

## Memories Suppressed and Memories Lost Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and His Earliest Works.

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抑圧された記憶と失われた記憶  
カズオ・イシグロの『忘れられた巨人』と初期作品

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### Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel *The Buried Giant* contains unfamiliar and familiar elements for the Ishiguro reader. The landscape is 6<sup>th</sup> century Britain where the shadow of King Arthur remains as do mythical creatures, prompting some to classify this book as fantasy. What is familiar is Ishiguro's focus on memory. Yet, the approach toward memory here is different. In previous books, the memories explored were those that belonged to an individual who was recalling them, sorting through them, and trying to make sense of the past. In this story, the memories have been forcefully removed from the characters, so their struggle becomes one of attempting to recall any basic fact of their past, rather than interpret them. This loss of the psychological dimension to memory makes the discussion of it less interesting than previous attempts. In addition, memories have been removed from the general population in an attempt to avert violent conflict. Again, because this has been done magically, it removes any interesting parallels to efforts in conflict resolution to address collective memory in the process of reconciliation. In the end, the story is compelling and memorable, but lacks depth.

カズオ・イシグロの最新長編『忘れられた巨人』には、彼の愛好家にとっては、なじみのある要素と、そうでない要素が含まれている。舞台は6世紀のイギリスで、アーサー王の影が神話の生き物のように描かれており、そのせいで、この本をファンタジーとして分類することも出来る。なじみのある点とは、記憶に焦点を当てていることだ。しかし、この作品での記憶へのアプローチの仕方はこれまでの作品とは異なる。これまでは、記憶というものは、個人に属しており、人は昔を思い出し、並べ替えて、過去を理解しようとするものであった。一方この作品では、記憶は強制的に登場人物から取り除かれているので、彼らは記憶を解釈するというよりも、過去の基本的な事実を思いだそうとするように描かれている。この記憶に対する心理的な面がないということは、この作品が、これまでの作品で試みられたことよりも劣っている評価につながるのではないだろうか。民族間の争いを回避するために、集団からも記憶が削除されている。これは魔法のように行われている。民族間の和解の過程で集団の記憶を取り除くことは、紛争解決の際に起こることである。この作品は説得力があり、印象的な作品ではあるものの、知的な面を深める点ではこれまでの作品に劣る印象である。

**Keywords** Ishiguro, *Buried Giant*, collective memory

**キーワード** イシグロ, 忘れられた巨人, 集団の記憶

*The Buried Giant* (2015) is Kazuo Ishiguro's tenth and most recent novel, and the story is in many ways his most unusual. Its setting is a fantastical ancient world sometime in post-Roman Britain where there exist some fanciful elements, such as ogres who "were then still native to this land" (*BG* 3) as well as dragons, wizards, pixies, and, of course, giants. King Arthur's reign was still within the lifetimes of some of the older characters, and the native Britons and the recently arrived Saxons live in communities, side by side. A mist hangs over the land, which is blamed for the residents' loss of memory.

Though these fanciful elements are seen here for the first time in Ishiguro's works, one of the major themes of the story, his explorations of memory, will seem quite familiar to Ishiguro readers because it appears in all of his novels. In addition, readers will recognize his creation of a slightly surreal environment (*Never Let Me Go*), and his placing of the characters on the cusp of geopolitical events (*Remains of the Day*).

Much has been made of the genre classification for this book. Ishiguro published it under the category of ordinary fiction, but some readers and reviewers felt that it should have been classified as fantasy. Some readers took this as an insult, accusing Ishiguro of "thoughtless prejudice" against the genre (Le Guin), but Ishiguro considers the fantasy bits to be mere "surface elements" (Alter). "I expected some of my usual readers to say, 'What's this? There are ogres in it ...' but I didn't anticipate this bigger debate" (Gaiman). Ishiguro goes on to say that "genre boundaries are things that have been invented fairly recently by the publishing industry," and that readers and writers should not take these boundaries too seriously and "think that something strange happens when you cross them, and that you should think very carefully before doing so."

Ishiguro's stories are ones of a person's reflections on the past. The setting of the narratives is late in the life of the main characters when something causes them to begin to recall the situations, characters, and events they have encountered in the course of their life and the decisions and choices they have made. The recalled time frame usually centers around a pivotal event or series of events that have had a great effect on their lives. The memories come back in bits and pieces and the characters make seemingly unconscious attempts to weave these pieces together to make sense of their identity and their moral bearing. At the same time, the reader has to make similar attempts to piece together what has happened and why, and therefore, the reader goes on a kind of journey together with the narrator. However, as would be the case with anyone, the narrators' recollections are slightly tinged by their own anxieties and fears about what they have chosen to do in the past and why, so again the reader has to work out, sometimes together with and sometimes separate from the narrator, what truly happened, why it happened, and why the narrator interpreted things the way that.

