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## Individual and Collective Memory in Ishiguro's the Buried Giant

*Ishiguro'nun Gömülü Dev Romanında Bireysel ve Kolektif Hafıza*

Ercan Gürova<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's seventh novel *The Buried Giant* (2015) investigates the concept of memory in a fantastical tale which is set in the early medieval history of the post-Roman period. In a pattern of quest, the main characters embark on a journey to accomplish their mission. As for Axl and Beatrice, an elderly couple, it is to find their son and recall their lost memories. For Wistan, a Saxon warrior, it is to terminate the she-dragon named Querig whose magical breath causes a mist of forgetfulness across the land. In a narration where individual and collective memory prove to be interconnected, the writer contemplates on loss, regret, forgetting and remembering. While the mutual dependency of

### Öz

Kazuo Ishiguro'nun yedinci romanı *Gömülü Dev* (2015), Roma sonrası dönemin erken ortaçağ tarihinde fantastik bir hikâyede bellek kavramını ele almaktadır. Bir yolculuk modeli içinde gerçekleşen bu anlatıda ana karakterler görevlerini yerine getirmek için yola çıkarlar. Yaşlı bir çift olan Axl ve Beatrice için bu görev oğullarını bulmak ve kayıp anılarını hatırlamaktır. Bir Sakson savaşçısı olan Wiston için ise bu görev büyümlü nefesi tüm ülkede bir unutkanlık sisine neden olan Querig isimindeki dişi ejderhayı yok etmektir. Bireysel ve toplumsal hafızanın birbirine bağlı olduğunun gösterildiği bir anlatıda yazar yitiriş, pişmanlık, unutuş ve hatırlayış üzerine düşünür. Metin boyunca bireysel ve

<sup>1</sup> Ercan Gürova, Dr Öğretim Görevlisi, Ankara Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Y. Okulu, ercangurova@hotmail.com, Orcid: 0000-0001-5446-9013

the individual and collective memories are presented throughout the text, the nature of traumatic experiences and mourning process is put under the limelight. The end of the novel puts an emphasis on the question of whether remembering is a blessing or a curse for both the individual and the community or nation. In this article, therefore, brief biographical information about Kazuo Ishiguro will be first given and afterwards the interconnected of individual and collective memory will be explored with the help of scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead. The opportunities offered by the individual and collective recollection, as well as the dilemmas and constraints it causes will be exemplified through the main characters in the novel.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro, The Buried Giant, memory

kolektif anıların birbirine bağlılığı sunulurken, travmatik deneyimlerin ve yas sürecinin doğası da odak noktası haline getirilir. Romanın sonu, hatırlamanın hem birey hem de toplum veya ulus için bir nimet mi yoksa bir lanet mi olduğu sorusuna vurgu yapar. Bu nedenle bu makalede öncelikle Kazuo Ishiguro hakkında kısa biyografik bilgi verilecek ve ardından Maurice Halbwachs, Cathy Caruth ve Anne Whitehead gibi uzmanların yardımıyla bireysel ve kolektif hafızanın birbirine bağlılığı roman üzerinden örneklerle araştırılacaktır. Bireysel ve kolektif hatırlamanın sunduğu fırsatlar ve aynı zamanda neden olduğu açmazlar ve kısıtlamalar romandaki ana karakterler üzerinden örneklendirilecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kazuo Ishiguro, Gömülü Dev, Hafıza

## Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the leading contemporary novelists of British literature, published his 7th novel, *The Buried Giant* in 2015. The novel, which is set in 5th or 6th century AD in Britain, is presented to the reader as a fantasy tale which portrays a journey of an elderly Briton couple named Axl and Beatrice who wish to find their son. On their way to find him, the couple come across a Saxon warrior Wiston, a wounded Saxon boy Edwin, and King Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain in his older years. During their quest, they are challenged by giants, ogres, knights and a she-dragon Querig whose enchanted breath causes an oblivious mist.

The plot revolves around themes such as loss, forgetting, remembering, and traumatic experience which all contribute to the general motif of memory in the narration. By amalgamating the components of contemporary fantasy literature and medieval literary convention and utilising from them as a framework and story structure, Ishiguro manages to investigate the intricacy and fuzziness of the concept of memory. This study will, therefore, give brief biographical information about the author, and afterwards discuss the significance of the theme of memory in the novel on a personal and collective level with reference to the arguments of prominent scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead.

Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Nagasaki-Japan in 1954, is a celebrated British novelist and short story writer. His first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) mostly focus on Japanese culture and identity accompanied with a mournful and mysterious tone. Turning from Japanese settings, Ishiguro wanted to explore other genres such as science fiction and historical fiction. *The Remains of the Day* (1989) narrates the story of an English butler who has dedicated his life to the loyal service of a lord. On the other hand, in the dystopian science fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), he deals with human cloning in an alternative reality of England during the 1990s. Furthermore, in his fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans* (2000), a detective story about the mystery of disappearances is addressed. Finally, in *The Buried Giant*, the writer enters the world of fantasy fiction.

The theme of memory has always been on the frontline in Ishiguro's narration. He elaborates on why he is preoccupied with memory throughout much of his career as follows:

I've always been interested in memory because it's the filter through which we read our past. It's always tinted – with self-deception, guilt, pride, nostalgia, whatever. I find memory endlessly fascinating, not so much from a neurological or philosophical viewpoint, but as this tool by which people tell themselves things about the lives they've led and about who they've become. (2016, interview with Piya Chattopadhyay, *The Agenda*)

Ishiguro's keen interest on looking back on past can be based on a melancholic texture where one cannot repair what has already been done. In this type of return, the aim is simply to present a sort of emotional consolation for what has been lost. In such cases, the main character in the narration goes through "a transition from a state of melancholia to one of mourning as he or she identifies the main source of melancholia as a lost object and begins to come to terms with that sense of loss" (Teo, 2014, p. 8).

The author's eager concern with the process of looking back resonates with his first three novels. In these works, returning to past and the burden of unresolved events play a central role in the narrative structures. The main characters in these novels investigate the past and the related important moments of their personal histories. On the other hand, in his book *The Unconsoled* (1995), the process of remembering not only illuminates the protagonist's memory but also it disturbs him. Still another example of delving into the past is *Never Let Me Go* in which the connection between memory and mortality is explored.

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro embarks on an investigation of the importance of memory on two levels. The first one is the collective memory in which the unity and the harmony of the group gets affected. The second one is the individual memory in which the impact is mostly on the integrity of one's self and one's relation to other human beings. The novel presents a rich content for the relation between individual-collective memory and the traumatic experiences of people.

Axl and Beatrice, the two main characters of the novel, and their personal narrative in relation to memory can be given as a significant example for the individual level of memory. They both believe that they need to find their son, who now lives in another village but they do not remember the reason why he has left them. It turns out that the only thing they cannot recall is not just about his son's whereabouts. The couple are not able to remember the past events clearly as the rest of the community in the village and this strange phenomenon is explained by the existence of a mysterious mist.

When Beatrice cannot recall her son's face except for a blurry image in her dreams, she laments by saying "...but it's cruel when we can't remember a precious thing like that (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 31). Moreover, because of having a hard time remembering all the memories of the past with her husband, she cannot help asking "I'm wondering if without our memories, there's nothing for it but for our love to fade and die" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 43).

The same trouble of remembering past events and blurry images linger in Axl's mind. As they proceed their journey, he recalls fragments of one of his memories in which he stands in a war tent among other fighters and feels raged because of an unknown reason. In the following chapter, the images of crying children, screams of terror, hateful looks and his own fury come flooding back to Axl. Therefore, as the narrative unfolds and the couple continues in their quest to find their son and kill the dragon, Axl has to face his personal traumatic experience of being involved in killing innocent people.

Throughout their quest to find their son, Beatrice asks repeatedly whether his husband is still with her. Her anxiety of being left alone turns out to be a fear of being abandoned by Axl and this fear lies in the fact that she herself betrayed her husband earlier. Another revelation in relation to the couple's afflicted bond is the moment when the reader finds out that their son is already dead and the couple's quest is actually a longing to visit their son's tomb. As the story continues, it is narrated that Beatrice's wish to visit her son's tomb was prevented by Axl as an act of revenge for her being unfaithful to him. Therefore, on the personal level, the traumatic experience of loss which is represented in the couple's search for their son "functions as a displacement of the couple's fear of and experience of losing each other" (Lorek-Jezinska, 2016, p.47).

Before the couple begin to regain their memories of their past life together, they are challenged by questions whether they would really like to see the mist disappear so that they can recall every bit of memory from their past life. The dialogue between the couple and a priest garners the attention of the reader on the elusive and ambivalent nature of recollection of memories and questions the role of blessing and beneficence we expect from the excavation of our memories.

Beatrice's infidelity to her husband and Axl's fury, vengeance and brutality pave the way for the question of whether an individual actually needs a complete recollection of their memories. This question also reverberates in the metaphoric use of "the buried giant" image of the novel. This image as the title of the novel functions as an indicator of the human psyche and his/her concealed or buried traumas and repressed memories.

