to give up their dreams, sacrifice themselves through labor, or seek to improve their living conditions through marriage. Yet Japanese films often adopt a critical stance toward such aspirations, particularly when marriage results in emotional and economic dependence, demanding obedience and the quiet suppression of unexpressed resentment. As Brian W. Shaffer observes, "Sachiko's husband was 'very strict and very patriotic;' never 'the most considerate of men,' he forbade Sachiko to learn English, even forcing her to throw away her English books" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 15). Such suppressed frustration is often redirected toward those deemed more vulnerable, individuals excluded from male protection, such as the poor or so-called *pan-pan* or *only-san*, giving rise to gossip, collective prejudice, and discrimination. This social climate undeniably shaped postwar life.

Within this context, the film's portrayal of Etsuko acquires deeper significance. Ogata's repeated questioning of whether Etsuko is "happy" suggests that she does not appear to be so. His suspicion seems rooted in her emotional reserve and in the sense that she harbors secrets. When Etsuko asks her husband, "If I had been exposed to the atomic bomb, would you still have married me?" (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 136), his startled silence and physical retreat signal his unwillingness to confront the issue. The scene implies that Etsuko has never told Jiro that she is a *hibakusha*, and

that Jiro may already be aware of this but prefers not to acknowledge it.

The film further complicates Etsuko's strategy of self-preservation. Although Sachiko (in Etsuko's narrative) claims to have worked as an interpreter, professional interpreting was accessible to very few women at the time. Even Toyoko Furuse, Japan's first officially recognized female interpreter, was primarily engaged in educational work, including English-language radio programs ("Japan's First Female Interpreter"). For ordinary women, serving as interpreters in official capacities was highly uncommon. By contrast, women with prior experiences in cabarets, bars, dance halls, or RAA facilities were often treated as "immediately deployable" labor for less formal roles, such as guides or escorts.¹³ Within this historical context, the film foregrounds the theme of "the lies I told" as its central concern. This emphasis is established from the outset by an opening on-screen quotation attributed to Kazuo Ishiguro: "Human beings sometimes tell lies not to deceive others, but to deceive themselves, to turn away from difficult truths."¹⁴ The adaptation consequently brings into focus the nature of Etsuko's deceptions, which the novel leaves unarticulated. Although this remains a tentative hypothesis, there is a strong possibility that Keiko is presented as having had keloid scars at birth, a condition that may have contributed to the growing strain in Etsuko's marriage to the fastidious Jiro. Etsuko's harsh response to the customer at the *udon* shop recalls the behavior of *pan-pan* as represented in postwar Japanese cinema. Following her divorce, she may have been valued for her prior experience as a former RAA employee and subsequently worked as a guide interpreter. It was perhaps in this capacity that she met Mr Sheringham and eventually left for England. Most unsettlingly, the film reinforces the widely held view that Etsuko once attempted to take her own child's life.

Etsuko's dream, symbolized by the opening scene in which she fixes her eyes on a magazine article about the Academy Awards, and by her gaze from the observation deck of Mount Inasa,

is one of independence and self-realization in England. Yet this imagined future fails to materialize. Discrimination against the Japanese persisted in England, as even the estate agent indicates, and Niki acknowledges that this was one of the reasons why they did not live in London but instead built a house in the countryside. The America that Sachiko had dreamed of would likely have presented a similar situation. Historically, this period also predates the moment when many women openly expressed dissatisfaction with being confined to the performance of “womanly roles” as suburban, middle-class housewives after marriage, despite the abilities they had cultivated through higher education, as discussed in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (first published in 1963).

At the end of the film, Niki tells Etsuko, “Women need to open their eyes, Mum, there is more to life than getting married and having babies” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 153). Of course, Niki is speaking not only to her mother but also to herself, as she is concealing her pregnancy. She also tells her mother, “I don’t think I’ll ever understand. About you or Keiko, or how things were back then” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 148). Set in 1982, the film implies that those living in the present can never fully comprehend what occurred in postwar Japan. Niki declares, “We all need to change,” (Ishikawa and Ishiguro 153) a remark that echoes Etsuko’s earlier insistence to Ogata that he, too, must change. These mirrored moments underscore the necessity of adaptation across generations. *A Pale View of Hills* reminds viewers that change is important, but it is equally important to seek the truth and to confront the darker realities embedded within that history.

Etsuko’s self-preservation is enacted in moments of crisis, while her self-justification unfolds retrospectively through narration, clinging to even the faintest glimmer of hope and, in the process, risking lives. By learning this history, revisiting the films of the era, and reconsidering *A Pale View of Hills* to uncover what remains unspoken in the novel, we are reminded that the ground on which we stand has been shaped not only by progress and recovery,

but also by the blood, tears, and bodies of those whose sacrifices remain unacknowledged.

Notes:

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- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Japanese are mine.
 - ² *Pan-pan* women were Japanese women who engaged in prostitution during the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952).
 - ³ *Okichi* refers to Saito Kichi (1841–1890) of Shimoda, later known as Tojin Okichi, who briefly served the U.S. consul Townsend Harris; her later image as a prostitute stems mainly from literary and popular representations and had become a generic term for prostitutes.
 - ⁴ Although Kovner uses the transliteration *onrrii-san*, this essay adopts the form *only-san* to reflect its English derivation.
 - ⁵ It may therefore be inferred that women seen out late at night were readily identified as *pan-pan* and subjected to merciless attacks.
 - ⁶ Due to page limitations, this essay cannot address all relevant postwar films, including Seijun Suzuki's *Gate of Flesh* (1948), Yasujiro Ozu's *A Hen in the Wind* (1948), Kenji Mizoguchi's *Street of Shame* (1954), Shohei Imamura's *The Insect Woman* (1963), and Kei Kumai's *Chino Mure* (1967); readers seeking a deeper understanding of the period are encouraged to view these works.
 - ⁷ Ishiguro confessed in various interviews that he favors Machiko Kyo, Kinuyo Tanaka, and Setsuko Hara, who were actresses active in postwar Japan.
 - ⁸ It appears to have been one of the RAA's establishments.
 - ⁹ See Kazuko Hirai's *Senryoka no Josei Tachi* which contains testimonies from women at the time.
 - ¹⁰ "America-san" is a mocking term referring to an American serviceman who regularly visits his so-called *only-san*.
 - ¹¹ For further reference, see Nakamura.
 - ¹² In this scene, the child says, "I don't want to go to England," so the mother and child are clearly Etsuko and Keiko. However, *The Scenario Book of A Pale View of Hills* identifies the characters as Etsuko and Mariko, so this essay follows the same designation.
 - ¹³ Watch Seicho Matsumoto's *Zero no Shoten* [Zero Focus] (1961), which features a woman interpreter speaking fluent English with an American man, and an acquaintance remarks that her fluency is due to her past as a *pan-pan* woman.

¹⁴ This quotation appears at the beginning of the film's official main trailer.

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