In both *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Buried Giant* there are troubling memories which are being repressed. However, in *A Pale View of Hills* these memories are being held back, intentionally or unintentionally, while in *The Buried Giant* these memories on the personal level are being held back by a power beyond the individual's control. In addition, in *The Buried Giant* we find that the memories of the population in general are being quashed intentionally. Therefore, Ishiguro adds a societal level here, which is also present, but only hinted at, in the background of *An Artist of the Floating World* and *Never Let Me Go*.

*The Buried Giant* follows an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, as they take a journey to visit their son who lives, they think, in a village "a few days walk at most" (21). The couple's saga has elements of Arthurian romances: a quest, a mighty warrior, an enchanted boy, a mysterious castle, precarious escapes from danger, and

even a remnant of Arthur's actual court itself in the character of the knight Sir Gawain. We have various trials and tribulations with triumph after triumph leading ultimately to failure in the final goal because that is ultimately unattainable. A question that has to be raised is whether these fantastical elements serve Ishiguro's purpose well or not.

This trip is only possible because recently Axl and Beatrice have experienced the return of some fragments of memories of their son. Their actual journey starts haphazardly as Beatrice can only rely on vague, partial memories to lead the two on the only route either one knows out of their village. It is the way to a nearby Saxon village that she had visited many times before. "I believe we'll know our way well enough, Axl," Beatrice assures him. "Even if we don't yet know his exact village . . . we'll find it with little trouble" (30).

The journey itself is emblematic of the effects of the piecemeal return of their memories: they have a son, he lives in a village not far away, Beatrice has been to a Saxon village to trade goods and might be able to remember her way there. That is all that they have, but it is not in spite of these titbits, but because of them, that they head off. When you have almost nothing, even a little bit feels like a lot.

Another way the effects of the loss of memories is illustrated is when Axl recalls a visit to their village of a mysterious woman who he thinks was a sort of healer who takes care of the injured and the sick. Though Beatrice does not recall her, Axl wonders why she came specifically to the door of their room because "here's the two of us both as healthy as any in the village" (9). The couple's conviction that they have "hardly aged at all down the years" rings hollow knowing that without their memories they have no way of comparing their current selves to the way they were. The episode of a healer making a visit specifically to see Axl and Beatrice also presages the couple's waning health.

One thing Axl and Beatrice learn on their journey is that the mysterious clouding of the memories of the people of the land is due to the breath of a dragon named Querig which hangs over the land as a mist. Because the old couple naturally wants to regain their lost memories, they willingly join with a Saxon warrior named Wistan who has been sent to slay the dragon, for if the dragon is gone their memories should return. For a while, it seems that the aged knight of Arthur's Court that they meet, Sir Gawain, also wants to slay Querig, but we eventually find out that this supposed mission is actually a cover story for Gawain to stay in the area to fulfil his actual mission, to protect the dragon. In the end, the dragon is slain, which will allow for everyone's memories to be restored.

However, Axl and Beatrice should be careful what they wish for. Axl's memories are jogged open just enough at the very end to deny the couple a happy ending. This takes place in a drip-by-drip fashion that is out of Axl's control. In the last scene, the couple talk to a boatman about taking them to an island to which Beatrice feels they must go because she recalls that it is there that their son awaits them. The journey on the boat to the island is a thinly veiled allegory for death and the afterlife. The two have been told that they will be questioned by a boatman and that their answers will determine whether they will be able to be together on the island. They have also been warned that the boatmen are wily and will ask questions in a way to divine a truth that even those being asked the questions may not be aware of.

Then both Beatrice and Axl remember that the reason that their son left them was because of a quarrel between the parents, and further that the quarrel was due to Beatrice's infidelity. Axl answers the questions as

honestly as he can, even though they bring out painful memories, the worst of which is his prohibition of his wife to visit the son's grave. In the end, only Axl is able, or willing, to admit this transgression, though Beatrice is well aware of it. "I forbade her to go to his grave, boatman. A cruel thing" (367). He admits that it was "a darker betrayal than the small infidelity cuckolded me a month or two."