While explaining some of the traits of trauma, Cathy Caruth gives the following definition: "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996, p. 11). Beatrice's asking Axl whether he is still with her in a repetitive manner throughout the book and the vision she sees in the dungeon can be illustrative of this type of trauma Caruth describes. In the dungeon, Beatrice, Axl and Gawain step onto something but each of them perceives it in a different way. It is considerably interesting and meaningful that Beatrice mistakes the objects for remains of dead infants: "What are all these skulls, sir? Why so many? Can they all have belonged to babies? Some are surely small enough to fit in your palm?" (Ishiguro,

2015, p. 140). It can be assumed from this quote that Beatrice has given a maternal response as a consequence of her own loss of her son since it is only Beatrice, not the others, who can see dead infants.

Caruth elaborates on the characteristics of trauma as follows: “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” (1996, p. 4). Therefore, the act of forgetting because of the mist or the reluctance to recall the past may never be successful for the individual as in the case of Axl and Beatrice. Even though they have vague and fragmented images of the past, the traumatic effects of the individual memory remain in the subconscious.

Deimantas Valanciunas in his article entitled “Forgetting or Making to Forget: Memory, Trauma and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*” points out the concept of “repetition compulsion” developed by Sigmund Freud, which emphasizes the constant ability of trauma that troubles a person in a specific way. It is suggested that “the patient does not remember anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather acts it out. He reproduces it not as memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, being aware of the fact that he is repeating it” (qtd in. Valanciunas, 2018, p. 217-218).

This concept of “repetition compulsion” can be used to understand some scenes in the novel. As mentioned before, the text presents quite a number of repetitive patterns and these can be interpreted as a way of dealing with personal traumas of the characters. To illustrate, the repetitive expressions between an old lady and a boatman in an abandoned mansion, the dialogue exchanges between Beatrice and Axl can be understood as the subconscious bond with the traumatic events that took place in these people. In a similar vein, the incessant belief that their son is waiting for them could be taken as a repressed affirmation of their son's demise. Hence, it can be assumed that “the trip Axl and Beatrice take to visit their son is actually a trip to his grave” (Valanciunas, 2018, p. 219).

Maurice Halbwach, a distinguished scholar on memory theories, makes a distinction between individual and collective memory based on how remembrances are organised in the mind. According to Halbwach, these remembrances are either “grouped about a definite individual who considers them from his own viewpoint or distributed within a group for which each is a partial image” (1980, p. 50). Therefore, an individual is engaged with two types of memory; however, as the individual participates in one of these memories, he or she might embrace a different or even an adverse approach in the other. Halbwach elaborates on the distinction and the interaction of these memories as follows:

On the one hand, he places his own remembrances within the framework of his personality, his own personal life; he considers those of his own that he holds in common with other people only in the aspect that interests him by virtue of distinguishing him from others. On the other hand, he is able to act merely as a group member, helping to evoke and maintain impersonal remembrances of interest to the group. (1980, p. 50)

The fact that individuals not only remember their personal past but they also remember as a group as a result of social interactions leads to the idea that these two memories are intermingled. Anne

Whitehead in his book entitled *Memory* (2009) puts an emphasis on the amalgamation of individual and collective memory by stating that “practices of remembrance are defined and shaped by the surrounding culture” (2009, p. 21). In a similar fashion, Halbwach points out that individual memory merges with the collective memory in order to confirm or blanket the gaps in its remembrances (1980, p. 51). This confirmation or covering of the gaps can be in the form of reliance of the one on the other, or relocating of the one on the other. Last but not least, the collective memory functions a role that surrounds the individual memory while staying distinct from it.

The interconnectedness of the individual and collective memory is best exemplified with war and ethnic conflict between the Britons and Saxons in the novel. The reader is presented with a landscape which symbolizes the terror and destruction of war. As the main characters continue their journey, they come across examples of this terror and destruction on their way. Even though they have a difficult time in recalling the past, each new place evokes new stories which will be clear memories later on. The individual memory of a traumatic experience cannot be reached directly; on the contrary, it needs to be located and connected within its surrounding collective experience and memory. The remnants of the past atrocities and destruction spark new but ambiguous traces of individual experiences as in the case of Axl and Beatrice, as well as the Wistan, the Saxon warrior who has a self-commitment to take revenge.

A strong image related to the concept of collective memory in the novel is the ‘buried giant’ as mentioned before. As Ishiguro explains in an interview, “the giant signifies the past violence and guilt that have been buried by force or consensus, sometimes to avoid further bloodshed” (qtd. in Lorek-Jezinska, 2016, p. 45-46). As an embodiment of the brutal killings and terror, the buried giant, which is she-dragon Querig, has to be found and annihilated in order to disclose all the atrocities committed and management of the people in power who are in favour of the ‘so-called peace’ among Britons and Saxons. As an ardent believer in the extermination of the Querig and the mist, the warrior Wistan is in dire need of remembering the past and knowing the truth about past events. He refuses to continue a mysterious agreement and the so-called peace built on slaughter and destruction, nor does he accept a consensus aimed to heal wounds by not remembering the past.

