

A Study of Trauma Writing in *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro, as an important immigrant writer in contemporary British literature and the laureate of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, has drawn extensive academic attention since the publication of *The Buried Giant*. Set in England after the era of King Arthur, the novel profoundly explores the relationship between memory, trauma, and historical writing through the fantastical device of “the mist of forgetting”. However, currently domestic and international scholarship on trauma writing in *The Buried Giant* remains relatively weak. Most studies focus on individual trauma and are largely limited to classical trauma theories, such as those of Freud and Herman.

This study makes its contribution in two respects: First, it innovatively introduces postcolonial trauma theory, broadening the research horizon on *The Buried Giant* and providing a new theoretical entry point for the study of Ishiguro’s trauma writing. Second, it systematically analyzes the trauma presentation in the novel from three dimensions—individual trauma, collective trauma, and postcolonial trauma. This study contributes to scholarship on trauma narratives by enriching academic research on trauma narratives in Ishiguro’s works, while also providing literary references for understanding issues of ethnic and national conflict and historical memory in contemporary society.

Keywords: Trauma; Kazuo Ishiguro; *The Buried Giant*; Individual trauma; Postcolonial trauma; Collective trauma;

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1. Study Background

1.1. Concept of Trauma

Trauma studies have undergone a long theoretical evolution, expanding from the concept of physical injury to encompass psychological, cultural, and literary domains. The term “trauma” originates from the Greek word for physical wound or bodily injury^[1]. Freud, the founding figure of modern psychoanalysis and an Austrian scholar, was the first to introduce trauma into the field of psychology, distinguishing between

traumatic events and traumatic experiences, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals enter into traumatic experiences ^[2].

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially included Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a landmark event that signified the emergence of trauma from the confines of psychology into the broader humanities, including literature, history, and sociology ^[1].

Neil Smelser points out that “a cultural trauma refers to an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole” ^[3].

In addition, Kai Erikson points out that “By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma’. But it is a form of shock all the same” ^[4].

Judith Herman, in her work *Trauma and Recovery*, both inherits and advances Freud’s theoretical framework, contributing not only to the further development of psychology but also exerting significant influence on literature, history, sociology, and other humanities disciplines ^[5]. Cathy Caruth of the Yale School, building upon Freud’s theory, connects trauma theory with literature, history, and culture, and this integration marks the formal transition of trauma concept from the psychological domain to the literary field, endowing literature with the capacity to express and communicate trauma ^[2]. Since then, trauma studies in literary criticism have flourished, giving rise to two major paradigms: the psychoanalytic paradigm represented by Freud and Lacan, and the postcolonial trauma paradigm. Scholarly advances have been made in the application of trauma theory, the establishment of trauma genres, the expansion of trauma theory in postcolonial literature, and the cultural significance of literature ^[2]. Gao Cai’e, for instance, points out that in the postcolonial context, both the colonizers and the colonized are often bearers of trauma, and that the emergence of trauma is closely related to a nation’s institutional arrangements and historical experiences ^[6].

1.2. Kazuo Ishiguro

Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954, is a Japanese-British novelist and a prominent immigrant writer in contemporary British literature. Alongside Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, he is known as one of the “three great immigrant writers of Britain”. Ishiguro began publishing novels in 1983. To date, he has published eight novels. In 2017, Ishiguro was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The official citation from the Swedish Academy read: “who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world”.

1.3. *The Buried Giant*

The Buried Giant is the seventh novel by Japanese-British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, published in 2015. The novel was longlisted for the 2016 Booker Prize and continues Ishiguro’s enduring exploration of memory, temporality, and trauma, though it relocates the narrative to a remote mythological past.

The story is set in sixth-century England, in the period following the fall of the Arthurian age. By this time, Roman forces had long withdrawn from Britain, and the protracted conflicts between the native Britons and the Saxon invaders had only recently subsided, leaving the two peoples to coexist in a fragile and uneasy peace. Yet a mysterious “mist of forgetting” blankets the land, gradually eroding the inhabitants’ memories—grudges and affections, old wounds, even the faces of loved ones slowly dissolve into the fog.

2. Literature Review

Since Ishiguro published his first work in 1982, international scholars have conducted in-depth explorations of his work from perspectives such as feminism, identity, historicism, narratology, and postcolonialism^[7].

