The Poetics of Unreliable Remembrance: Trauma and Narrative Reconstruction in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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ABSTRACT

The discipline of memory studies, which arose at the turn of the century, provided academics with an alternative perspective on the way the past and its telling should be interpreted. Kazuo Ishiguro, a modern author and the winner of the Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize for his literary work, writes his novels with a focus on memory, trauma, and personal identity. The purpose of this paper is to discuss Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000) as an investigation of the fallacy of

autobiographical memory and to evaluate the process by which the novel's main character tries to restore his personal identity through narrative reconstruction.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Trauma, Narrative, Colonialism.

The emerging field of memory studies seeks to investigate how people and communities recall, re-create, and communicate the past. Memory studies emphasise the instability and constructedness of remembrance, in relation to the areas where memory encounters identity, trauma, and narrative. The Japanese-British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro, who was the winner of both the Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize, is one of the writers of the modern era who consistently focuses on aspects such as memory, history, loss, and identity.

In *When We Were Orphans* (2000), memory emerges as both a redeeming force and a deceiving one, in the face of trauma. The plot of the novel is dedicated to the story of Christopher Banks, a well-known London detective, whose life is still influenced by the mysterious disappearance of his parents in Shanghai in the 1930s. Through Banks's character, Ishiguro analyses the unreliability of autobiographical memories and their impact on the fragmented individuality of a person. In this way, the present paper will address the issue of *When We Were Orphans* as postmodern autobiographical fiction, that centers on the process of narrativisation as a method of reconciling the fragments of early memories, with the consciousness of an adult.

Memory, as contemporary scholarship reminds us, is not a neutral repository of facts, but a constructive and interpretive process, shaped as much by present need, as by past experience. It is within Banks' first-person narration that the above-mentioned idea manifests itself. Having chosen to write about

his life as a means of coping with the grief of losing his parents, Banks reveals that most details cannot be recalled, and that one must resort to imagination to piece together one's childhood memories. In effect, a fictitious reality is created by the narrator to fill in the gaps that have been formed by the passing years. At the same time, the process of writing about one's experiences reveals a post-modernist approach to a linear narrative. Namely, the passage of time between Banks' early days in Shanghai and his later life in London creates an insurmountable gap that cannot be filled by any imagination. Thus, Ishiguro employs such techniques as extended retrospection and digressions, along with the narrator's constant hesitation and changes of mind, to illustrate the existence of certain gaps in time and consciousness. On a psychological level, the novel recreates a process known as reconsolidation of memories, during which the traumatic experience is altered by repeated retelling, thus leaving one unsure as to whether Banks' narrative constitutes the recovery of memory, or is a complete fabrication.

Banks's trauma during childhood has a direct effect on his adult life, demonstrating how personal experience, psychological needs, and narratives intertwine. The theory of psychoanalysis states that victims of trauma tend to reproduce unresolved issues of their past lives when becoming adults, and this phenomenon explains Banks's choice of profession as a detective. Indeed, his role as an individual who solves mysterious events and puzzles is, in a way, a reproduction of the main mystery which Banks could not resolve – the disappearance of his parents. First of all, Shanghai is presented in the book as a place related to both personal memories and historical experiences of its citizens. Namely, the narrator describes how he and his companion Akira spent sunny afternoons there, as well as recalls the protection offered by the International Settlement to the inhabitants of the region. However, at the same time, Shanghai appears to be a historical place full of opium production, conflict, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the weakening of Europe's dominance. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the nostalgic remembrance of a safe and

happy place and historical trauma, creates an important element of the novel's narrative regarding the connection between personal memories and power, as Biwu Shang demonstrates in his analysis of the competing childhood and adult layers of Banks's Shanghai memories (Shang 2-3). Banks's cherished memories of childhood, Ishiguro suggests, were sustained by a colonial system built upon exploitation, and Banks himself resists acknowledging that his father's involvement in the opium trade, and his own security as a child, depended upon imperial violence. His nostalgic image of Shanghai obscures both the suffering of the Chinese population and the wider geopolitical forces that shaped his own life, a concealment that Rafał Łyczkowski traces through the novel's obscured treatment of British colonial expansionism, and the story of Banks's mother, Diana Banks (Łyczkowski 17-18). So, in this sense, the novel shows how historical realities are refracted and reshaped through the subjective, often distorted lens of private recollection.

This aspect of the novel is further emphasised by means of its first-person narrative style, which raises further doubts concerning Banks' reliability. As mentioned above, Banks is the protagonist of the book, but he is also the author's narrator who happens to be a detective. Ishiguro uses the reader's anticipation concerning his skill at uncovering mysteries against him. While the author's detective character can find answers to the most complicated questions posed by others, he is incapable of providing solutions to his own mystery. For example, his memories about his parents, his father's business, and the disappearance of his mother belong to the myths that have developed around their stories within the last few decades. The detective role becomes Banks' psychological defense: by applying all efforts towards investigating, he tries to impose order on the senseless situation caused by his irrational loss. However, as shown by the book's end, the image of a successful detective proves to be more hurtful than healing.

The presentation of Banks as an unreliable narrator in Ishiguro's novel also serves to question the authoritative position held by autobiographical writing. In his work, one encounters inconsistencies,

retrospective clarifications, and instances where the memories recalled by Banks are contradicted by the reactions of other characters or events occurring around him, that seem to refute what he remembers. Through such literary devices, it is revealed how trauma impacts a person's self-perception in ways that render impossible, any assertion of clarity in one's knowledge of themselves. Far from providing access to insights into Banks's past experiences, narration is seen as his mode of protection against such revelations.

