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Research Article



## Exploring the Interplay of Memory and Guilt: A Critical Examination of Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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### Abstract

*A Pale View of Hills* stands as a testament to the literary prowess of Kazuo Ishiguro. As his debut novel, it received widespread acclaim, showcasing his distinctive narrative style, masterful craftsmanship, and intricate character development. The book captures the attention of its readers through an interplay of nostalgia, cultural complexities, and individual memories. The almost unanimously positive reviews it garnered after its release underlines the undeniable narrative dexterity of Ishiguro and his ability to handle deep-rooted emotions with finesse. Set against the backdrop of England during the early 1980s, the novel delves into the life of Etsuko, a Japanese woman in the autumn of her years, now residing in England. Etsuko's existence, marked by solitude and introspection, forms the crux of the story, and her interactions serve as windows into

her soul, revealing layers of her personality, cultural dislocation, and past traumas. The narrative primarily revolves around a poignant discussion between Etsuko and her younger daughter, Niki. Notably, the name 'Niki' itself emanates from a cultural compromise between her parents, underscoring the amalgamation of two worlds in her identity. This meeting isn't merely a casual mother-daughter interaction but triggers a cascade of memories for Etsuko. Etsuko finds herself transported to the era shortly after the harrowing bombing of Nagasaki. During that time, she shared her life with her first husband, a Japanese man named Jero. These reflections, prompted by Niki's visit, allow the readers to journey through Etsuko's past, gaining insights into her experiences, struggles, and choices in post-war Japan. Throughout the novel, Ishiguro adeptly weaves a tapestry of memories and present moments, blurring the lines between reality and perception. By embedding touching and, at times, enigmatic twists, especially towards the culmination, Ishiguro not only engages the readers but also prompts them to ruminate on the deeper nuances of memory, identity, and cultural displacement. This work stands as a nuanced exploration of personal histories intertwined with broader historical and cultural narratives.

**Keywords:** Memories, Guilts, Suicide, Mother, Daughter, Past, Patriarchy, Relationship cruel, Socio-cultural narrative

During a poignant visit from her daughter, Niki, Etsuko is prompted to delve deeply into her past, reminiscing about her youthful days in Japan. She provides Niki with insights into her reasons for leaving Japan and establishing a new life in England. This heart-to-heart discussion unravels stories of her first marriage and the birth of her daughter, Keiko, of Japanese descent. Niki, Etsuko's younger daughter, is a product of her second union with an Englishman who has since passed away. Niki's recurrent visits serve as a catalyst for Etsuko's introspection. These interactions invariably lead her to recall the tumultuous period shortly after the devastating bombing of Nagasaki. It was a time marked by chaos and personal upheavals, during which she was navigating the challenges of her married life with Jiro, her first husband, while also expecting their child, Keiko. Literary critic Penelope Lively engaged with the novel and found its narrative approach both captivating and unique. She perceived the novel as potent, a testament to its understated yet profound depth. Despite its seemingly straightforward narrative, Lively found the undercurrents of the story to be both "unsettling" and somewhat "baffling." She encapsulated the novel's overall impact as one that resonates with an "extraordinary tension," hinting at latent sorrows and lurking malevolence.

Etsuko's guilt and emotional upheaval goes side by side her feelings of loneliness, somehow she thinks herself responsible for the suicide of her elder daughter Keiko. Even her second husband also thinks that she could make the life of Keiko far better but she could not. When Etsuko expresses her feeling about Keiko's funeral that "I never expected you to come. "Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 10).

Etsuko further explained that she was living in Nagasaki a long time ago and met her father. Niki was not interested in the news of Keiko's death but she appreciates several deeds of her past and advises her mother not to regret for her past choices she once made. Now the novel takes turn towards the story of Sachiko. It was the time when in Nagasaki bombing was over, those were days of calm and relief. Etsuko and her husband lived in an area to the east of the city. Sachiko lived with her little daughter Mariko across the ditchy ground in a cottage. The story of Sachiko reflects the story of Etsuko in many ways, here we cannot make differences between illusion and reality because Etsuko thinks herself responsible for the suicide of Keiko. Sachiko was very careless about her daughter Mariko, that thing was disturbing Etsuko because this story somewhere reflected the story of Etsuko herself. When she informed Sachiko about the fighting of Mariko with two other children, Sachiko made no reply and continued to walk up the hill then she said to Etsuko. "It's very kind of you to be so concerned, Etsuko", she said "So very kind. I'm sure you'll make a splendid mother" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 14).

