



A Pale View of Grief: Maternal Guilt, Displaced Memory, and Migration in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

A Pale View of Hills is the first novel of Sir Kazuo Ishiguro. It narrates the story of Etsuko, a Japanese woman who is living alone in England after her elder daughter Keiko's suicide. She is reminded of her life in post war Nagasaki when her younger daughter Niki visits her. She remembers meeting Sachiko, a mother who plans to move from Japan to America with her daughter Mariko. Mariko feels lonely, frightened and is not willing to go. Slowly, Sachiko's story parallels Etsuko's story, especially her migration to England with her daughter Keiko. As the narrative moves on, we start to feel that Etsuko indirectly speaks about her guilt through Sachiko's story. The novel deals with memory, motherhood, grief, migration, and hidden trauma. The story starts after the death of Etsuko's daughter and moves toward post War Nagasaki and Sachiko and Maiko. This movement gives a displaced structure to the novel. The memory of another daughter and another child acts as an indirect means through which the readers know about Keiko's suffering and Etsuko's guilty conscience. In this paper, we aim to analyse how Ishiguro presents this maternal guilt. We also analyse the four connected aspects of the novel: Etsuko's guarded reaction about Keiko's death, the parallel mother daughter relationship, the geographical difference between England and Nagasaki and the uncertain conclusion of the novel. Based on the theories of Caruth, Balaev and Lacapra, we analyse trauma through displacement, silence, repetition, and spatial memory. Migration creates uneven emotional consequences. While it makes the mother escape, migration exposes the child to fear, estrangement, and loss of belonging.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Migration, Maternal Guilt, Displaced Narration.

Introduction:

Sir Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-British novelist, screenwriter, musician, and short-story writer. He is one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary writers. Ishiguro has received

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accolades with life-time achievement connotations: The Peggy V. Helmrich Award (2013), The Library Lion Medal from New York Public Library (2014), The Sunday Times Distinguished Author Award (2014), The Golden Plate from the American Academy of Achievement (2017). In 2018 he received a Knighthood from the United Kingdom, and the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star, from Japan. Also, in 2018, he was made an Honorary Citizen of Nagasaki City and Prefecture. In 2019 he received the Bodley Medal from the Bodleian Libraries of Oxford University. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2026)

Ishiguro's novels include *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* (2015) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021). This paper aims to analyse how Ishiguro presents maternal guilt in his debut novel *A Pale View of Hills*.

A Pale View of Hills starts in an English country house, and then it turns toward post-war Nagasaki. This movement from England to Japan gives a distinct emotional structure to the novel. The story begins with death, grief, and maternal unease. But Etsuko gives Keiko only brief and guarded attention. She recalls the visit of her younger daughter, Niki, the weather, the silence of the house, and the discomfort between the mother and daughter. Though Keiko's death remains close to the surface, Etsuko keeps it at a distance. Her words reveal this refusal: "I have no great wish to dwell on Keiko now; it brings me little comfort. I only mention her here because those were the circumstances around Niki's visit this April" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 4). The statement may sound controlled; but it depicts the emotional pressure of the novel. After this brief introduction of Keiko, Etsuko's narration shifts to a summer in Nagasaki before Keiko's birth. She recalls Sachiko and her daughter Mariko who live by the river. This focus forms the main problem of the novel. We, the readers, are forced to ask ourselves: why does a mother who has lost her daughter speak at such length about another mother and child? This displaced maternal memory can be explained with Caruth's theory of traumatic memory and LaCapra's idea of acting out. Caruth's idea explains why painful experience returns indirectly and LaCapra's concept clarifies Etsuko's repeated return to a past which she cannot fully confront. Etsuko's maternal grief over Keiko is visible through the story of Sachiko and Mariko. Etsuko approaches Keiko through Mariko, and she approaches her failure through Sachiko. The Nagasaki story explains things indirectly. Thus, Ishiguro turns maternal guilt into structure rather than confession.

