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Narrating Migration and Trauma  
in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

LJUBICA MATEK  
University of Osijek, Croatia

**Abstract**

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) represents both trauma and migration as continuous processes rather than finite stages in the life of Etsuko, the novel's protagonist. This essay focuses on the ways in which trauma is narrated in the novel, arguing that in representing the protagonist's life, Ishiguro mimics the narrative strategies used by trauma survivors. Written from the point of view of an unreliable narrator, the novel is a discontinuous narrative marked by indeterminacy and ambiguity, which "travels" from Britain to Japan and back, and which evinces biographical gaps and uncertainties that blur the boundary between Etsuko's past and present, making it impossible for her to fully cross that boundary. The parallels between her life and the life of her friend Sachiko as well as her dubious narration, a consequence of creating a false version of traumatic events as a protective measure against their impact, serve to emphasize the incompleteness of both her migration and her story.

**Keywords:** migration, trauma, memory, unreliable narration, Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*

Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), although far from being autobiographical, mirrors somewhat the circumstances of his own life as he was born in Nagasaki and moved to England with his parents at an early age. Although he perceives himself to be a part of the Western literary tradition, he acknowledges that "[his] parents have remained fairly Japanese in the way they go about things, and being brought up in a family you tend to operate the way that family operates" (Mason and Ishiguro 336). This may explain why, despite his own successful cultural migration and adaptation, Ishiguro is aware both of the

difficulties of a life in exile and of the psychological and practical complexity inherent in the act of abandoning one's country and starting a new life elsewhere. My essay discusses how the novel's narrative strategies mimic the actual coping mechanisms of displaced people who, in the process of migration, experience a traumatic event. In that sense, the material, practical dimensions of migration and trauma are less important in Ishiguro's novel than their psychological effects. In fact, the sense of something lost or gone missing, a sense of incompleteness or inconclusiveness, whether psychological, as reflected in the characters' behaviour, or narrative, as reflected in the construction of Ishiguro's stories, echoes temporary or permanent dislocation and marks much of his fiction.

Although migration is generally a demographic, and consequently also a political and economic phenomenon, the novel takes a different approach and focuses on its psychological and emotional aspects. This means that while the protagonist Etsuko's symbolic migration from womanhood to motherhood and her literal migration from a difficult life in post-World War II Nagasaki to a more comfortable life in Britain may have triggered her trauma, the novel does not focus on the factual aspects of the story. Rather, the reader is presented with Etsuko's constant feelings of guilt and inadequacy, as she tries to deal with the ghosts of her past by verbalizing them. The essay contends that Ishiguro's intricate, ambiguous narrative written in the first person demonstrates that it is hardly possible to verbalize trauma in any other way. Etsuko's unreliable narration reflects the complexity and elusiveness of the process of migration which, for her, never seems to be complete, leaving her torn between who she was and who she is now. The narrative strategy has the same equivocal effect upon the reader who remains puzzled, but nevertheless deeply moved, by her story.

Ernest Ravenstein's "Laws of Migration" is one of the earliest attempts at developing migration theory, with a focus on the material (largely economic) causes behind the literal, physical move from one location to another. He suggests that unfavourable circumstances in one place push people out of the country and favourable circumstances pull them into another location, migrants typically going "by preference to one

of the great centres of commerce or industry” (199). However, the economic logic behind this mechanism of migration and a purely demographic point of view on the phenomenon fail to show why migration is, very often, both desired and traumatic, causing the migrant to develop an ambivalent attitude to the initial decision to migrate, which instigates a lifelong process of re-evaluating and questioning that decision. In Ishiguro’s novel, this is illustrated by Ogata-San’s remark: “‘A man might work and make his contribution in one place, but at the end of it all’ — he shrugged and smiled wistfully — ‘at the end of it all, he still wants to go back to the place where he grew up’” (150). In other words, while physical migration may be seen as finite in the sense that it begins at a specific place and point in time and ends at another, the psychological ramifications underlying migration, which include trauma (both as a cause and consequence of migration), memory, and the feelings of guilt, regret and loss, represent a constant, never-ending reminder of the past and render migration crucial both in Etsuko’s life and in the lives of her daughters. Contrary to Ravenstein’s approach, in *A Pale View of Hills* migration is seen as a predominantly psychological process, and a traumatic one at that, whereby the issues of trauma and memory arise as crucial in determining the novel’s narrative strategy.