Sachiko was very cruel to her daughter at many places this cruelty is clearly shown but Etsuko was not too much harsh for her daughter Keiko. "Many critics say that there are many "similarities between Etsuko and Sachiko. First of all both of them formed relationship with foreign husbands, both have harmed their daughters by pursuing western lovers" (Beedham, 15).

The feeling of guilt works through the complete novel as Gabriele Annan points out in one of her reviews 'On the High Wire', is to read it as "a ghost story, reading this review helps us to illuminate Etsuko's guilt. Annan proposes that Etsuko feels guilty for having taken Keiko to England', the mask of self deception put on by Etsuko does not slip and create a tension by gradually revealing." It is those last days in Nagasaki during which Etsuko decided to leave her Japanese husband for her foreign lover and depart for England. In a critical passage, Etsuko refers to Mariko as if she were her own daughter, as critics have noted. On one occasion, "there was a tragic moment when Etsuko and Sachiko find Mariko lying open eyes and they think she is dead." Mariko was looking towards them with a 'peculiar blankness' (*A Pale View of Hills*, 41) the blood was coming from a wound on the inside of Mariko's thigh and never explained. When Etsuko talks about the matter and asks to Sachiko to report the police, she denied and says, "It is just a little game Mariko likes to play when she means to be. I've grown quite used to these little games or hers" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 42).

Sachiko wants to leave Japan and settle to another country but Etsuko is much worried about the future of Mariko and admits to Sachiko, that there would be.... various difficulties like-a different country has its own language and different ways of living but Sachiko ignored her suggestions and tells her that "I know I'll manage" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 44). In this story of Etsuko and Sachiko, we can clearly see that Etsuko worries about Mariko's welfare everywhere because "Etsuko appears to stage through the Sachiko-Mariko relationship her own misgivings over Keiko" (Wai Chew Sim, 30). She wants to justify herself because the guilt of Keiko's suicide tortures her every time and she wants to overcome this feeling of guilt through her agitation for Mariko's good future.

The above description provides the double reading of a single character in *A Pale View of Hills*. This novel provides a deep psychological insight through which, the character of Etsuko is passing and 'memory tries to cope with tragedy' (Wai Chew Sim, 32).

The other story line is in present time, Niki spends few days unwillingly with her mother: Niki and her mother (Etsuko) watched a girl playing on the swing on the third day of Niki's visit a dream of that girl haunted Etsuko following night and it has returned to her several times. Eventually it is clear that "the identity of the young girl found hanging, which Etsuko both half-remembers and dreams, never becomes clear but is somehow at once both Mariko and Keiko, and someone else entirely" (J. Baillie and S. Matthews, 49). When Etsuko talks about her fancy to becoming grandmother, Niki replies angrily because becoming a mother is a 'horrible screaming thing for her' (*A Pale View of Hills*, 48). She explains her feelings to her daughter but Niki replies arrogantly, "Perhaps you will get married and have children soon., I said. "I miss little children."

I can't think of anything I'd like les, said Niki. "Well,

Suppose you're still rather young."

"It's nothing to do with how young or old I am.

I just don't feel like having a lot of kids screaming around me" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 48).

Niki negotiations to becoming a mother proves that motherhood is not a respectable thing for her because Keioko's childhood and her suicide divert her feeling of becoming a mother.

Niki and Etsuko's conversation at home proves that motherhood is not a respectable thing of her because Keiko's childhood and her suicide divert her feeling of becoming a mother.

Niki and Etsuko's conversation of home proves that Keiko was all alone in England. Etsuko failed to take care of her daughter Keiko but now she realizes her mistake of bringing Keiko to England, She could not fulfill all the duties of a mother, as Keiko was unaware about her condition of living alone. It is very well explained by Niki that Keiko was not a part of her family.

"Keiko did didn't come to Dad's funeral, did she?" She said eventually."

You know perfectly well she didn't so why ask?

"I was just saying, that's all."

