



## INTERSECTIONS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION, AND POSTMODERNISM IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS\*

KAZUO ISHIGURO'NUN ÇOCUKLUĞUMU ARARKEN ADLI  
ESERİNDE OTOBİYOGRAFİ, KURGU VE  
POSTMODERNİZM'İN KESİŞİMLERİ

Şebnem DÜZGÜN



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### Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000) can be read as a postmodern fictional autobiography, in which Christopher Banks, a fictional detective, uses autobiographical writing to relieve himself from his childhood traumas caused by the mysterious disappearance of his parents. Christopher reflects on past events from his mature perspective and fills in the gaps in his childhood memories by using his imagination to cope with his traumatic past. However, the narrator is unable to make a complete assessment of past events from his current perspective because of the temporal distance between the past and the present. Challenging the notions of metanarrative and linear temporality, he reimagines and reconstructs the past to create his own truths about his life. On the other hand, Christopher's fictional autobiographical writing serves as a means for self-discovery, which compels him to confront his traumatic past rather than hide it behind the facade of a successful and renowned detective. Referring to the arguments on postmodernism and autobiographical writing, this article examines *When We Were Orphans* as a postmodern fictional autobiography to show that the narrator reconstructs and reshapes his story in order to create a coherent and cohesive personal reality and mitigate his childhood traumas.

### Öz

Kazuo Ishiguro'nun *Çocukluğumu Ararken* (2000) adlı romanı, hayali bir dedektif olan Christopher Banks'in, ebeveynlerinin gizemli bir şekilde ortadan kaybolmasının neden olduğu çocukluk travmalarından kurtulmak için otopiyografik yazını kullandığı postmodern bir kurgusal otopiyografi olarak incelenebilir. Christopher, geçmişteki olayları yetişkin bakış açısıyla değerlendirir ve travmatik geçmişiyle başa çıkmak için hayal gücünü kullanarak çocukluk anlarındaki boşlukları doldurur. Ancak anlatıcı, geçmiş ile şimdiki zaman arasındaki zamansal mesafe nedeniyle geçmiş olayları mevcut bakış açısıyla tam olarak değerlendiremez. Üst anlatı ve doğrusal zamansallık kavramlarına meydan okuyarak, yaşamı hakkında kendi gerçeklerini yaratmak için geçmişten yeniden hayal eder ve yeniden yapılandırır. Öte yandan, Christopher'ın kurgusal otopiyografik yazını, travmatik geçmişini başarılı ve ünlü bir dedektif görüntüsünün arkasına saklamak yerine onunla yüzleşmeye zorlayan kendini keşfetme aracı olarak işlev görür. Bu makale, postmodernizm ve otopiyografik yazın üzerine tartışmalara atıfta bulunarak, Kazuo Ishiguro'nun *Çocukluğumu Ararken*'i postmodern bir kurgusal otopiyografi olarak inceleyip, anlatıcının tutarlı ve bütünlük bir kişisel gerçeklik yaratmak ve çocukluk travmalarını hafifletmek için hikayesini yeniden yapılandırıldığını ve şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir.

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## Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000) is a postmodern fictional autobiography, exploring the protagonist's pursuit of his lost parents and his personal history. Complying with postmodern conventions, the novel highlights the difficulty of narrating one's life from an objective viewpoint and suggests that it is almost impossible to textualize personal or public history in an objective way, as everyone creates their own story from their personal perspectives. Since this article studies *When We Were Orphans* as a postmodern fictional autobiography, it is crucial to define the basic characteristics of postmodern autobiographies. Postmodern autobiographies benefit from postmodern theory to reconstruct the past and the self in the past. Postmodernism, which is generally considered to have emerged in the mid-twentieth century, coincides with the growing interest in autobiographies, which have become more subversive and experimental in the postmodern era (Thiemann, 2019). Autobiography is traditionally considered to be a form of life writing that "reveals reliable self-knowledge" (de Man, 1979, p. 922). It is supposed to provide an accurate and true record of one's life (Rich, 2017). In traditional autobiographies, the temporal sequence of a person's life is presented in a coherent narrative text "with the aim of constructing a unified whole" (Hornung, 1997, p. 221). On the other hand, autobiographical texts of the postmodern era defy linear temporality and dismiss "transcendental reality as a metaphysical illusion," challenging the conventional idea of "a unified, sovereign self" (Thiemann, 2019, p. 783). They confront the conventional notion of autobiography as a true representation of the writer's life and question "its status as a distinct genre that differs, above all, from fiction" (Thiemann, 2019, p. 784). According to Ihab Hassan (2003), postmodernism could be considered a type of autobiography, "an interpretation of our lives in developed societies, linked to an epochal crisis of identity" (pp. 201-202). Therefore, the self is viewed "as various and inconsistent" rather than unified and coherent in postmodern autobiographies (Rich, 2017, p. 4). Furthermore, postmodern autobiographical texts show that autobiography is useless, because the textualized self is merely disintegrated among the gaps in memory and "'truth' about an identity so constructed by others that it is impossible to comprehend" (Rich, 2017, p. 6). Accordingly, contemporary autobiographies refute "[t]raditional notions of truth, authenticity and the universal self" and reveal some of the principal concerns of postmodernism, which are related to "[the] questions about our knowledge of the past and the difficulty of articulating our relationship to it" (Thiemann, 2019, p. 778; Gudmundsdóttir, 2003, p. 1). However, paradoxically, autobiographies are employed by postmodernist writers to release