Ishiguro portrays displacement in three ways: Firstly, Etsuko transfers the emotional weight of Keiko's death onto Sachiko and Mariko. The fears, silences, and anxieties surrounding Mariko recall Keiko's later isolation in England. Secondly, the geographical movement is treated as an emotional and moral problem. For Sachiko, moving to America is escaping. In the same way Etsuko leaves to England. In both cases the 'departure of mother' is associated with renewal and the child experiences relocation as threat. Thirdly, the post-war Nagasaki has a historical displacement of its own. The city has survived devastation and now moves forward by rebuilding, American influence, social change, and uncertainty. The public catastrophe changes private lives through damaged landscapes, unsettled homes and strained family relations.

This mother-child pattern is very crucial for this novel. Sachiko keeps telling Etsuko that Mariko will get used to America. But Mariko's fear, silence, and attachment to familiar spaces are not conducive to such optimism. This situation foreshadows Keiko's later condition in England. Mariko belongs to another woman, so Etsuko can feel concerned about Mariko. But those concerns trace back to Keiko, and to Etsuko herself. There is no direct confession in the novel. But the repetitive scenes establish a correlation between the mothers and the daughters. We can understand this indirect narrative form by the theory of trauma. Caruth's description of trauma emphasizes belated return, in which an event is initially beyond complete understanding and then returns in a changed form (Caruth, 1996, p.42). This pattern continues in Etsuko's narrative. Keiko's death creates the need to tell the story, but Etsuko speaks about it indirectly. Her narration moves into memories of a summer in Nagasaki. LaCapra's idea of

“acting out” and “working through” helps us understand this condition. Etsuko’s memory returns again and again to loss, and it struggles to find peace (LaCapra, 2001, p.45). Balaev’s approach to trauma is also useful because the novel connects personal grief with place, culture, migration, and the after-effects of history (Balaev, 2014, p.97). Whitehead’s discussion of trauma fiction helps us understand Ishiguro’s use of repetition, indirect narration, disturbed time, and uncertainty (Whitehead, 2004, p.74).

In this study, Etsuko is viewed as a literary figure of memory and guilt. Ishiguro presents her calm voice as a sign of inner pressure. Her pain is visible in her repeated memories. Keiko receives little direct attention, but her absence gives force to the whole narrative. The novel repeatedly returns to child fear, maternal choice, failed migration, and the failure of home to protect the child. In this way, Ishiguro shows how grief can remain alive inside another person’s story.

1. Etsuko’s Narrative Economy and Keiko’s Death

Etsuko tells her story with great restriction and reveals her pain indirectly. Instead, she delays it and moves it into other memories. At first, Niki’s visit to her mother’s country home seems ordinary. She arrives in April, stays for a short time, feels restless, and returns to London. But Keiko’s suicide gives this visit its real emotional weight. Etsuko remembers that she and Niki spoke very little about Keiko. Still, Keiko’s death remained present between them: “...not just the quiet that drove my daughter back to London. For although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko’s death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked” (3). The word “hovering” suggests grief that is silent but always present. Keiko is absent from the conversation, yet her death controls the emotional atmosphere of the house. This early reference to Keiko shows how carefully Etsuko speaks. She does not face grief openly. She lets it remain in the background. She says: “I have no great wish to dwell on Keiko now; it brings me little comfort.” (4). This statement may sound casual, and practical but its composure unsettles the readers. ‘A mother refers to her daughter’s death, and immediately moves away from it’ - this refusal becomes one of the important aspects of the novel. Though Keiko is the wound behind the narrative, Etsuko rarely allows the wound to get direct attention. Instead, she creates a controlled narrative domain in which grief can be acknowledged without being fully faced.

Niki’s presence gives an indirect form to this question of guilt. Etsuko remarks that Niki has not come “simply to see how I had taken the news of Keiko’s death; she had come to me out of a sense of mission. For in recent years, she has taken it upon herself to admire certain aspects of my past, and she had come prepared to tell me things were no different now, that I should have no regrets for those choices I once made. In short, to reassure me was not responsible for Keiko’s death.” (3) This assurance expresses more than consolation. It shows that the notion of responsibility has entered already in the private language of the family. Niki offers apology even before Etsuko openly asks for it. In this scene Ishiguro does not give accusation, confrontation, or confession. The moral crisis stays inside ordinary speech, where affection, unease, and evasion occupy the same space.

