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Shifting Memories: PTSD In Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and *A Pale View of Hills*

Dr. Sidharth Tanmoy Dash
Teacher, Bhubaneswar, India

Abstract- This paper explores the manifestation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). Focusing on the protagonists Christopher Banks and Etsuko, the study examines how historical trauma—specifically the interwar geopolitical strife in Shanghai and the atomic detonation in Nagasaki—fractures individual consciousness. Drawing upon contemporary trauma theory (Caruth, Van der Kolk) and psychological criteria for PTSD, this analysis demonstrates how Ishiguro utilises stylistic techniques such as narrative fragmentation, temporal distortion, and displacement to mirror the internal architecture of trauma. Ultimately, both Stevens (implicitly contrasted through Ishiguro's broader oeuvre of repressed figures) and the primary subjects, Banks and Etsuko, demonstrate how narrative unreliability serves not as a mere literary device, but as a psychological defence mechanism against unassimilated catastrophic memory.

Keywords— Kazuo Ishiguro, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Memory and Trauma, Narrative Unreliability, *When We Were Orphans*, *A Pale View of Hills*, Psychological Dissociation, Trauma Theory, Historical Catastrophe & Literary Psychopathology

I. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's literary canvas is frequently populated by figures trapped in the amber of their own recollections. While much critical attention has been paid to the rigid societal repression of Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro's exploration of psychological trauma reaches its clinical and emotional zenith in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000). In these novels, the protagonists Etsuko and Christopher Banks navigate the aftermaths of monumental historical catastrophes: the atomic annihilation of Nagasaki and the violent, opium-fuelled geopolitical destabilisation of pre-WWII Shanghai.

Rather than depicting trauma through overt sentimentality, Ishiguro constructs narratives that are themselves symptomatic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). By aligning the structural constraints of the first-person novel with the clinical manifestations of trauma—such as avoidance, intrusion, hyper-vigilance, and dissociation—Ishiguro creates a profound aesthetic representation of the fractured mind.

This paper argues that Etsuko and Banks are fundamentally PTSD-affected characters whose unreliable narrations act as psychological fortresses, designed to contain memories too devastating to integrate into their conscious identities.

II. THE DIAGNOSTICS OF LITERARY TRAUMA: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand Banks and Etsuko as PTSD-affected subjects, one must bridge the gap between clinical psychology and trauma theory. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth posits that trauma is not experienced at the moment of its occurrence, but rather returns in a structured delay:

"Trauma is the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4).

This delayed psychic imprint aligns with the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, which includes intrusive flashbacks, persistent avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, negative alterations in cognition, and marked alterations in arousal or reactivity (American Psychiatric Association).

In Ishiguro's fiction, these clinical symptoms manifest as stylistic choices. The text becomes an embodiment of what Bessel van der Kolk describes as "the speechlessness of trauma" (124). When the mind cannot linguistically process a catastrophic event, it stores it as fragmented, non-linear sensory data. Consequently, the narrative structure of both *A Pale View of Hills* and *When We Were Orphans* is inherently non-linear, looping back to specific temporal loci that the characters desperately attempt to rewrite or avoid.

III. CHRISTOPHER BANKS AND THE DETECTIVE'S ILLUSION IN *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS*

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks's entire career as a celebrated English detective is a manifest symptom of childhood trauma. The sudden, mysterious disappearance of his parents in Shanghai during his youth inflicts a psychic wound that halts his emotional maturation.



[Childhood Trauma: Disappearance of Parents]



[Psychological Defense Mechanism: Megalomaniac Delusion]



[Adult Persona: Renowned Detective Saving the World]

Banks exhibits a classic PTSD symptom: a persistent, obsessive fixation on the traumatic event, which he attempts to master through repetition and sublimation. His choice of profession is not an intellectual pursuit but a psychological compulsion. He genuinely believes that by solving high-society crimes in London, he is preparing himself to solve the "ultimate case"—the rescue of his parents. This delusional framework expands to megalomaniac proportions as the narrative progresses, culminating in his belief that his finding them will single-handedly avert the outbreak of World War II.

