



THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN *THE BURIED GIANT*

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ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) explores memory as both a personal and collective force that shapes identity, morality, and history. Set in a post-Arthurian Britain afflicted by a mysterious mist that causes widespread amnesia, the novel interrogates whether remembering the past—particularly violent and traumatic events—is necessary for justice and authentic relationships, or whether forgetting can serve as a form of mercy and social stability. This paper argues that Ishiguro presents memory as an ethically ambiguous phenomenon: while memory is essential for personal identity and moral accountability, it also threatens peace by reviving hatred and vengeance. Through the experiences of Axl and Beatrice, the symbolism of the mist and the dragon Querig, and the broader political implications of collective forgetting, *The Buried Giant* challenges readers to reconsider the value of memory in both private life and national history.

INTRODUCTION

Memory is one of Ishiguro's central themes that distinguish him from his contemporaries. In his novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015), Ishiguro tells the story of an older couple, Axl and Beatrice, who live in foggy and gray Britain. Life there affects the memories of their own past life and common historical experiences. They begin to forget it (Borowska-Szerszun, 2016). The author's attention focuses on the journey of an old married couple, who are described as rather weak heroes. The novel is set in a fictional neomedieval world. Here, Ishiguro situates memory within a quasi-mythical landscape, blending fantasy with historical allegory to examine how individuals and societies relate to their past. *The Buried Giant* takes place during a fantasized version of the Briton-Saxon conflict in a land inhabited by dragons and knights. The author raises the problem of the connection between individual and collective



memory, and of the process of remembering and forgetting as a common phenomenon of life and historical development. The novel takes place in a land where Britons and Saxons coexist under an uneasy peace, sustained by a mysterious mist that erases memories of past conflicts. This collective amnesia raises a fundamental question: is peace built on forgetting morally sustainable?

This paper will try to explore how Ishiguro uses memory to examine themes of identity, love, trauma, and political responsibility. By analyzing individual memory loss, collective historical forgetting, and the ethical dilemma between remembering and forgetting, this study demonstrates that *The Buried Giant* presents memory as a burden that humanity must confront.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For analysis trauma **theory** (Caruth), **cultural memory theory** (Jan Assmann), will be used. Depending upon the context **ethical criticism** will also be used to some extent. The paper will touch bit theories of psychology too. Jung's The novel ultimately suggests that while forgetting may offer temporary peace, it forecloses justice and authentic human connection

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is defined by the paradox that it is both unforgettable and inaccessible to conscious memory. Trauma resurfaces indirectly, shaping behavior and affect rather than narrative clarity. In *The Buried Giant*, the mist functions as a metaphor for traumatic repression, suppressing unbearable memories of war while leaving their emotional residue intact.

Jan Assmann argues that cultural memory constructs collective identity by selectively preserving or erasing historical events. In Ishiguro's novel, the erasure of Briton-Saxon violence represents a deliberate political manipulation of cultural memory, raising ethical questions about historical responsibility.

DISCUSSION:

The novel *The Buried Giant* opens in a land where '**a strange mist lay over the country, robbing people of recollection,**' creating a society unable to remember its own violent past. The question of whether forgetting, or rather totally erasing a traumatic past, is beneficial for individuals and communities runs through *The Buried Giant*. Infact this dilemma of remembering and forgetting is central concern of the novel. The novel is set in post-Roman Britain,.. The erasure of people's memories makes possible peaceful coexistence of Britons and Saxons, who only a generation before were locked in a violent conflict. The mist was actually a measure adopted by the victorious King Arthur to prevent future bloodshed. In



this landscape, an elderly Briton couple, Axl and Beatrice, embark on a journey to reunite with their long-lost son and to restore the memories of their life together, which has been wiped out by the mist.

Here the readers can notice both individual and collective memory. Axl and Beatrice's fragmented traumatic memories illustrate it at an individual level. They sense loss but cannot articulate it and this reflects Caruth's notion of trauma as 'unclaimed experience.' Axl remarks, **"It's as if the mist has stolen from us something precious, though we can't say what it is."** Their emotional unease indicates that forgetting does not eliminate pain but merely obscures its source. Beatrice's fear of remembering underscores the protective function of repression. She asks Axl, **"What if the memories we find are ones that will drive us apart?"** This anxiety reflects the trauma and fear of the survivors that memory will reactivate suffering. Ishiguro thus portrays forgetting as psychologically understandable but ethically limited tool