The colonised context of Banks' narrative proves crucial to any analysis of the interplay of memory, trauma, and power within the novel. In the context of the British expatriate community in colonial Shanghai, Banks is privileged in his race, class, and political status, and finds himself part of a protected and privileged environment that, in reality, owes its existence to treaties that are founded upon imperial dominance. It is perhaps possible to view Banks' obsession with finding or saving his parents, as a parody of the rescue narrative common in imperial fiction: his belief that he, a citizen of England, could rescue and reunite his family, while caught up in a war-torn Chinese city. This represents an aspect of the imperial mindset that Western nations can, and must save others. Dominic Dean develops this reading at length, arguing that Banks is received simultaneously as the abandoned child, and as that child's Western rescuer, and that the collapse of these two roles into one figure, functions as a sustained parody of international rescue politics (Dean 150). Thus, Banks himself can be seen as representing a Westerner's complex, wherein trauma is inextricably intertwined with imperial ideology.

The intermingling of the personal and the ideological, thus compromises Banks' ability to achieve genuine self-reflection. He is unable to see the manner in which his desires, values, and identity have been constructed within colonial frameworks. Indeed, the trauma Banks suffers is inextricably linked to the loss of the privileges he enjoys through colonial domination, and with the dismantling of an imperial structure that

ensured his safety. Through Banks, Ishiguro illustrates how trauma stories from colonial contexts can be used to obfuscate the exploitative history behind them, focusing instead on the victimisation of privileged individuals.

In Banks' case, memory distortion and memory suppression work as important tools in constructing his identity throughout the entire novel. Banks' identity is formed through his process of recalling and rewriting his past; his image as a respected detective as well as his image as a detached and calm man serve him as compensatory devices that emerge because of the absence of his parents, due to their disappearance. Gender makes this picture of Banks' identity much more complicated. Banks' idealized image of his mother differs greatly from what he finds out about her during the process of investigation. In particular, her love affairs and her position in the colonial world make Banks' romanticised idea of a saintly and self-sacrificing mother unrealistic. The same can be said regarding Banks' relationships with women in general, as his attitude towards female characters is very cold and repressive. The reason for this might be the trauma caused by the loss of his mother in early childhood.

When We Were Orphans is structured by Ishiguro as a postmodern fictional autobiography that seems to be designed for therapeutic purposes. Banks writes in an attempt to understand himself and organise traumatic memories into an autobiographical narrative, that would follow current therapeutic approaches based on the assumption that narrative therapy is a powerful tool that transforms traumatic experiences into something understandable. Şebnem Düzgün reads the novel in precisely these terms, arguing that Banks uses fictional autobiography to try to relieve his childhood trauma, though the temporal distance between his past and present prevents him from ever fully assessing what actually happened (Düzgün 1). However, in spite of its apparent therapeutic nature, this novel demonstrates some flaws and inefficiency of this approach. Writing may provide Banks with some kind of psychological containment and

allow him to describe traumatic events and make sense out of them; however, they do not bring him catharsis as he wants them to do, because writing allows him to stay in control. He selects certain episodes from his memory, explains them according to his own understanding of events, and presents himself to his readers in the way he wants to. In other words, writing protects him from discovering harsh truth about his parents, and even about himself.

The novel concludes without any conclusive resolution in terms of a breakthrough therapy for Banks. At the end of the story, the old man remains undecided in some of his most essential questions concerning the events that took place in his early years of life, as well as compelled by his own impulses arising from childhood trauma. The narrative, despite the deep psychological examination, fails to break through the distortions and defense mechanisms created by traumatic experience. In other words, the author questions the so-called myth of therapeutic narrative, in that he denies the possibility of gaining therapeutic power in recounting one's history of life and traumas. The book also touches upon cultural memory, in that personal recollection is always coloured by the existing cultural context, including the narrative framework. In his portrayal of himself as an orphan-detective, the main character draws on the cultural memory of the British people based on various literary works, starting from Dickens' stories, to modernists' novels about loss and displacement, as well as stories in the genre of detective literature and adventures.

The historical context that surrounds Banks' experiences, the war between China and Japan, the waning of British colonial power, and the changes in Shanghai itself, can only be glimpsed through the lens of Banks' own consciousness. As a novel, it reflects the incomplete image of British imperialism, wherein the individual experience of the main character overshadows the larger structures of violence, which underpins his entire world, and eventually unravels him. The late realisation that his paradise childhood

was founded on violence becomes clear to Banks too late to fully comprehend the full scope of his experience. In this regard, the novel fails to present the idea of an enlightened historical self, transcendent of ideology.

It is shown that Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans* is based on the intricate relationships between trauma, memory, and narrative reconstructions, that show that the autobiographical process of remembering does not involve a straightforward retrieval of the past, but entails a very complicated and unstable operation. The process of reorganisation of the traumatic experience gained during the childhood, through the use of narration, is highlighted via the example of Christopher Banks, whose memories of his past are full of temporal discontinuities, conjectures, and self-corrections, thus indicating the fallibility of memory as the tool for discovering the truth about history or oneself. Moreover, the identity of a detective that he chooses, serves him as a repetition of his trauma, since the need to solve some mystery becomes the manifestation of his unconscious desire to find out more about his parents' fate. However, his memories of the city of Shanghai are clouded with nostalgia and an unrealistic view of it, that ignores the violence of colonialism.

Thus, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* questions the notion that the process of narration alone is enough to heal any trauma that one may have suffered. On the contrary, rather than showing how the practice of narrating events serves as an easy way of recovering from psychological wounds, this novel demonstrates the constraints of narratives, and suggests that there is a point where trauma breaks one's sense of self so badly, that remembering everything truthfully seems like an impossible task after all. This is one of the important contributions that this book has made to memory research.

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