You mean you didn't come to her funeral because she didn't come to your father's Don't be so childish, Niki."

"I'm not being childish. I'm just saying that's the way it was. She was never a part of our lives - not mine or Dad's anyway. I never expected her to be at Dad's funeral" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 52).

The English house of Etsuko is an eminent proof for Shaffer that "Etsuko and Niki both felt guilty. 'The reason for Etsuko's buried guilt is obvious', and Niki's guild 'may be attributed both to 'survivor's guilt' and to the fact that she purposefully absented herself from her sister's funeral" (Shaffer, 19).

Carelessness of Etsuko shows everywhere because she was not much worried about Keiko's behaviour after knowing all the things, "she never tries to cure her daughter. She could spend more time with Keiko to know the reason of her misbehave. Here we can say that Keiko was a lonely child on a foreign land, however, Etsuko is her real mother. But now after Keiko's

suicide, Etsuko is suffering from a sense of guilt and analyzing the whole world in relation to pain and problem of her own life. Death of Keiko is like a ‘wound on one’s own body’ as Etsuko regrets for the daughter” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 54).

I fell only regret now for those attitudes I displayed towards Keiko. In this country, after all, it is not unexpected that a young woman of that age should wish to leave home. All I succeeded in doing, it would seem, was to ensure that when she finally left - now almost six years ago - she did so severing all her ties with me. But then I never imagined she could so quickly vanish beyond my reach; all I saw was that my daughter, unhappy as she was at home, would find the world outside too much for her. It was for her own protection I opposed her so vehemently. (*A Pale View of Hills*, 88)

At one place Etsuko accepts that her second husband was not much aware about the culture of Japan and ever less a man like Jiro, her first husband. Jiro was not a selfish man according to Etsuko. He worked hard to do his part for the family and he expected Etsuko to do hers. He was very dutiful man. Jiro spends seven years with her daughter, “he was a good father to her. Finally Etsuko says whatever she convinced herself of during those final days, she never pretended Keiko would not miss him” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 90). But now she has no wish to remember those things again.

My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko’s interests very much at heart. There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again. Etsuko neglects the tomato plants and left them ruined.

“I think the tomatoes are ruined for this year”, I said.

“I’ve really rather neglected them” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 91).

But “her daughter Niki stopped beside the tomato plants and inspite of the heavy drizzle stood contemplating them for some time and she began straightening the canes. She gave support to all the fallen tomato plants. This incident is symbolically connected to Keiko’s incident because the fallen life of Keiko was not supported by her mother and Keiko committed suicide. There was no one to help Keiko like Niki help those fallen tomato plants” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 92).

When Etsuko compares her two daughters and admits, “my two daughters had much in common, much more than my husband would ever admits. As far as he was concerned, they were complete opposites; furthermore, it became his view that Keiko was a difficult person by nature and there was little we could do for her” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 94). Within the intricate tapestry of Etsuko’s memories and relationships, the perceptions of her second husband stand out. He often insinuated that Keiko’s inherent personality traits were passed down from her father. However, Etsuko firmly rejects such simplistic interpretations. To her, suggesting Jiro as the primary influence in shaping Keiko’s disposition was merely a convenient, yet inaccurate, assignment of blame. It was, in her eyes, an overly facile way to eschew any shared responsibility.

Etsuko’s reflections delve deeper into the uncanny parallels between the two girls, especially during their impressionable years. Their temperaments were strikingly akin: both exhibited vehement tempers and a palpable sense of possessiveness. Unlike many of their contemporaries who might allow minor slights or disagreements to roll off their backs, these two harbored their anger. Such grievances wouldn’t dissipate with the fleeting nature typical of

childhood upsets; rather, they would stew in their feelings, casting a moody pall over the entirety of their day.

In her subsequent reflections, Etsuko articulates her distinct aspirations and concerns for the two young women. For Niki, she holds profound optimism, envisioning a future brimming with promise and fulfillment. In stark contrast, she recounts the heart-wrenching trajectory of the other girl—Keiko. After a protracted period of intensifying despair, Keiko tragically succumbed to her inner demons, choosing to end her life. While Etsuko's second husband was inclined to either attribute these disparate paths to inherent nature or squarely lay the blame on Jiro's doorstep, Etsuko now yearns for a semblance of closure. She wishes to distance herself from the painful vestiges of the past, understanding that perpetual rumination brings little solace or insight (*A Pale View of Hills*, 94).