So, it can be said that in *The Buried Giant*, memory loss is not simply a magical device or narrative tool, it also functions as a device to repress their past trauma. In his book, *Introduction to Psychology*, Alicia S. Bustos defines amnesia as "a loss of memory, either total or partial, for the past events in a person's life. Amnesia caused by repression is psychological ... amnesia may also be caused by cerebral shock such as may occur in a head injury" (*Introduction to Psychology*, 162). She adds: "in psychological amnesia, the person suddenly represses almost everything about self ... he uses forgetting as a sort of unconscious defense mechanism against some painful or guiltproducing memory" (*Introduction to Psychology*, 162). Axl's amnesia, along with that of others in the novel, can be interpreted through the lens of psychological repression and dissociation, particularly drawing on the theories of Carl Jung and narrative psychologist Mark Freeman. Jung's concept of the 'shadow' posits that individuals unconsciously repress aspects of themselves—often those associated with guilt, violence, or shame—because acknowledging them threatens the ego's stability. In this light, Axl's journey becomes not only a geographical quest but a metaphorical descent into the recesses of his unconscious, where he must confront the repressed truths of his past. As the narrative progresses, Axl begins to encounter fleeting, unsettling memories that emerge in flashes and half-formed feelings rather than coherent recollections. For example, he is haunted by visions of past violence:

He had a vague recollection of sheep drifting innocently past them, but his memory of the shepherds themselves had become confusingly bound up with that attack on the



villagers by the well. What had brought the pair of them to that village that morning?

Axl remembered the cries of outrage, children crying, the looks of hatred. (*The Buried Giant*, 148).

These fragments of memory reflect symptoms of dissociative amnesia—a psychological defense mechanism where traumatic memories are not processed but instead locked away from conscious awareness. Ishiguro's portrayal aligns with Freeman's theory of narrative disruption, in which trauma is not merely remembered differently but refuses to go along with narrative coherence completely.

Ethical criticism emphasizes responsibility, choice, and moral consequence. As Axl begins to recover memories of his past actions—particularly his emotional withdrawal and complicity in political violence—he confronts guilt and responsibility. He acknowledges, '**I was not always the husband you deserved.**' Memory becomes the basis for ethical self-recognition. Their marriage, sustained initially by forgetting, is tested by truth. Ishiguro suggests that love without memory is emotionally comforting but ethically shallow.

At the societal level, *The Buried Giant* dramatizes what Assmann describes as 'organized forgetting.' The dragon Querig's breath enforces collective amnesia, erasing memories of a genocidal war. Sir Gawain defends this forgetting, warning that once memory returns, '**men will remember the slaughter, and rivers will run red again.**' Same is uttered by Witson :

Men will burn their neighbors' houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance. (*The Buried Giant*, 340)

This moment foregrounds the ethical dilemma at the heart of cultural memory: should societies remember atrocities at the risk of renewed violence, or forget them to preserve peace? Ishiguro refuses to idealize either option, but he exposes the moral cost of forgetting, that is, the denial of justice and historical truth.

Besides, the novel's title symbolizes suppressed historical trauma. The "buried giant" represents collective violence which is so gigantic that cannot remain hidden. The mist helps in collective forgetfulness to maintain the peace. But this peace is unreliable as it is not based upon acceptance and resolution, but it rests on denial; denial to remember. The consequences of ending the amnesia—represented by the dragon's death—are depicted as deeply ambiguous.



While the mist's lifting allows for a clearer understanding of the past, it also reawakens old grievances and sets the stage for renewed violence. The character Gawain reflects this fear when he says:

Right enough, princess, the warrior's words make me tremble... Yet who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now? We must hope God yet finds a way to preserve the bonds between our peoples" (*The Buried Giant*, 323)

Trauma theory suggests that unacknowledged trauma inevitably resurfaces, a concept mirrored when the mist begins to lift and tensions re-emerge. Ishiguro's allegory resonates with post-conflict societies that suppress painful histories in favor of reconciliation. The novel critiques such strategies by suggesting that peace built on erasure is inherently unstable.

Ethical criticism highlights the novel's refusal to provide moral certainty. When Querig is killed, memory returns, but so does the threat of violence. Ishiguro does not celebrate remembrance as redemptive; instead, he presents it as a moral necessity fraught with danger. As Axl reflects, **'Perhaps it was never right that such things be hidden, even if the truth wounds us.'** This statement encapsulates the novel's ethical stance: memory is painful, but forgetting is a form of moral evasion.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of trauma theory, cultural memory studies, and ethical criticism, *The Buried Giant* emerges as a profound meditation on the burden of memory. Ishiguro presents forgetting as psychologically protective and politically expedient, yet ethically inadequate. Memory, though destabilizing, is essential for accountability, justice, and authentic human relationships. It can be said that the novel challenges the assumption that remembering is always preferable to forgetting, suggesting instead that human relationships and societies exist in a fragile balance between truth and oblivion. The novel does not provide a definite answer. By refusing to prefer one upon another, Ishiguro compels readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that memory, like history itself, is both necessary and perilous and morally ambiguous.



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