Keiko’s life in England is described only with minimal details. But still those details have high impact. Before separating from family, Keiko “had retreated into her bedroom”, shutting the family members out of her life. (35) In the England parts of the novel, the bedroom becomes more painful image. Keiko lives in the family house but that room separates her from the family members. During nights, Etsuko can hear the movement of Keiko, but still there was not any emotional contact. It has already failed. The house had contained Keiko’s pain without offering any solution for that. This image modifies the meaning of migration. After Nagasaki, England may have given a new life to Etsuko. But, for Keiko, it becomes a place of enclosure, silence and solitude. Her death intensifies the state of abandonment. As Etsuko remembers, her first thought after hearing about the suicide was to wonder how long Keiko’s body lay undiscovered. The enquiry officer later said Keiko had been dead “for several days” (35). The

detail is disturbing. It repeats the earlier pattern of invisibility. Keiko had lived unseen within her own family; and she dies unseen in a strange city.

By comparing Keiko and Mariko, Etsuko tries to manage guilt. Jim's description that Keiko was "a difficult person by nature" gives a convenient reason for the tragedy (65). Etsuko accepts that this kind of explanation made easier to place blame elsewhere, especially on Jiro or on Keiko's temperament. But still, she opposes that convenience. She states "I do not find it as easy as my husband did to put the blame on Nature, or else on Jim" (65). This sentence opens for self-accusation. But she hastily closes that gap by stating, "There is little to be gained in going over them here" (65). This pattern repeatedly occurs: guilt surfaces and narration deviates from it.

This narrative economy prepares the readers for the movement towards Sachiko and Mariko. As Etsuko could not stay with Keiko for long, the memory of Nagasaki gives another route. Sachiko's plans, Mariko's fear, river, cottage, the possibilities of leaving to America- all enable Etsuko to approach maternal failure from a safe distance. Keiko's story is brief, but only that pressure organises later memories. So, the silence surrounding Keiko is not empty. It is active silence. It directs the readers to the displaced story in which Etsuko's guilt can be read more clearly than it can be spoken.

2. Sachiko, Mariko, and the Double Mother-Child Plot

Sachiko and Mariko bear the emotional weight which Etsuko cannot directly hold on Keiko. First, they appear as belonging to the past of Nagasaki, they come as a part of the remembrance of younger pregnant Etsuko. But the narrative is from older Etsuko who lives alone after the death of Keiko. This double time frame changes the actions of each and every remembered details. Mariko belongs to the previous summer, but her fear, loneliness, opposition to migration bear the shadow of sadness which Keiko experience later in England. Sachiko belongs to Etsuko's past. But her decisions express the moral pressures of Etsuko's personal choices. Sachiko talks about America with great faith. To her, departure to America means an escape from insecurity, societal judgement, and the narrow boundaries of life after war. "Mariko will be fine in America" she assures Etsuko and describes America as "a better place for a child to grow up". (28) This statement reflects maternal justification. She explains migration as opportunity, progress, and care. But, the need to assure at this length itself expresses doubt. Etsuko's statement that this move will be "enormous change" gives voice to Sachiko's anxiety which she refuses to acknowledge. (28) This statement has more weight since Etsuko is about to perform a great change later by taking Keiko to England.

Mariko's behaviour challenges Sachiko's belief. Mariko avoids school, wanders alone, speaks suspiciously, and goes to the river over and over. She expresses her fear silently. It is demonstrated through physical withdrawal, flight, silence and attachment to unsafe spaces. Ishiguro gives Mariko only less direct conversations. But he makes her distress visible through movement and refusal. Mariko resists the adult language of adjustment. America means possibility to Sachiko. But for Mariko, it means cutting off from the fragile world she still knows. Sachiko's maternal stature remains unstable throughout the Nagasaki plot. Sometimes, she seems to be very loving and having the determination to arrange a secured future for Mariko. At other times, she is intolerant, careless, and absorbed in Frank's promises. Her question that "Do you imagine for one moment that I'm a good mother to her?" shows her assessment about herself (179). Though Sachiko knows that her plan requires sacrifice from Mariko, she continues to treat departure as necessity. In this sense, her guilt and desire move together. Sachiko may be a true person from Etsuko's Nagasaki past or mere memory changed by later guilt feeling. However, Etsuko's narrative arranges Sachiko's story in such a way that it reflects her own. Sachiko's America anticipates Etsuko's England. Mariko's fear foretells Keiko's withdrawal. Sachiko's method of defending migration resembles the explanation Etsuko may have once given to herself. Both the stories occur separately superficially. But their emotional structure keeps drawing them together.