He goes on to admit that

There was nothing to gain, boatman. It was just foolishness and pride. And whatever else lurks in the depths of a man's heart. Perhaps it was a craving to punish, sir. I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance. A petty and black thing I did her, and my son also. (367)

When asked by the boatman how he feels about all this now, he says that it was a "wound that healed slowly, but heal it did," and that "the last of the darkness had left me" (368). However, it is evidentially too late because Ishiguro has them go their separate ways, Beatrice trusting the boatman to take her to the island and Axl wandering off across the shore. As usual, Ishiguro leaves us with an ambiguous ending. Did the couple fail their quiz, perhaps because Beatrice held back and did not tell the boatman about Axl's forbidding her to visit the grave? Or after living for some time blissfully together, was the sudden confrontation of past troubles too much of a shock for Axl to overcome? Did the boatman's questions reveal a rift between the two that is too wide to gulf? Or is it that death will inevitably separate individual souls and therefore the quiz served as a kind of last rite?

In terms of structure, this story could be considered to be an anti-comedy. The basic comic structure begins with a group of people who have problems with their relationships, many complications occur, and the result is better relations in the end, or the happy ending. In contrast, in *The Buried Giant* we have the reverse. Here, Axl and Beatrice begin the story with a congenial and happy relationship, but as the story progresses, troubles between them emerge, even if those troubles are from the past, and in the end the two are torn irreparably apart.

The other major theme in *The Buried Giant* is tied to Axl and Beatrice's struggles with losing, then regaining their memories, but this part plays out in the geopolitical arena. To a certain extent, Ishiguro assumes we know something about ancient British history and can fill in the gaps from our knowledge, then parts of it he fictionally recreates. The theme concerns the two peoples currently inhabiting the land, the original Britons and the more recently arrived Saxons. The outline of the story leading up to the present story is that sometime after the Romans left Britain, the Angle and the Saxon (in the story only referred to as Saxons) peoples arrived from the continent in large enough numbers to threaten the Britons' hold on the island. Ishiguro takes on the legend of King Arthur, and we find that in the time of the past generation Arthur organized and lead the Britons in resistance to these invaders. However, a great truce was brokered between the two sides, and it is hinted that Axl himself in his younger years was the major architect of the suspension of hostilities. However, this truce was only a ruse on the part of Arthur to actually give him time to gather a strong enough army to eventually challenge the Saxons to an apocalyptic battle where the Saxons were roundly defeated. Then for good measure, during and after the battle, when all the able-bodied Saxon men would have been engaged in the fighting or already vanquished, Arthur had small bands of soldiers go around to as many Saxon villages as possible to murder every single remaining

inhabitant, woman, child, and old person, in order to deplete the Saxon population beyond repair. Crucially, in order to avoid the cycle of revenge that would inevitably result from such atrocities, Arthur had the dragon Querig captured, imprisoned, and had the magician Merlin put a spell on her so that her breath became a mist that covered the land and robbed the people of their memories of what had happened before.

Of course, this fix to the situation cannot last. Querig is killed by Wistan and at the end of the book the memories of those unspeakable atrocities are set to recover and vengeance on a grand scale is surely to occur in very short order. The Saxon warrior Wistan explains, “It’s justice and vengeance await, mistress. And they’ll soon hurry this way, for both are much delayed. . . . My king sent me to destroy this she-dragon not simply to build a monument to kin slain long ago. You begin to see, sir, this dragon died to make ready the way for the coming conquest” (347). Ishiguro is careful to show that there were atrocities on both sides with the example of the little Briton girl who enters the apocalyptic battle in order to hunt down a Saxon lord for revenge. “I will have him die at my hands only, after what he did to my dear mother and sisters” (244). After she finds him and Gawain cuts him down by the legs, the girl torments the fallen lord with a farm tool. “Then she brought the hoe down not with a swing, but a small prod, then another, the way she is searching for crops in the soil.” (247)

These memories of past misdeeds touch on what is known in modern peace studies as collective memory, a concept that is becoming better understood as an important aspect of conflict resolution, especially in the area of peacebuilding. Broadly speaking, some level of collective memory is at work in any group. The members of the group share ideals and goals, both of which have been agreed upon in the past and carried forward, creating a kind of historical narrative. All of this creates a group cohesion and identity which is rooted in the past as much as it is located in the present (McGrattan, 488).

Ishiguro makes it clear he had the idea of collective memory in mind in conceiving of *The Buried Giant*.