Admittedly, difficult material conditions in post-war, post-nuclear bomb Nagasaki represent a backdrop for the narrative of *A Pale View of Hills*, and the public trauma of war and its consequences are the context in which Etsuko’s private struggles ensue. However, it is the interior context of his character’s world that Ishiguro is interested in, not the external circumstances. In fact, he uses this setting merely to outline the frustrations of his characters, not because he wants to be political. He even confirms as much in a conversation with Suanne Kelman where he suggests that he dispenses with the need for historical or factual accuracy since he is far more interested in the psychological impact of trauma, which seems to be far more devastating for an individual, than physical or material consequences: “I feel I have to know the fictional landscape in which my novel takes place very well. That’s the landscape I have to research, not any actual chunk of history or real country” (45).<sup>1</sup> In other words, he aims to be a writer of the mind and soul, rather than a historical

realist, which enables him to dispense with hard facts and delve into the unfathomable abysses of the psyche.

Accordingly, he creates an unreliable narrator whose story raises, rather than answers, many questions about how people remember their (traumatic) past, and how they represent and perceive themselves by means of (selected) memories. The past is represented as a “pale view” of what once was, and Etsuko’s narration only underlines the ontological and epistemological ambiguity of her own identity. This points to the conclusion that the novel is much more interested in the interior circumstances of the characters’ lives, how and what they remember, than in realistic depictions of external context. More importantly, it seems that for Etsuko the issues of migration, motherhood (pregnancy), and marriage are all intertwined in a single complex traumatic experience. She cannot separate one from the other, although each can be seen as a trauma of a different kind, but views them as an integral traumatic experience that affected her life. In order to suggest this, Ishiguro opts for unreliable narration which challenges the reader rhetorically, cognitively, and emotionally, while, at the same time, providing a plausible representation of the workings of Etsuko’s mind.

The complexity of Etsuko’s trauma and the ambiguity in articulating it enable multiple interpretations of what may have brought it about. For Justine Baillie and Sean Matthews, the issue of (unwanted) motherhood seems to unlock the meaning of the novel. They suggest that “[t]he contradictions in Etsuko’s narrative are most apparent in her ambivalence toward motherhood,” or rather her “inability directly to acknowledge negative feelings about pregnancy and motherhood” (49). This is contrasted with her daughter Niki’s suggestion that women who believe they have no other option but to become mothers are “miserable” or “brainwashed” (Ishiguro 90, 180). Cynthia F. Wong, on the other hand, identifies Etsuko’s inability to deal with her past as crucial (127-145), whereas Ken Eckert highlights cultural factors of evasion and repression in post-war Japan as the key cause of Etsuko’s unreliable narration (77-92). The multiple layers arising from Ishiguro’s ambiguous narrative allow for all of these interpretations to hold true if motherhood, the past, and the circumstances in post-war Japan are seen and acknowledged as

being traumatic, as this study posits. Thus, whatever the cause(s) of her trauma, the vagueness with which the events of Etsuko's past are represented is consistent with the nature of trauma narratives. Specifically, the evasion of a coherent truth about her first marriage, about the circumstances that may have contributed to Keiko's depression and suicide, and particularly about the identity of Sachiko and Mariko, friends whose story she retells to her daughter Niki, points to the conclusion that Etsuko is deeply insecure about the decisions she has made in her private life.

In his study, "Traumatic Memory and Narrative Isolation in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*," Michael Molino recognizes the limitations of understanding trauma since trauma creates blind spots in the memory which preclude any contextualization (322-334). Yet, this kind of unavoidable deception (provoked by the traumatic event) does not prevent a verbalization of trauma, even if this means a deeply subjective, and therefore questionable, account of the circumstances regarding the traumatic event. According to Wayne Booth, contextualization – taken to mean an "objective" truth – can often, especially in great authors, be dispensed with. Thus, in his discussion of unreliable narration in Henry James, he points to another classic, Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, suggesting that the personal, subjective, untrustworthy narration colours the story in a specific way without making it irrelevant for the reader:

Is *The Great Gatsby* the same novel it would have been if, in place of the deeply involved Nick, it were narrated by an omniscient narrator? As it stands it can be described as either Nick's experience of Gatsby or as Gatsby's life seen by Nick. The seamless web of observation and experience creates a unity which we accept—but which we can be very sure must have developed in a process similar to that of James's exploration into possible observers. ... The convincing texture of the whole, the impression of life as experienced by an observer, is in itself surely what the true artist seeks. (*The Rhetoric* 346)