The scene involving the kittens intensifies the harshness to this structure. Sachiko's

decision to drown the kittens represents many concerns of the novel. It is a disturbing act showing maternal authority, and forced separation. The scene reveals the suppression of attachment and exposes the violence hidden behind promises of a better future. Mariko is shocked on seeing that act. She realises that her mother can destroy what she loves when the departure demands. The box, the river, and the helpless animals all form a brutal image of severance. From this scene, migration loses its optimistic language and becomes an act of cutting away.

Etsuko recollects Mariko's fear in detail. This seems vital because only limited narrative space is given for expressing Keiko's personal suffering. This displaced structure gives space for Etsuko to explain the child's fear. At the same time, it also gives space for avoiding a child's suffering. Keiko's loneliness can be felt through Mariko. Like Mariko, Keiko too is represented through withdrawal rather than confession. Just like Mariko, Keiko opposes the future selected by the mother. And like Mariko, Keiko too becomes the child who cannot translate adult hope into safety. Etsuko's observer state is also noticeable. Since Sachiko is another lady, she could question her decisions. Mariko is somebody else's daughter and because of that she could worry about her future. This distance gives the moral freedom to Etsuko. But the reader realises that every concern regarding Mariko is directed towards Keiko. Etsuko, while doubting Sachiko's plans, questions her decision about migration indirectly. When she notices Mariko's suffering, later indirectly remembers Keiko's silence. Her observations become a form of displaced self-judgement.

This double mother-daughter structure adds a moral depth to the novel. Ishiguro does not directly state that Etsuko failed Keiko in the same way as Sachiko failed Mariko. Instead, he creates a repetitive pattern. One mother dreams of America, and another mother lives in England later. One child is afraid of departing, and another confines into solitude after migration. One story is given voice and another is hidden. Through this procedure, the novel asks how far maternal hope can justify a child's fear, and how a survivor remembers choices that may have caused harm. Sachiko and Mariko are the forms which depict Etsuko's sorrow. Etsuko's guilt about Keiko is expressed without actually mentioning her name. Ishiguro's method relies heavily on this indirect method of storytelling. The mother who narrates another mother's failure gradually brings out the burden of her own.

3. Postwar Nagasaki, Migration, and Domestic Space

The personal grief in the novel is related to a broad historical landscape. Etsuko remembers post war Nagasaki. But still the place does not become a documentary. Ishiguro presents only some random scenes to the readers: apartment blocks, wasteground, riverbanks, ditches, insects, a cottage, and hills seen from a distance. These places represent the pressure of public catastrophe without turning the novel into public testimony. The city which is devastated by bombing has moved into a period of reconstruction, but its damaged past is present in the atmosphere of the remembered landscape. Etsuko's place suggests modernization and uncertainty at once. The buildings, with their Western-style features, belong to a new Japan formed after defeat and encroachment. Yet the area around them remains unsettled. The place gives Etsuko a vantage point from which she can observe Sachiko and Mariko. This distance is significant as Etsuko sees figures, gestures, and movements across open ground. But the full knowledge remains beyond her reach. The landscape trains the reader in partial seeing.

The wasteground is one of the key spaces in the novel because it is in-between settlement and ruins. It separates residential buildings area and Sachiko's cottage. But at the same time, it links them. Though Etsuko's modern apartment and Sachiko's cottage seem different, they both belong to the same damaged geographical landscape. The wasteground has the memories of destruction and stands for suspended transition. It was not fully reconstructed and not fully abandoned either. In this sense, it is like Etsuko's memory: sometimes it is clear, sometimes fragmented and filled with uncertain marks. Sachiko's cottage becomes an image of unstable shelter. That has lived past war and demolition, but it gives only little safety to

Mariko. The cottage is situated near the river; hence danger becomes a part of the child's everyday life. That cottage becomes a place of waiting too - waiting for frank, waiting for departure and waiting for the future outside Japan. Sachiko believes that place to be a temporary place before leaving for America. But for Mariko, it is a fragile world threatened by her mother's plans. Sachiko's statement "Yes, we're leaving Nagasaki, Etsuko" declares movement, but it also signals rupture (114). For Sachiko, departure means possibility. But for Mariko, it means the loss of the few attachments she still possesses.

