

# Trauma of Female Characters in a Pale View of Hills: War and Family

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**Abstract:** *In A Pale View of Hills, a female immigrant Etsuko recalls her experiences living in Nagasaki, Japan, after World War II. A series of characters in the novel are more or less affected by the war and show some psychological trauma. However, war traumas are not the only ones. In addition to the war trauma, the female characters also suffer from the "invisible" trauma from within the family. As a stay-at-home wife, Etsuko was tolerant and reserved for the war trauma. As a mother, Sachiko's war trauma has paralyzed her sense of duty and responsibility; As a daughter, Mariko's trauma cannot be seen by her mother, which eventually leads to her self-destruction. This paper attempts to analyze the double traumas suffered by Etsuko, Sachiko and Mariko from war and family, and study how they bear and deal with traumas under different family ethical identities. Through the interpretation of the double trauma suffered by the female characters, readers can better understand the attitude towards trauma and the choice of life of the female characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels.*

**Keywords:** Trauma; War; Family

## 1. Introduction

*A Pale View of the Hills* is Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel. It features Etsuko, a British immigrant who has experienced the loss of her daughter. And the whole story begins with Etsuko's recollection of her life in Japan after the Second World War. The narrative style is flat, and a series of female characters who have experienced the trauma of war are drawn out in Etsuko's quiet recollections. Through the portrayal of these characters, the author shows the traumatic effects of war and family on these females, and offers reflections on how to overcome these traumas.

The trauma research on this work focuses on the trauma caused by the war. The researcher believes that Etsuko's war trauma caused her to suffer from amnesia. The scholar believes that Etsuko fills the blank of those days through Ogata-San's memories, so that she falls into amnesia<sup>[1]</sup>.

Researchers also focus on other trauma of the characters, especially cultural trauma and family trauma. Cultural trauma refers to the trauma of characters under the collision of different cultures. Wang Fei mentioned that Etsuko's identity anxiety makes her immigrant life lonely<sup>[2]</sup>. Another researcher believes that the author expressed the anxiety and suffering of the Japanese older generation in the face of a completely different reality from the past. He also pointed out that " 'trauma' is the absurd fact in the traditional Japanese spiritual structure of the older generation"<sup>[3]</sup>. Regarding the trauma of family relations, the researcher believes that the trauma of family members invaded the whole family, and causes the disharmony of the mother-daughter relationship in this work<sup>[4]</sup>. In addition, the researchers are concerned about how Kazuo Ishiguro expresses these traumas in the work. Since the whole work is the memory of the old Etsuko, the study of this aspect often starts with the traumatic memory of the protagonist. For example, the scholar believes that "the memory narrative of the text has two aspects". Through this kind of multiple memory, Kazuo Ishiguro shows "the division of individual identity, experience and memory caused by the protagonist's inner pain"<sup>[5]</sup>. In order to show the harm of traumatic memory, Ishiguro's Etsuko split another identity in memory. Therefore, her recollection and narration of trauma are of unreliability. To show this unreliability, the author has also used some techniques. For example, Ljubica matek mentions that Kazuo Ishiguro employs ellipses and ambiguity to express "the unstable nature of memories and the enigmatic yet powerful impact of trauma on the individual"<sup>[6]</sup>.

The term "trauma" has its roots in 19th century Victorian British clinical medicine in relation to

trauma from industrial accidents and in modern psychology in the late 19th century, particularly in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis<sup>[7]</sup>. Freud believed that hysterical patients' recall of the situation of trauma tends to occur several times before the emotions are fully digested, repeating over and over again and forcing the person to re-experience the trauma. In subsequent research, Freud recognized that traumatic memories are influenced by the subject of memory. Memories constructed by the id under the expectations of ego and under the supervision of the superego are not necessarily real. Furthermore, he believed that the causes of trauma could often be traced back to early experiences. Freud's theory of trauma laid the foundation for later researchers. Building on it, Cathy Cruth argued that trauma is ever-present in the victim's psyche, and that the events that caused the trauma keep flashing back to the victim, so that the victim keeps carrying these innermost traumas with him.

This paper tries to combine the war trauma of the characters with the trauma caused by their female ethical identity in the family, and analyze how these female characters are self-rescue, self-consistent or self-destructive under the double trauma.

## **2. Trauma from War: Psychological Pain and Healings**

### ***2.1 Etsuko: Recollection and Reconstruction***

In *A Pale View of Hills*, recollection is always a clue running through the novel. At the beginning of the first chapter of the novel, the author explains that Etsuko is a middle-aged woman living alone in the British countryside. The narrative of the novel quickly shifts to her memories of the past through the visit of her younger daughter Niki after her eldest daughter Keiko commits suicide.