I’ve had this idea of writing a story about historical memory or societal memory. You know, the question how do societies remember and forget particularly their dark secrets or the dark memories? I have to say I was tempted to look at the actual contemporary events - the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the Rwanda genocide, France in the years after the Second World War when they had to really agree to forget what had happened during the occupation years. But I didn’t really, in the end, want to set it down in any of those particular settings. I didn’t want to write a book that looked like a piece of reportage or something that was specifically concerned about one moment in history. As a novelist, I wanted to retreat to something a little bit more metaphorical. (Persistence)

Conflicts create profound memories, especially of wrongdoings, and these can hamper post-conflict reconciliation. These memories can be held and operate on the individual level as well as on the group level. Initiatives for reconciliation after protracted conflicts have to recognize the existence of memories of abuses on the levels of the individual, family, local community, and the larger cultural group. In addition, memories can lead to conflicts because they can be manipulated by some to bring “the past into the present and with it the old scars, grievances, resentments, hatreds and senses of revenge.”

Taking memory into account can therefore help us to better understand how certain uses of the past may reignite, perpetuate, or originate conflicts. But, at the same time, it can show us how societies use memory to learn from history, to heal old scars, to remember and compensate the victims, or to promote more reflexive ways of dealing with the past in order to avoid future conflicts. (Wagoner, 3)

For the people in post-conflict situations, looking forward is the important thing. This may involve creating a memory narrative, and then establishing the idea that this narrative belongs to the past. However, even though remembering may be necessary, it is only a step because reconciliation needs some kind of forgiveness or, at the very least, a level of forgetfulness. As a Peruvian woman victim of violence admits, "When I forget, I'm well. Remembering even now, I just go crazy" (Neumann). Marcus Breitweg reminds us, "Given both the difficulties of commemorating violent conflicts on a political scale and the pain of remembering violence on a personal level, forgetting is sometimes seen as a resort to healing" (1).

What we call collective memory is actually a collection of many memories held by many individuals and each of these is subjective, unreliable, unstable and malleable, and "we are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities" (Gillis, 3). Collective memory is "as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated" (Kansteiner, 180).

This description sounds very similar to Ishiguro's approach to displaying the memories of his characters in his early works, and this complexity gives depth to the characters and keeps the reader enthralled. Unfortunately, in *The Buried Giant* this complexity is missing. The memories of the characters, on the individual and the group levels, have been repressed by the mist coming from Querig's mouth which is the result of a spell placed on her by magic. The dragon has been ill, so that may account for the recent slight recovery of some memories, but with the slaying, the mist will disappear and presumably everyone's memories will return to normal. The memories of atrocities will return, and the people will commit acts of revenge. This is an exciting backdrop for the end of the story, especially because being Britons, the aged couple are now targets of the Saxon community's revenge, but it is hardly more than a melodramatic effect. It lacks any kind of interesting profundity on the issue of collective memory after conflict and what to do about it. At most, the story may be construed as an allegory for a modern situation, let's say Japan, where Ishiguro admits he considered setting the story, along with post World War II France and modern-day Bosnia (Alter). The Japanese have lived under the spell of affluence which has caused them to forget the atrocities committed during the war, both by them and to them. Of course, such a reading is entirely arbitrary, as there is nothing at all in the book to suggest this.

*The Buried Giant* is a good read, but in contrast to Ishiguro's other works, it does not rely on depth of character and psychological analysis. First, it is a story of atmosphere. It is mystical from the start, literally in that the land is covered by a mist, but also because in the opening Axl is struggling to recall his memories. All through the book the accounts of the past and even the setting of the warren, which is home to the couple, are scarce, bare, and subjective. The style of the dialogue adds to the antique ambience. It is simple, straightforward, polite and proper, and strangely calm and lacking in emotion. Beatrice: "You've long set your heart against it, Axl, I know. But it's time now to think on it anew. There's a journey we must go on, and no more delay." Then there is the polite and even amicable discussion between the Knight Gawain and the Saxon Wistan as they prepare



to kill each other in a swordfight. It is also a story of action, though much of the action takes place away from the narration, or is condensed into a microsecond, as in the two swordfights. Lastly, it is a suspenseful story in that there are many questions and mysteries as the couple face one obstacle and peril after another, be they ogres, pixies, and dragons, or mountains, moors, and the weather.

It has been said that Kazuo Ishiguro does not ever write the same book twice, and he has shown his willingness to delve into areas some might consider different genres, such as science fiction in *Never Let Me Go*. In *The Buried Giant* Ishiguro includes the elements of fantasy in a melancholy and dark tale that takes the reader on a journey together with Beatrice and Axl to an unknown place.

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