On the other hand, there are others such as Sir Gawain who is in favor of the de facto collective amnesia, which contributes to the temporary peace and social harmony among the former rivals and foes. When all the main characters finally reach the colossal hole where the she-dragon Querig lies, Sir Gawain desperately begs the warrior Wiston not to take action against the giant by reminding him the benefits of its mist on Britons and Saxons.

Sir Gawain’s attempt to persuade Wiston to “leave this country to rest in forgetfulness” is rejected on the grounds that no agreement or consensus can be built on magical tricks and slaughters. A similar concern or fear rises in Axl about the disappearance of the mist and recalling the past clearly. He voices his concern and looks for a reassurance from Beatrice regarding the possible disappointments of revealing the past memories: “Promise, princess, you’ll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment... Promise to keep what you feel for me this moment always in your heart, no matter what you see once the mist’s gone” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 211).

As they get closer to the dragon and Wiston is about to hunt down the creature, Beatrice also reveals her concern about what is to come if the mist disappears. Her guilty conscious (her betrayal to her husband) impedes her taking an action against the source of mist: "If the she-dragon's really slain, and the mist starts to clear, Axl, do you ever fear what will then be revealed to us? ... there's part of me fears the mist's fading..." (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 204). As a result of the fading effect of the mist, Beatrice starts to remember her betrayal, and in a similar vein Axl recalls having forbidden his wife to go to their son's grave and killing villagers brutally.

After the termination of the she-dragon by Wistan, the mist completely disappears and it marks a new era for the Saxons and Britons in which animosity, conflict and chaos take over. Therefore, the removal of the mist and its source creates a dilemma in relation to the relative stability and peace among the opponent communities. This dilemma brings forward the question of whether a community or a nation needs to remember everything from its past, which is also investigated as an idea by Anne Whitehead as she states: "in the context of the collective, a degree of forgetting is as important as remembering for allowing the community to function in the aftermath of social and historical catastrophes" (2009, p. 14).

The low tension between the Saxons and the Britons before the termination of the mist is disrupted as Wiston, the killer of the she-dragon, announces that "justice and vengeance" is what comes next and "the dragon died to make ready the way for the coming conquest" (241). The death of the creature and the disappearance of the mist of forgetfulness pave the way for loosening the old hatreds across the land; hence "although one monster is killed, another one, probably even more ominous, is awoken" (Borowska-Szerszun, 2016, p. 33). The initial wrath and antagonism of Wiston already gives a hint about the chaotic future of the land: "Men will burn their neighbours' houses by night. Hang children from tress at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses...For you Britons, it'll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You'll flee or perish..." (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 242).

## Conclusion

*The Buried Giant* as an emotive journey of memory which comes to terms with loss and traumatic experience. Furthermore, it investigates the relation between individual and collective memory and confirms the fact that individual memory and traumatic experiences are mutually interconnected with collective memory. By the same token, "it is only through individual acts of memory that the collective memory can be observed" (Erl, 2011, p. 16). The mutual dependency of these two types of memory is best illustrated through the main characters' private relationship and their deeds on a societal aspect

Revisiting the past as a central preoccupation of the narrative succeeds in providing the couple their memories; however, they do not appear as true winners of this arduous process. No matter how much they hold on to each other and display a strong bond, it is not possible to take the final journey together at the end of the novel. In a similar vein, although Wistan the warrior accomplishes his mission to kill the dragon to remove the mist and the collective amnesia, his act unfolds yet another wave of chaos and destruction. Thus, the end of the novel problematizes the idea whether remembering the past is a blessing or a curse for both the individual and the community or nation. Ishiguro's ambivalent approach to remembering the past reminds of the concept of 'difficult forgiveness' which emphasizes

both the need to remember and the need to release the perpetrator from their crime (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 457). However, the process of forgetting, remembering and release is also challenged by the characters as they do not wish to forget the past. Instead, complexities of forgetting is underlined; an environment of nostalgia which allows reassessment of the past lives is presented; loss, regret and wrongdoings are portrayed in an elegiac tone, which offers neither escape nor consolation in the end. Even though the novel does not bring much optimism in relation to the excavation of the individual and collective memories, it implies the fact that it is worth contemplating on the recollection of the past both on the individual and collective levels as it gives us the opportunity to question and challenge themes such as memory, regret, forgetting and forgiving.

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