In Etsuko's recollection, readers can easily learn that the time and place Etsuko recalled was in post-World War II Nagasaki, Japan. Etsuko mentions, "now I do not doubt that amongst those women I lived with then, there were those who had suffered, those with sad and terrible memories"<sup>[8]</sup>. In Etsuko's recollections and narration, the trauma of the war she experienced is also reconstructed. The reconstructed memory eventually becomes a memory that Etsuko herself recognizes and can tell to others.

Etsuko's reconstruction of the traumatic memories of the war is first reflected in her forgetfulness. By avoiding the trauma of the war, Etsuko constantly hides her direct memories of the war, while she also forgets some memories shortly after the war. The forgetting of these memories allows her to escape even more distantly from the source of trauma, the war.

### ***2.2 Sachiko: Isolation and Evasion***

In Etsuko's recollection, Sachiko has a large proportion. In contrast to other people around them who experienced war trauma but reengage into collective life, Sachiko has a sense of isolation. The trauma of the war gives Sachiko a strong sense of escape.

On the one hand, what Sachiko wants to escape is both the public and the collective. This is because the postwar Nagasaki people choose to begin their new lives. They stick to their hometown and begin a new life on the land that brings them traumatic memories of war. Unlike others, Sachiko is unwilling to compromise with the start of a new life as usual. Therefore, she separates herself from the collective psychologically.

On the other hand, Sachiko wants to escape from the land that scared her. The war gives Sachiko a strong sense of escape. In order to rationalize her escape, she even brainwashes herself that fleeing from Japan can give her daughter a better living environment. "Trauma is a kind of personal memory, and when the injury occurs, the subject of the memory is spatially grounded"<sup>[9]</sup>. In Sachiko's case, this nature allows her to transfer the source of her trauma to the land. When living in Nagasaki, the surroundings will always make her miserable. In this process, her recognition and of the trauma has shifted. In fact, what brings trauma to Sachiko is the war, but Sachiko subjectively believes that she and her daughter will not be better after the war. It is about leaving Japan so they can have a better life.

### **3. Trauma from Family: Female Identity and Sufferings**

#### **3.1 *Etsuko: A Dazed Housewife***

Judging from the narrative in the novel, Etsuko's life after marrying Jiro is not very happy. After marrying Erlang, she always plays the role of a virtuous housewife. As the wife of Jiro's, she is not in an equal position with him. She needs to listen to her husband and obey him. Etsuko is constrained by the traditional Japanese image of virtuous housewife and must show her deference to her husband in the process of getting along with him.

In fact, due to the increased education level of Japanese women after the war and other factors, "the traditional model of the male and the female in the Japanese families was impacted, and the change of the times pushed women to the society"<sup>[10]</sup>. But Etsuko and Jiro's family still follows the traditional Japanese pattern of couples.

At home, Etsuko is even more comfortable with Ogata-San. But Ogata-San's attitude remains traditional and conservative. When he finds in the news that the wife and husband in a family votes for different political parties respectively, Ogata-San believes that the wife is a betrayal of the family. It can be seen that Etsuko lives in a traditional Japanese family, and the men in the family all believe that the wife must be completely subordinate to the will of her husband. Etsuko does not get the happiness she wanted in this family, but let herself imprisoned in the family. This trauma from the family makes Etsuko not happy, and also explains that Etsuko later leaves Japan and starts a new life.

#### **3.2 *Sachiko: A Derelict Mother***

In the novel, there is no doubt that Sachiko is a very derelict mother. In Etsuko's recollection, Sachiko is almost immersed in the belief that she has to leave Japan. She is pinning her hopes on an American boyfriend in a relationship, and she is even more protective of the relationship than she is of Mariko.

Sachiko's dereliction of duty as a mother is firstly reflected in her deprivation of Mariko's right. In the first chapter, when Etsuko meets Mariko, she finds that Mariko does not go to school. This is Sachiko, as a mother, depriving Mariko of the right to go to school for education. Secondly, Sachiko deprives Mariko of the right to have kittens. When the cats become a stumbling block in Sachiko's eyes, Sachiko drowns the cat in the river without hesitation. There is no doubt that this image must have done indelible damage to Mariko, but Sachiko didn't realize it. In the end, Sachiko takes away her daughter's right to choice. Under Sachiko's control, Mariko does not have the right to refuse to leave Japan.