Booth defines the unreliable narrator as one who does not speak for or act in accordance with the norms of the work (*The Rhetoric* 158), or, more specifically, unreliable narration is a consequence "of what James calls

*inconscience*; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him" (159). In further discussion, Booth claims that narration is an art (164) and that all the choices the novelist makes are of degree, not of kind.<sup>2</sup> *A Pale View of Hills* vividly exemplifies these issues in that its narrator's *inconscience* remains an enigma to the reader until the end and reminds one of the complexities involved in both self-representation and self-perception, particularly when discussing personal trauma. The factual imperfection of unreliable narration mimics life more accurately and helps the reader become more emotionally immersed in the story. In his "Distance and Point of View" essay, Booth contends that point of view is a technical matter by which the artist either discovers his meaning or works his will upon his audience, and, as such, it can be judged only in the light of the meanings or effects it is designed to serve (184).

Subsequent narratological attempts at defining and better understanding the phenomenon of (un)reliability extend and refine Booth's initial views. For example, James Phelan distinguishes between six types of unreliability, which essentially answer the above mentioned questions asked by Booth, and which try to determine the degree to which a narrator is wrong or insufficient in his/her narration; in other words, whether the narration is affected by a lack in the narrator's reporting, interpreting (reading) and evaluating (regarding) or by the fact that the narrator reports, interprets (reads), and evaluates in a mistaken fashion (34–37, 49–53).<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Ishiguro's own claim that "the whole narrative strategy of the book was about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories" (Mason and Ishiguro 337) testifies to the fact that the novel's narrator frequently underreports and sometimes misevaluates events from her past that are too painful to deal with. Significantly, Tamar Yacobi's research confirms that unreliability is rhetorical and arises from a definitive "communicative intent on the author's part" (122). The unreliable narrator may be unself-conscious, that is an "unsuspecting monologist," or self-conscious, which is harder to detect. Thus, the implied reader recognizes deception through certain textual features encoded by the implied author, which means that unreliability is not to be found "within the reader's

organizing activity” but in the narrator and the author, that is, unreliability resides within the implied author’s norms or “overall design” (124-125).

*A Pale View of Hills* plausibly represents a protagonist with an “inability to develop a coherent sense of identity” (Rogers 7) due to a traumatic experience (or several such experiences). This is symbolized in the novel by the possibility that Etsuko and Sachiko are two people, or, on the contrary, that they are, in fact, one. Thus, while feeling the urge to repress her trauma and the need to work through it, Etsuko claims to remember a story about a female friend she knew years ago in Nagasaki, a woman named Sachiko, and begins to tell what she suggests is Sachiko’s story, rather than her own:

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, and because it was during that visit I remembered Sachiko again after all this time. I never knew Sachiko well. In fact, our friendship was no more than a matter of some several weeks one summer many years ago. (Ishiguro 11)

The subsequent confluence of her memories with someone else’s story illustrates the coping strategy of creating an alternative scenario about a traumatic event. While looking for ways to simultaneously express the possible origins of trauma and avoid talking about it, the story of Sachiko emerges as an attempt to deal with memories which Etsuko cannot accept as her own. This disrupts the realist narrative structure and prevents the construction of a definitive version of experience, both for the reader and the protagonist. Nevertheless, the remembering and retelling process, however doubtful in its truthfulness, serves the therapeutic purpose of letting go of at least a part of the protagonist’s psychological burden, echoing in its structure and form the recollections and testimonies of trauma victims.

Etsuko’s narrative evinces ellipses and inconsistencies that point to her simultaneous attempts to tell the truth in order to come to terms with it and to hide it, as it is still too painful to cope with it. By employing allusions, ellipses and unfinished sentences, such as “I assure you, I was merely...” (Ishiguro 19) or “But I do wish you well. And I assure you I ...” (45), the story is rendered ambiguous and prone to various readings.