Shaffer, in his 1998 monograph *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*—the first dedicated study of the author, points out that “Indeed, all of Ishiguro’s protagonists are haunted by something ‘unresolved somewhere deep down’; all of them use their self-narratives as a ‘kind of consolation or therapy’”^[8]. Cynthia F. Wong, in *Kazuo Ishiguro*, emphasized that by reflecting upon the life events belonging to other individuals, Ishiguro’s protagonists start to interpret what their own life experiences signify. Such a narrative not only echoes their hurtful personal histories but also displaces these painful memories within the current textual narrative^[9].

Evidently, international scholarship has long paid attention to the theme of trauma in Ishiguro’s works. After the publication of *The Buried Giant*, some scholars have conducted research on it, with themes including cultural memory, trauma writing, and identity. For example, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska employed trauma narrative theory and its concept of latency, combined with psychoanalytic theory, to deeply analyze the narrative structure and conceptual framework in *The Buried Giant*^[10]. In contrast, Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun approached the novel from the perspectives of literary memory and cultural memory, viewing *The Buried Giant* as a field of “literary memory” and a medium of “cultural memory”^[11].

3. Analysis of Trauma Manifestations

3.1. Individual Trauma

Kai Erikson holds that individual trauma refers to a blow inflicted upon an individual’s psyche^[12]. Sigmund Freud defines “trauma” as a high-intensity stimulus received by an individual within a short period of time, rendering the individual psychologically unable to adapt and incapable of deploying adequate mental capacities^[13].

It follows that individual trauma is essentially damage sustained at an individual psychological level. Common external manifestations of psychological trauma include symptoms such as dreams and avoidance^[14]. All these symptoms are vividly portrayed in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Buried Giant*.

First, experiential avoidance. Experiential avoidance denotes a set of behavioural strategies adopted by individuals to evade distressing physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and behavioural inclinations (for instance, deliberately avoiding or forgetting unpleasant events and repressing inner negative feelings), and its purpose is to alter the intrusive pattern and frequency of adverse events and associated situations^[15]. The whole land of Britain in the novel is shrouded in the “mist of forgetting” cast by the she-dragon Querig. More than merely a fantasy plot device, the mist stands for a defensive-avoidance mechanism generated by both collective and individual trauma: people voluntarily steer clear of talking about past violence and suffering.

“For in this community, the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past—even the recent one”^[16].

Rather than being forbidden from recollection by external force, the villagers spontaneously avoid traumatic memories on a psychological level.

Second, flashbacks, or the involuntary intrusion of trauma. Involuntary intrusion compels people to relive traumatic events repeatedly and involuntarily without sufficient temporal and contextual cues,

accompanied by intense distressing emotions ^[17]. Axl repeatedly suffers fragmentary memory flashbacks, with uncontrolled fragments concerning his son and the war surfacing mostly at the opening of the novel.

“Possibly the child had just been speaking to him, saying something amusing, and they were both of them laughing. But now, as earlier outside, nothing would quite settle in his mind, and the more he concentrated, the fainter the fragments seemed to grow. Perhaps these were just an elderly fool’s imaginings” ^[16].

When Axl attempts to recall past events consciously, memory fragments slip out of his grasp and vanish fleetingly. This represents fragmentary intrusive flashbacks brought about by trauma: traumatic memories cannot be narrated coherently. They only emerge briefly as disjointed images and dissipate again the moment he focuses his attention.

Trauma can also recur in the form of dreams. Questions remain concerning whether nightmares function to regulate emotions, safeguard sleep and help people process traumatic experiences, and whether their frequency can, to some extent, reflect the dreamer’s mental-health status and the severity of trauma endured ^[18]. Sir Gawain repeatedly dreams of scenes of battlefield slaughter, which constitutes the re-experiencing of trauma during sleep. Having witnessed the massacre of Saxon civilians in King Arthur’s era, Sir Gawain keeps justifying himself and suppressing his sense of guilt in waking life. Nevertheless, trauma cannot be sealed off completely. It recurs in the form of nightmares featuring bloodshed. Even though he deliberately represses it while awake, trauma invades his mental world in sleep, which is a typical manifestation of traumatic nightmares.

“Once, years ago, in a dream, I watched myself killing the enemy. It was in my sleep and long ago. The enemy, in their hundreds, perhaps as many as this. I fought and I fought. Just a foolish dream, but still I recall it” ^[16].