In the novel, Sachiko repeatedly mentions that she will take Mariko to the United States for the good of Mariko. But in reality, this is just Sachiko's brainwashing. In this repetition, Sachiko defends herself for neglecting her daughter's feelings. In the end, under the brainwashing, Sachiko ends up further and further down the road of motherhood.

### **4. Female Characters under the Double Trauma**

#### **4.1 *Etsuko: Reconciliation with the Past***

Etsuko's memories show that Etsuko's trauma comes from two main sources, which are war and family. Etsuko's past experiences in the war destroy her original happiness, and indirectly leads her into the wrong marriage to Jiro. And the biggest trauma from the family is the suicide of her daughter Keiko. Etsuko's memories and narratives are actually her way of finding self-reconciliation in the midst of trauma.

In the process of recalling the past, Etsuko modified the memory in order to avoid too much pain and criticism. Through the implication of the text, the reader can easily associate Etsuko and Keiko with Sachiko and Mariko. In fact, Etsuko is actively projecting his own experiences onto others. Although it is not certain that Sachiko and Mariko are real people, their story is in part a projection of the experiences of Etsuko and Keiko. As Etsuko reminisces, she experiences her past with Keiko from the perspective of an outsider. In addition, the memory of Etsuko occasionally incarnates as Mariko's caregiver, which is actually Etsuko's compensation psychology to Keiko.

Etsuko is haunted by the guilt of Keiko's suicide. It is Keiko's suicide that makes her reflect on

whether she has made the right decision to go abroad. The little girl on the swing that she often dreams of in England is actually a projection of her longing for Keiko. Through reminiscing, Etsuko finally restores the truth of what happened, and also faces the fact that she once caused Keiko harm. Facing the truth and letting the pain go off is the beginning of Etsuko's reconciliation with past trauma.

#### **4.2 Sachiko: Emigration from the Hometown**

Although part of Sachiko's experience is the projection of Etsuko's own experience, it does not affect the separate analysis of the image of Sachiko. As a double victim of war trauma and family trauma, Sachiko suffers the biggest trauma mainly from the war. The only solution Sachiko accepts is to flee and to emigrate to the United States.

Sachiko's family trauma comes mainly from the pain of her dereliction of motherhood. The huge war trauma makes Sachiko only feel the emotion of escape, and she changes from the identity of "victim" of the war to the identity of "perpetrator" of her family. Sachiko keeps telling herself that she is doing this for Mariko's future, which is also a brainwashing of herself as an irresponsible mother. Because Sachiko does not know how to properly raise and care for her daughter as a mother, and she attributes her negligence to the pretense that she is striving for a better life for her daughter in the future.

Ultimately, Sachiko's response to the trauma of war and the family trauma of being an irresponsible mother is to emigrate from home. She believes that by going to the United States, she would be able to escape her traumatic circumstances and ease the pain of being an irresponsible mother.

### **5. Conclusion**

In the work, Kazuo Ishiguro recreates the life experience of Etsuko and Sachiko living in Nagasaki after World War II through the memories of the protagonist. As survivors of the war, they each suffer the trauma of the war. The war trauma gives Etsuko symptoms of amnesia, as she cannot remember playing the violin late at night after the war. At the same time, the war trauma also makes her deliberately avoid recalling the war-related past. Sachiko's war trauma makes her strongly resist the surrounding environment and eager to escape. As females in the family, they have each suffer the trauma from family. Soon after the war, Etsuko marries the son of her benefactor and starts a family. But the family does not bring Etsuko much comfort. Etsuko's position in the family is totally unequal to that of her husband. As a mother, Sachiko does not fulfil her responsibilities as a mother very well. Even though she realizes that her idea of taking her daughter to America might be problematic, she does not really care about her daughter's needs. To avoid blaming herself for being a bad mother, she repeatedly brainwashes herself for doing what is best for her daughter.

Taking on the double trauma of war and family, these female characters also show different responses to the trauma. Etsuko finally takes the first step toward self-reconciliation with her past by sorting out her past mistakes in raising her daughter in her memories and narration. Sachiko, facing the trauma of war and the self-blame trauma of being a derelict mother, chooses to flee her hometown and rationalizes her immigration behavior in order to relieve the guilt for her daughter and escape from her dereliction of duty.

Trauma can come from irresistible external causes or from the closest family members. How to face and cope with trauma also requires personal exploration and family support. Through the different coping measures of Etsuko and Sachiko, it is not difficult to further understand their reactions and attitudes to trauma as individuals and as members of a family with different social responsibilities. This has implications for understanding both the characters and the traumas.

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