Moreover, the insistence on “assuring” the interlocutor, while never finishing the sentence, adds to the hesitancy of what she is saying. Additionally, Ishiguro resorts to paralipsis, a lateral ellipsis which, according to Genette (52), implies sidestepping or omitting a constituent element of a situation, (an instance of underreporting, according to Phelan). Thus, while claiming to remember Sachiko, Etsuko is often evasive about facts related to their friendship making it ultimately obvious that she carefully sifts the information she gives, colouring it ever more apparently with repressed feelings of guilt about something as yet unarticulated. Consequently, although there is a sense of emotional directness, what draws the reader into her story is, in fact, a constant sense of mystery, of something known but never spoken out loud. This sense of mysteriousness, deriving from a lack of coherent knowledge is one of the chief features of both trauma and its attempted verbalization.

As a scholarly concept, trauma became relevant in the late nineteenth century (Stevens 1), and because of its inherent complexity it has been studied by various disciplines from various angles. According to Maurice Stevens,

The traumatic event possesses specificity, there is an agent and victim of injury, a place and time of occurrence, and a blooming narrative of accountability or innocence. On the other hand, its unknowability, that is, the degree to which trauma exceeds signification or eludes description, makes it particularly susceptible to becoming something else as well. The event is also enigmatic. (2)

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud contends that there is a compulsion in the mind of the traumatized person to repeat the traumatic experience (24), often with different people, in different circumstances or through retelling the trauma, in order to make meaning or deal with the consequences of the traumatic event, with the intent, “to restore an earlier state of things” (75). Often, however, the traumatic event is repressed and the impulse to repeat is a consequence of the need to know what, for some reason, is not known. In her study of trauma, titled *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth asserts that, “it is always 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. This truth, in its delayed



appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (4). Moreover, according to neurobiological research results, traumatic memories are stored differently from ordinary memories and, consequently, they are also retrieved in a way that is not verbal (linguistic) in the usual sense of the word, but rather reoccur in the form of unusual feelings, bodily sensations, flashbacks and nightmares (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172).

It is precisely from this complex nature of trauma, which is a psychological, physical, and verbal phenomenon, that Ishiguro draws his inspiration and the basis not only for the story but also for the narrative technique that he uses in order to relate a part of Etsuko’s history which is seen as traumatic, “both specific and enigmatic, both discursive and material” (Stevens 2). Literature, so suggests Anne Whitehead, is able to successfully represent trauma through its motifs, tropes and its very structure, serving as a witness to trauma (83-85). In line with this, Ishiguro’s novel uses unreliable narration in order to verbally represent the protagonist’s trauma caused by the act of her migration and the circumstances surrounding and following it. In fact, Etsuko’s narrative represents an “enigmatic recall, tantalizingly hamstrung by gaps and internal inconsistencies” (Mason and Ishiguro 335) as it seems that the only way to deal with unpleasant memories is to “use the language of self-deception and self-protection” (Mason and Ishiguro 337). Etsuko’s struggle with her family’s history and her memories through telling other people’s stories illustrates James Baldwin’s assertion that “no one wishes to be plunged, head down, into the torrent of what he does not remember and does not wish to remember” (xiii). The language of trauma seems to be evasive and enigmatic, rather than revealing. Therefore, Ishiguro’s “main strategy was to leave a big gap” (Mason and Ishiguro 337) in the narrator’s story in order to point to the fact that trauma is a “speechless terror” experienced on a somatic level rather than a linguistic one (van der Kolk and van der Hart 172).

Therefore, it is not surprising that Etsuko’s story is weaved by means of fragile threads of memory which result in a captivating but elusive narrative about her life, told by a narrator who is “mistaken”

(Booth, *The Rhetoric* 159) not only because she believes herself to be a caring, selfless mother, but also because she *needs* to believe herself to be one. However, throughout the story the reader is able to conclude that she is much more troubled by and concerned with other things than actual mothering. The novel opens with a description of how she and her second, British, husband decide to name their daughter:

Niki, the name we finally gave my younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I—perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past—insisted on an English one. (9)

Their negotiation about the name suggests that Etsuko's life in Britain is continuously haunted by the ghosts of her past and a constant struggle to shed her Japanese identity; the latter is much more important to her than the act of naming her soon-to-be-born child. As opposed to her husband, who acknowledges Etsuko's cultural heritage, she is explicit about her troublesome relationship to her past and her desire to forget her Japanese life. The painful irony of the situation arises from the fact that Niki is her second child, and that her first daughter, Keiko, who was born and raised in Japan, lives with them serving both as a constant reminder of the very past Etsuko is trying to forget and a witness to her mother's denial of their Japanese identity. Such a desperate attempt to re-create herself suggests that some kind of traumatic event must have affected Etsuko. Moreover, her trauma is extended to Keiko who, as the reader can deduce from scattered pieces of textual evidence, suspects that she is a burden to her mother and feels both neglected and invisible as well as forcefully uprooted from her Japanese heritage and homeland. This may be the reason (or one of the reasons) for Keiko's depression and suicide, which, in turn, contributes to Etsuko's constant feeling of guilt and evasiveness about the past.