The river extends this sense of danger. It is linked with Mariko's wandering, fear, and isolation. It becomes disturbing in the 'kittens' episode. After Sachiko disposes of the kittens, Mariko stands near the water and watches the box move away. Etsuko recalls that "Mariko had run several yards down the river's edge" and stood watching "the box float on" without any expressions on her face (118). This scene changes the landscape into emotional evidence. The river takes away what Mariko loves, and her silence records the damage more powerfully than any explanation could.

In the novel, even homes and rooms fail to protect children. Keiko's bedroom in England is a clear example. Etsuko remembers that Keiko had "retreated into her bedroom, shutting us out of her life" during the years before she left the family (35). This room changes our usual idea of home. Keiko lives inside the family house, but she is emotionally far away from everyone. Her room becomes a place of silence, refusal, and despair. For Etsuko, England may have promised a new life. For Keiko, however, it becomes a place of confinement. Her later death in a Manchester room continues the same pattern. The child who first withdraws into a room finally dies alone in another room. Etsuko's English country house also has a sense of emptiness. Niki finds the place quiet and uneasy. Etsuko looks at the landscape with a calm but distant attitude: "The countryside outside was peaceful enough, although the day was dull and overcast" (10). This statement creates a subdued mood. Peace and dullness exist together. The house seems orderly, but it lacks emotional warmth. Niki soon returns to London, while Keiko remains present only as a memory and an absence. Like Sachiko's cottage in Nagasaki, Etsuko's English home cannot keep the family together. Migration intensifies this uneasiness. Sachiko imagines America as a place of opportunity and freedom. Etsuko's later move to England seems similar. But the novel shows migration mainly through the child's suffering rather than through the mother's hopes. For the adult woman, leaving may seem like escape from hardship or the past. For the child, the same move can mean loss, loneliness, and emotional abandonment.

The title image brings the novel's main ideas about place, memory, and guilt together. The phrase "a pale view" suggests something distant, unclear, and difficult to see fully. The "hills" suggest a landscape that can be seen from far away, but the view is still faint. This image suits Etsuko's memories of Nagasaki, Keiko, and her past life. She looks back after many years, but she cannot understand the past completely. Her memories are mixed with grief, silence, and guilt. Ishiguro uses places like the river, the cottage, the wasteground, the bedroom, the country house, and the distant hills to show Etsuko's troubled mind. Together, these places create a quiet map of guilt, where personal sorrow and the effects of war meet softly but painfully.

Conclusion

Etsuko's troubled memory of motherhood gives the novel much of its emotional power. The story begins after Keiko's suicide, but Etsuko's mind moves back to post-war Nagasaki and to the lives of Sachiko and Mariko. This movement helps the reader understand Keiko's pain and Etsuko's guilt. Sachiko's desire to leave Japan for America is similar to Etsuko's later move to England. Mariko's fear and loneliness also remind us of Keiko's unhappy life. Thus, Etsuko expresses her grief indirectly through the story of another mother and child. Ishiguro uses memory, repetition, distance, and place to show trauma. Keiko is rarely spoken about directly, but her absence controls the emotional mood of the novel. The wasteground, the river, the cottage, the closed room, the country house, and the distant hills all become spaces of grief.

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These places connect Etsuko's personal loss with the larger effects of war, migration, and family breakdown. The Sachiko-Mariko story also gives the novel its moral seriousness. Etsuko can judge Sachiko's decisions and Mariko's fear because they seem to belong to another family. Yet these memories slowly lead back to Etsuko and Keiko. Migration offers freedom to the mother, but it brings fear, loneliness, and displacement to the child. The novel ends without clear answers. Even the title suggests this uncertainty. A "pale view" is a view seen from a distance. It is faint, incomplete, and unclear. In the same way, Etsuko's memory keeps grief visible, but never fully resolved.

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