A dream of a little girl was disturbing Etsuko again and again, when she told about the dream to Niki and then she said: "I supposed you mean it was her Keiko." Etsuko had some feelings of guilt in her unconscious mind, which were coming out threw her dreams. Etsuko and Sachiko both were ambitious and had left their husbands for their lovers and settled in foreign countries to fulfill their desire. "Keiko's removal from her father and culture traumatized so deeply that she finally committed suicide" (Fricke and Maximilians, 24).

Like Sachiko, Etsuko also enters into a relationship with a westerner and leaves Japan to begin a new life in the west country that eventually leads to the suicide of Keiko. An act of throwing kittens into the river shows Sachiko's cruelty for her daughter Mariko. At various places she called the kittens "filthy little animals" and then she put those kittens in a vegetable box to push them over the edge of the bank. Mariko did not want to go to America, she had no father like feeling for Frank and called him a pig but her mother Sachiko did not want to understand her daughter's wish to stay back in Japan. She promised her daughter.

"In any case", I went on, "if you don't like it over there, we can always come back," But she does not agree with her mother and her mother said her again:

"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" (*A Pale View of Hills*, 173).

The story of Mariko represents the story of Keiko and Keiko never come back to Japan.

In the final chapter it is very clearly shown the guilt of Etsuko also impacted Niki. Niki decides at one point to 'read through all her father's newspaper articles' and go through all 'the drawers and bookshelves' of the house in order to unearth them (*A Pale View of Hills*, 91). What she learns as a result of that reassessment is suggested later when she tells Etsuko that, "I suppose Dad should have looked after [Keiko] a bit more, shouldn't he? He ignored her most of the time. It wasn't fair really" (PVH, 175). Niki is kind and caring it proves through her acts. This insight is given figurative emphasis when Niki goes into the garden of Etsuko's cottage to feed some goldfish in a pond, and also to straighten some young tomato plants that have languished as a result of neglect. "These deeds are Niki's most interventionary acts in the novel and suggest that her change of mind contain a wider didactic thrust" (Wai Chew Sim, 29).

The characters of both Etsuko and Sachiko appear to have merged inexplicably. Very quickly into the novel, we realize that Sachiko is Etsuko's alter ego. When Etsuko recounts the

character of Sachiko as those of a friend she happens to remember, “as a mask confront to her own history, utilising Sachiko’s past to help her analyse the decisions she made many years ago” (Yugin Teo, 40).

Niki is very well aware the guilt of her mother and somehow she is also suffering with the feeling of that guilt through her lack of sleeping due to bad dreams. She admits to her mother.

“I suppose Dad should have looked after her a bit more, shouldn’t he? He ignored her most of the time. It was not fair really” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 175).

Etsuko and Niki both know that he was not her real father. Etsuko, who came to England to live a happy life on her own terms becomes a miserable one. Accepting her mistake she says “I knew all along, I knew all along she wouldn’t be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same.” Niki did not want to make her mother’s life more miserable. She gave her new hope to live life and advise her to forget all past because with a bad past, a person cannot live a good present. Niki admits her mother “There’s no point in going over all that now” (*A Pale View of Hills*, 176).

After spending her holidays Niki decides to go back but her mother wants to live with her more days. Niki is following her mother’s footsteps, what Etsuko had done in her past, leaving her first husband, settled down in England. Niki wants to live her life with her own way and she does not want to live with her mother, like Jiro. But Keiko wanted to live with her parents, she did not get this opportunity. Her mother Etsuko left her alone to suffer in a new country between the strangers. Keiko suffered before her suicide but Etsuko suffers after Kiko’s suicide. The novel ends with Niki’s departure and her mother Etsuko ‘smiled’ and ‘waved’ her. Now Etsuko very well aware her loneliness and guilt of Keiko’s suicide so she wanted to sell the house and adjusted somewhere smaller. A long line of bad memories connected to that house, mostly the suicide of Keiko. Etsuko recognized the fact that how she had left alone, her daughter, Keiko in the same way Niki left her mother alone because she wants to live according to her free will.

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