

Fragments of a Haunted Mind: Involuntary Memory and Unreliable Narration in *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

With an emphasis on Etsuko's disjointed and untrustworthy narration, this paper explores the function of involuntary recollection in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*. Based on Ansgar Nünning's paradigm for narrative unreliability and Proustian notions of memory, the analysis investigates how trauma, suppression, and narrative displacement influence Etsuko's memories. The novel creates a nuanced and emotionally complex portrait of a mother struggling with loss and guilt through the use of metaphor, temporal fluidity, and psychological projection. Ishiguro uses Etsuko's memories as a prism to examine the buried nature of post-war trauma and the erratic character of self-narration.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*, involuntary memory, unreliable narrator, trauma, retrospective narration, Etsuko

A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro, published in 1982, is a book that explores memory, trauma, and psychological displacement in great detail. The book examines the complicated relationship between mother and daughter, cultural identity, and emotional repression through the eyes of Etsuko, a Japanese woman who lived in England following World War II. Etsuko's involuntary recollection, which frequently arises suddenly due to emotional or environmental triggers, is at the heart of the story's structure. These disjointed recollections, which are frequently projected onto other people, especially Sachiko and Mariko, point to a repressed trauma involving Etsuko's daughter Keiko. By using this technique, Ishiguro uses memory as a literary device as well as a theme, enabling readers to uncover secrets concealed behind the narrator's constructed memories.

2023110

Marcel Proust, who makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary memories, is credited with creating the idea of involuntary memory. Involuntary memory is triggered by a sensory cue and frequently reveals emotionally charged experiences that the individual may not want to face, whereas voluntary recall is intentional and conscious. This is the second way that Etsuko's memories in *A Pale View of Hills* work: they come from her subconscious when she muses over her daughter's suicide rather than being voluntarily recalled. Such memory lapses, contradictions, or metaphorical replacements are important textual indicators of untrustworthy narration, particularly when discussing trauma, according to Ansgar Nünning (Nünning 31).

Etsuko's projected story of Sachiko and Mariko is among the novel's most blatant instances of involuntary remembering. Sachiko, who is supposedly a friend from Nagasaki, has a lot in common with Etsuko. Both have girls who suffer emotionally, both are single mothers, and both intend to travel to the West from Japan with an unreliable man. Etsuko is able to escape the remorse and moral complexity of her previous choices by incorporating her own painful experiences into Sachiko's story. In traumatic narrative, this displacement is a typical indication of involuntary memory. As Etsuko says of Sachiko, "She was determined to go to America... even though the man had made no real promise. She was clinging to something" (Ishiguro 98). Etsuko could as well be speaking of herself. Her commentary's ambiguity and lack of emotional nuance point to repression at work.

These memories are also frequently triggered by sensory cues, which connects them to Proustian involuntary recollection. Etsuko's hazy reflection on a tragic experience while observing a rope dangling from a tree is a particularly striking scene: "I remember, at that moment, I had the strongest sense that I had seen such a thing before. Perhaps in a dream. A vision. I can't quite recall" (Ishiguro 184). Although Etsuko doesn't explain, the imagery is strikingly similar to hanging and may be a subliminal reference to Keiko's hanging death. Her psychological defensive systems, which take the form of obscure metaphors and narrative redirection, are revealed by her incapacity—or refusal—to express this recollection directly.

The narrative's temporal fluidity is another important aspect of Etsuko's involuntary recollection. The story's abrupt transitions between the past and present illustrate how traumatic memory frequently causes linear time to collapse. The tone and tempo of Etsuko's narration are consistent with her experiences in modern-day England, even as her thoughts stray into memories of Nagasaki during post-war reconstruction. The story deviates from a rigid timeline, reflecting the way memories can suddenly and uncontrollably resurface in the present. According to Ishiguro, "Memory,

2023111

I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily colored by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain recollections I have passed on here” (Ishiguro 156). This revelation highlights the novel’s main themes of memory instability and the psychological impulse to hide or change upsetting realities.

Another characteristic of Etsuko’s unreliability and trauma-induced memory is her emotional detachment. She seems composed, even unconcerned, even when talking about her daughter Keiko’s suicide “She had become very distant. I suppose she was unhappy in her own way” (Ishiguro 11). Such emotional flatness, which suggests numbness or suppression, is inconsistent with the trauma of losing a child. As Nünning points out, an unreliable narrator may attempt to “evade moral responsibility” or “distance themselves from painful truths” through linguistic and rhetorical means (34). Therefore, it is possible to interpret Etsuko’s flattened affect as a sign of unresolved grief and guilt, which she is only able to address indirectly through displaced and involuntary recollection.

This reading is supported by the novel’s recursive structure. Even when they don’t seem to be connected to the story at hand, Etsuko keeps thinking about Sachiko and Mariko. As the book goes on, these events get increasingly complex, indicating that Etsuko’s mind is reenacting and rewriting the trauma in order to process it. This Freudian concept of repetition compulsion is frequently linked to unresolved trauma. The substitution becomes increasingly obvious as Etsuko continues to recount Sachiko’s story “She seemed so sure of herself. But in the end, I don’t believe she ever really knew what was best for Mariko” (Ishiguro 101). There is a slippage between the two narrative levels here since Etsuko’s critique of Sachiko might just as readily be directed to herself.

To sum up, Etsuko’s involuntary recall in *A Pale View of Hills* exposes the severe psychological and emotional wounds from her past. Ishiguro paints a picture of a woman battling grief, repression, and guilt through fragmented memories, narrative displacement, metaphor, and sensory triggers. These recollections are portrayed as subjective, erratic pieces of a tragic past rather than as objective facts. Etsuko’s lack of dependability stems from emotional self-preservation rather than dishonesty. The reader is encouraged to look between the lines and discover the terrible realities she is unable to express by her involuntary memories. Ishiguro’s novel thus turns into a nuanced examination of the ways in which memory can both disclose and conceal the self—a concept that is particularly relevant in postmodern fiction.

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2023112

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