3.2. Collective Trauma

In the novel, the massacre perpetrated in the age of King Arthur inflicts upon the British-Saxon society precisely the collective trauma as defined by Erikson: a slow erosion of the basic tissues of social life. The breakdown of collective bonds manifests first in the rupture of intergenerational relations. The mist not only erases adults’ memories of the massacre but also severs the chain of historical transmission, leaving younger generations such as Edwin with no comprehension of their national history whatsoever. He has no grasp of what it means to be a Saxon. The erosion of collective belonging finds deeper expression in the blurring of ethnic identity. During the age of the mist, Britons and Saxons intermingled, intermarried, and shared the identity of “Englishman”. What appears to be a harmonious utopia is in truth a “false community”: a fragile coexistence built upon enforced forgetting rather than genuine reconciliation. The villagers do not exercise active forgiveness; instead, they lose the capacity for hatred. This “insidious shock” proves more destructive than the sudden onset of individual trauma, for it deprives the community of the possibility of confronting its history and rebuilding its identity.

3.3. Postcolonial Trauma

What distinguishes postcolonial theory from early colonialist theory and neocolonial theory is its emphasis on cultural issues. The prefix “post-” here operates primarily within the domains of cultural knowledge and ideology ^[19].

Within a postcolonial context, trauma is isomorphic: the traumas people endure are bound up with the institutions a nation adopts or the history that nation has undergone ^[6].

The Buried Giant powerfully illustrates this insight. The Britons are both perpetrators of massacre and

victims of the forgetting haze; the Saxons, as the targets of the slaughter, also lose their sense of historical self-recognition as a result of collective amnesia.

Axl's experience most exemplifies this dual identity of perpetrator-victim. He is a maker of peace as well as a complicit participant in the massacre. As memories return, he is forced to confront the bloody crimes committed by his own community. When Wistan asks Axl whether he is that "gentle Briton" from the past, Axl's reply lays bare his perpetrator-trauma:

"If I was that man, sir, I see him today only through the haze of this creature's breath, and he looks a fool and a dreamer, yet one who meant well, and suffered to see solemn oaths undone in cruel slaughter" ^[16].

In the gradual reawakening of memory, Axl must face the brutal past stained with blood for which his own people are responsible. At the novel's close, after Wistan slays Querig, he reveals the ultimate consequence of the massacre: peace will not endure; instead, vengeance will be unleashed:

"The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When he soon rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours' houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn" ^[16].

Forgetting cannot truly heal trauma. It only allows trauma to return in more violent forms. Colonizers attempt to bury history through cultural-ideological manipulation, symbolized by the haze of forgetting. Yet this repression of trauma ultimately gives rise to its belated eruption. The buried giant will eventually stir: the repressed historical memory will come back in the shape of violence.

4. Conclusion

This thesis interprets Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* from three interrelated dimensions: individual trauma, collective trauma, and postcolonial trauma. Most existing studies draw heavily on classical psychoanalytic trauma theories and focus primarily on individual suffering. Breaking new ground, this thesis introduces a postcolonial trauma perspective. Through an examination of trauma representations in the novel, this study arrives at the following conclusions.

The value of this research lies in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, it validates the feasibility of integrating postcolonial trauma theory with classical trauma frameworks in literary analysis. Practically, by systematically analysing trauma writing in *The Buried Giant*, this study enriches scholarship on traumatic narratives across Ishiguro's oeuvre. This research nevertheless has its limitations. Its analysis of narrative strategies and pathways to trauma recovery can be further deepened, and comparative studies with Ishiguro's other works have not been fully developed.

As a profound contemporary fable, *The Buried Giant* offers literary reference for contemporary societies reflecting on ethnic conflicts, historical memory and transitional justice. The novel warns us that forgetting may bring temporary peace, yet only memory, painful as it is, can open up the possibility of genuine healing. Nevertheless, the text also cautions that memory alone is insufficient. Without justice, recognition, and the willingness to bear witness to suffering, the buried giant will rise once more. Ishiguro's achievement resides in conveying this profound insight with restrained, hauntingly tranquil prose—a tranquility akin to the mist itself, concealing beneath its surface an abyss of violence alongside human compassion.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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