The novel's anachrony makes the story puzzling for the reader not only because Etsuko retells her memories in a random manner, but also because certain inconsistencies make one question the accuracy of her recollections. For example, the reader is introduced to the uncanny

presence of Etsuko's dead elder daughter, Keiko, early on in the novel, which is not surprising, as the suicide of one's child is deeply traumatic. The reader expects the mother to think and talk about it. However, though Etsuko acknowledges the importance of the event, she tries to dismiss it by suggesting that she and her family hardly ever mentioned it: "For although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko's death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked" (10). According to Natasha Rogers, this type of ambiguity and the tension between what is said and what is left unsaid are consistent with the nature of trauma narratives. In her study of trauma and narrative, Rogers suggests "that narrative is an essential tool in representations of trauma, but that it paradoxically can unintentionally or intentionally create a compromised version of the traumatic events" (6). In line with Etsuko's statement that Keiko's death colours their everyday life although they hardly ever mention it, the novel represents her death as the key traumatic event, even though the suicide occurred outside the novel's narrative structure. However, the reader is never given a clear account of events and although Etsuko's reminiscence of her past serves as a therapeutic re-working of the trauma, the sense of uncanny mystery remains pervasive until the novel's end, requiring the reader to try and construct a meaningful story from the puzzling pieces. The resulting account is a story which can never be fully verified by the facts presented in the novel.

In order to represent trauma effectively, Ishiguro purposefully omits facts, challenging in this way the conventional narrative structure. Whereas an omniscient narrator who authoritatively presents the story by means of a chronological plot may create a sense of completeness, Etsuko's first-person perspective projects a sense of incompleteness. Rogers explains that experimental strategies, such as indeterminacy, are used to develop the narrative form which strives to bear witness to the events. It is a form which helps the sufferers to work through their trauma although it has limitations and never actually creates the illusion that it is a definitive version (6). The relative irrelevance of establishing hard facts in trauma narratives is confirmed by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart who claim that imagining alternative scenarios enables the traumatised person to soften the unmitigated horror of the traumatic

experience, distorting inevitably the truth of it, but making it easier to deal with (178-179).

Because Ishiguro builds the story around Etsuko's untrustworthy memory which creates a framework for the story, the full extent of Etsuko's trauma remains ambiguous until the end. The relative extraneousness of Japan's historical situation is reflected in Ishiguro's lack of interest in the facts of Etsuko's biography and, conversely, in his focus on how she (selectively) remembers her life in order to hide from the truth. In fact, her tiptoeing around various traumatic events serves as a means of reshaping the past in order to be able to live with her decisions. The memories of Etsuko's Japanese life seem to be so painful to her, as well as riddled with doubt and guilt, that she is unable to talk about them openly. In fact, her interpretation of her younger daughter Niki's arrival as a "mission ... 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 I was not responsible for Keiko's death" (10) alerts the reader to a clear possibility that Etsuko might very well be somehow responsible for her daughter's suicide, even though she keeps dismissing the subject by seemingly thinking and talking about other events. Etsuko uses "the language of self-deception and self-protection" (Mason and Ishiguro 337) in order to keep her dignity and sanity in the face of such a horrific tragedy. In this way, the readers are confronted with a story that simultaneously does not want to be told and aches to be told. Such hesitation often occurs with trauma survivors in their therapy sessions which resemble an instance of (both consecutive and continuous) storytelling. The similar nature of literature and therapy arises from the fact that "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" (Caruth 3).