When Banks returns to a war-torn Shanghai in 1937, his narrative completely unravels, revealing the extent of his psychological fracturing. Walking through the active battle zone of the Chapei district, amidst severed limbs, mortar fire, and dying soldiers, Banks remains absurdly detached. He worries about minor social etiquette and treats an active war zone like a controlled crime scene:

"I had by this time formed a clear plan of action... I would guide the Japanese soldiers to the house, ensure my parents were safely evacuated, and then return to the international settlement" (Ishiguro, *Orphans* 242).

This severe cognitive dissonance is a textbook example of dissociation. Facing the reality of a brutal war zone triggers a regression to his childhood self. The physical violence surrounding him mirrors the internal, unassimilated violence of his past, causing his mind to reject reality in favor of a comforting, controlled delusion.

IV. ETSUKO'S GHOSTLY DOUBLE: DISSOCIATION AND PROJECTION IN A PALE VIEW OF HILLS

If Christopher Banks copes with trauma through a delusion of control, Etsuko, the aging Japanese protagonist of *A Pale View of Hills*, copes through radical narrative displacement. Living in the quiet English countryside following the suicide of her eldest daughter, Keiko, Etsuko looks back at a brief period in post-war Nagasaki.

Throughout the novel, Etsuko avoids discussing her own grief, her first husband, or her culpability in uprooting Keiko from Japan. Instead, she fixates on a strange friend she claims to have known in Nagasaki named Sachiko, who neglected her own troubled daughter, Mariko. It becomes increasingly clear to the reader that Sachiko is not a discrete historical entity, but rather a psychological proxy—a projection designed to insulate Etsuko from her own overwhelming guilt and PTSD. By transferring her own failures as a mother onto "Sachiko," Etsuko can speak about the unspeakable.

The text's linguistic barriers break down entirely in the novel's climax, exposing the structural fault lines of Etsuko's trauma. While discussing an evening by the river in Nagasaki, Etsuko accidentally slips from the third person into the first person:

"Sachiko turned to me and smiled... 'In any case,' she said, 'if things don't work out, we can always come back.'" (Ishiguro, *Pale View* 182).

A few lines later, while remembering a conversation with her young daughter on the bridge, Etsuko states, "*I told her that we could always go back if she was unhappy*" (183). The pronouns ("we" and "I") betray her. The trauma of the atomic bomb, coupled with the subsequent cultural displacement and her daughter's suicide, has shattered her ego to the extent that her memories can only be accessed through a fractured, double persona.

Character	Historical Root of Trauma	Primary Psychological Symptom	Narrative Manifestation
Christopher Banks (When We Were Orphans)	Parental Disappearance / Sino-Japanese War	Dissociation, Fixation, Megalomania	Treating an active war zone as a domestic, solvable detective case.
Etsuko (A Pale View of Hills)	Nagasaki Atomic Bombing / Daughter's Suicide	Radical Displacement, Projection	Creating a fictional/composite alter-ego (Sachiko) to process maternal guilt.



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While Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* suffers from an acute, culturally-enforced emotional repression, his trauma is largely ideological and domestic. In contrast, Banks and Etsuko suffer from catastrophic historical violence that completely shatters their capacity to interpret reality. For Stevens, the defence mechanism is professional duty; for Banks, it is the myth of the detective; for Etsuko, it is the invention of an alter ego. Ishiguro demonstrates an evolving taxonomy of trauma across these texts. The reliable "professionalism" of Stevens morphs into the clinical unreliability of individuals whose histories are punctuated by blood, ash, and sudden loss.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and *A Pale View of Hills* offer profound insights into the architecture of the traumatised psyche. Christopher Banks and Etsuko are not merely eccentric or unreliable narrators; they are deeply wounded individuals navigating the debilitating terrain of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Through their fractured voices, Ishiguro illustrates how trauma resists chronological sequencing, instead demanding a cyclical, defensive retrieval of memory. By analysing these characters through a psychological and clinical lens, readers gain a deeper appreciation of Ishiguro's mastery: he transforms the novel form into a living artefact of human survival, illustrating the extraordinary, fragile measures the mind takes to protect itself from the unbearable weight of history.

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