This is particularly the case when it comes to her first pregnancy which overlaps with the time of her brief friendship with Sachiko and the sacrifices that Sachiko claims to have made for Mariko, one of them being their move from Tokyo to her uncle's house: "I did, for Mariko's sake. I came all this way to stay at my uncle's house, because I thought it would be best for my daughter" (45). The trauma of failed motherhood is also echoed in Sachiko's claim that America is a place where "so many things

are possible" (46), which parallels Etsuko's departure to Britain, a country that represented the fulfilment of her dreams, but not her daughter's. The readers do not get to learn the story from Keiko's perspective, but the story they are able to construct from Etsuko's memories suggests that Keiko was not keen on leaving Japan. This may have contributed to her long-term unhappiness and eventual suicide, as did the fact that Etsuko ignored her reluctance to leave.

Furthermore, the story becomes more and more uncanny, as it seems to take some kind of shape, but never a fully conclusive one. The reader may seem to have grasped the truth at one moment, only to be dissuaded at another, so one is forced to fill in the gaps on one's own, comparing and contrasting Etsuko's and Sachiko's life until the two are so blurred that one cannot discern whether these two really were two women, or just one. In Etsuko's narrative, Sachiko is well-educated and far more concerned with her own happiness than her daughter's. In addition, Sachiko wishes to go to America and live there, regardless of the fact that her daughter Mariko wishes to stay at home. Etsuko, however, is pregnant with her first child, filled with apprehension about motherhood and her own adequacy for the role of a mother, and never expresses the desire to leave Japan. Moreover, despite having doubts about herself as a mother-to-be, in her retelling of events, she seems to voice a more genuine concern for Mariko than Mariko's own mother, Sachiko. Yet, her involvement in Mariko's well-being sounds both desperate and unlikely, almost as if she were trying to make herself believe her own story.

However, one of the clearest marks of incongruity between Etsuko's rendering of events and the factual situation that the reader can construct is the discrepancy between Etsuko's description of herself as a timid, traditional Japanese woman, and her unorthodox behaviour which includes leaving her first husband (who was Japanese), moving to Britain with their daughter Keiko, and marrying a British man. It cannot go unnoticed that her life in Britain as well as her subsequent relationship to Keiko seem to echo much more clearly the supposed relationship between Sachiko and her daughter Mariko, and that her new marriage resembles Sachiko's relationship with an American soldier named Frank. But, as was pointed out previously, Ishiguro is not interested in getting to the bottom

of things in a factual sense. Instead, he focuses on the “emotional upheaval” (Mason and Ishiguro 338) that caused Etsuko’s migration, and that continues to plague her throughout her life in the form of the guilt that, “out of her own emotional longings for a different sort of life, she sacrificed her first daughter’s happiness” (Mason and Ishiguro 338). This is one of the few things she is able to articulate as she ponders the past with Niki: “‘Your father was rather idealistic at times,’ I said. ‘In those days, you see, he really believed we could give her a happy life over here.’ ... ‘But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn’t be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same’” (Ishiguro 175-176). Her feelings of guilt make it clear that Etsuko was much more similar to Sachiko than she wanted to admit. But, whether Etsuko and Sachiko are one and the same person or not, it is clear that their stories and lives are marked by migration and a constant yearning for a different kind of life. Sachiko’s identity and fate remain a mystery, but Etsuko does move to Britain, and although her life there is more comfortable than the one she had in Japan, this never seems to appease her doubts about her decision to leave Japan.

The end of the novel seems to provide a possible substantiation of the merging of Etsuko’s and Sachiko’s identities. This occurs when Etsuko gives her daughter Niki a calendar picture of the Nagasaki harbour featuring the Inasa hills in the background. Etsuko had previously remembered going on a daytrip to Inasa with Sachiko and her daughter Mariko, but now, as she gives Niki the picture, she suggests that Keiko was there with her, not Mariko:

“That calendar I gave you this morning,” I said. “That’s a view of the harbour in Nagasaki. This morning I was remembering the time we went there once, on a day-trip. Those hills over the harbour are very beautiful. ... Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars.’ I gave a laugh and turned to Niki. “No, there was nothing special about it. It’s just a happy memory, that’s all.” (103)

This is in clear contradiction to what the reader had found out earlier, as Etsuko was supposed to be pregnant that summer, and Keiko had not yet been born. But rather than the final piece of the puzzle which is Etsuko’s life story, this is one of many and it does not serve to fully convince the

reader of anything, but rather to make one wonder more. What it does is illustrate Ishiguro's claim that:

[M]emory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception. And so quite often, we have situations where the license of the person to keep inventing versions of what happened in the past is rapidly beginning to run out. The results of one's life, the accountability of one's life is beginning to catch up. (Swift and Ishiguro 23)

Thus, it remains unclear whether Etsuko tries to rearrange her own memories in order to save some dignity, or whether the memories have been fictionalized unconsciously, as most memories are. There are two possibilities: that she wishes she had at least one happy memory with her daughter, which is why she appropriates Mariko as her daughter in her retelling of events, or that Mariko was indeed Keiko and the conflict which was caused by the mother's desire to leave Japan was in fact between Etsuko and Keiko. Authorial intent, in Ishiguro's own words, was not to reveal the "truth" but to question it; specifically, the "unresolved points of fact in the narrative, open to varying constructions by the reader" testify that Ishiguro is "not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional aspect, the actual positions the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions" (Mason and Ishiguro 342). It is difficult to decide whether Etsuko's unreliable narration is an instance of being mistaken or of withholding information, although it is likely, as Phelan contends, that various types of unreliability interact and merge (34–37; 49–53) in Etsuko's narrative. The novel's title gives weight to the daytrip suggesting that the truth about her past could be revealed by it, provided that the reader found out which version of the daytrip was the accurate one. But, significantly, the view of the hills is "pale," as are memories, and the facts of the daytrip as well as of Etsuko's life will remain "pale," too, due to Etsuko's conflicting feelings and memories. Typically for trauma narratives, the false or misremembered versions of the traumatic experiences serve to protect the characters from the effects of trauma which they cannot confront (Rogers 7), functioning thus as a self-preservation mechanism.

In conclusion, in *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro employs the narrative strategy of unreliable narration constructed by means of ellipses and ambiguity in order to express the unstable nature of memories and the enigmatic yet powerful impact of trauma on the individual. Consistent with the ways in which trauma is typically narrated and remembered, the novel rejects a straightforward, linear plot and uses fragments and allusions which need to be connected into a certain kind of structured narrative by the reader. Ishiguro purposely chooses to leave certain issues unresolved so that the novel (and Etsuko's story) remains open to various interpretations and the ambiguity is such that the reader continues to wonder about the exact nature of Etsuko's trauma well after the story has ended. The traumatized protagonist-narrator either underreports or misreports traumatic events in order to protect herself from them. Thus, despite being voluntary, her migration remains marked by trauma. Ishiguro's narrative technique plausibly represents the haunting feeling of Etsuko's being torn between her life in Japan and her life in Britain, both marked by trauma. The feeling of guilt makes it impossible for her to fully cross the boundary between Japan and England, turning thus the traumatic experience of migration into a complex, ongoing, life-long process rather than a single event. Consequently, the story's narrative remains open to a constant process of re-evaluation and reinterpretation in the attempt to understand the depth of the protagonist's trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> In his interview with Mason, Ishiguro has made the same claim: "I am not essentially concerned with a realist purpose in writing. I just invent a Japan which serves my needs. And I put that Japan together out of little scraps, out of memories, out of speculation, out of imagination. ... As usual, I'm not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional aspect, the actual positions the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions. ... I'm inviting Western readers to look at this not as a Japanese phenomenon but as a human phenomenon. ... breaking the prejudice of Japanese people, suggesting that migration is difficult for anyone. ... I'm very keen that whenever I portray books that are set in Japan, even if it's not very accurately Japan, that people are seen to be just people" (341-343).



<sup>2</sup> “To decide that your narrator shall not be omniscient decides practically nothing. The hard question is: Just how inconscient shall he be? Again, to decide on first-person narration settles only a part of one’s problem, perhaps the easiest part. What kind of first person? How fully characterized? How much aware of himself as narrator? How reliable? How much confined to realistic inference; how far privileged to go beyond realism? At what points shall he speak truth and at what points utter no judgment or even utter falsehood?” (Booth, *The Rhetoric* 165)

<sup>3</sup> In *Living to Tell About It* (2005), Phelan identifies six types of unreliability divided into two categories: the first one comprises reports that are wrong – misreporting, misinterpreting (misreading) and misevaluating (misregarding), and the second one reports that are insufficient – underreporting, underinterpreting (underreading), and underevaluating (underregarding). According to Phelan, one type of unreliability often interacts with other types, as insufficient knowledge or mistaken values can both contribute to misreporting, and this, in turn, can be seen as misinterpreting.

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