tensions and past traumas and “*provid[e] orientation and stability in a disoriented and unstable world*” (Hornung, 1997, p. 222).

Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* can be read as a postmodern fictional autobiography, which shows the unreliability of memory to reach a fixed, universal truth through the case of Christopher Banks, an English detective, who seeks to find out the dark points about his personal story, especially those related to the mysterious disappearance of his parents. Banks tells the events occurring during his childhood and adulthood from his subjective perspective, violating the conventional linear chronology to integrate and make sense of his fragmented early memories. The literature review indicates that there are some works which focus on the role of memory and nostalgia in *When We Were Orphans* (e.g., Lalrinfeli, 2012; Weston, 2012; Drag, 2014; Shang, 2017). The literature review also reveals that there are some other studies that examine the postmodern logics in *When We Were Orphans* and evaluate the novel as a reconfiguration of traditional detective fiction (e.g., Machinal, 2009; Ringrose, 2011; Tellini, 2016; Hopartean, 2018; Sönmez Demir, 2020). Expanding on the previous arguments, this article studies *When We Were Orphans* as a postmodern fictional autobiography, drawing on postmodern theory to show that the narrator textualizes (hi)story in order to construct a coherent and cohesive personal life story and mitigate his childhood traumas.

### ***When We Were Orphans: A Postmodern Fictional Autobiography***

Autobiographical texts of the postmodern era challenge the conventional idea that autobiographies represent with verisimilitude the real life of the writer (Thiemann, 2019). Hence, postmodern writers use an unreliable narrator whose narrative is apparently erroneous or distorted because the narrator is lying or suffering from something, like hubris, age, and “*questionable sanity*” (Nicol, 2009, p. 82). In *When We Were Orphans*, which is a postmodern fictional autobiography, Ishiguro portrays Christopher Banks as an unreliable narrator, who is biased and under the effect of the trauma he experienced when he was a small child due to his parents’ disappearance. In order to cope with his traumatic memories, Christopher Banks, the narrator, uses fictional autobiography “*as a form of psychotherapy or as an instrument in the process of self-discovery*” (Hornung, 1997, p. 222). Christopher’s search for his parents is actually a search for his own self, which has been damaged by conflicting and contradictory accounts about his past. Christopher attempts to define himself as a well-known, successful detective, thus it is likely that he attempts to reshape his childhood memories in a positive light to overcome the image of a

lonely, desolate, and weak orphan. In an attempt to define himself as an accomplished detective rather than a poor orphan, he looks to Inspector Kung, who participates in the investigations about his parents' disappearance, as a role model. As a child, Christopher plays detective games, constructing an idealised rather than realistic image of Kung. The inspector appears as a “*legendary*” figure with “*handsome features*” in these games, which he plays with his Japanese friend Akira (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 131). Although Christopher grows up, he still clings on the idealised image of Kung, with whom he associates himself. This idealised image of the inspector, in turn, makes it hard for the adult Christopher to come to terms with a new image of Kung created by his friend Morgan:

‘You usually see him [Kung] in a heap on the pavement. Or if he’s been let into some hole of a bar, he’ll be snoring away in a dark corner.’

‘Are you implying Inspector Kung’s become a drunk?’

‘Drink. Opium. Usual Chinaman stuff. But he’s a character. Tells stories about his glory days and people give him coins (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 233).

Having established a stable truth about Kung, Christopher is surprised to find his truth challenged. Since he defines himself in relation to the idealised image of Kung and tries to nominate himself as successful and famous as Kung, he resists the idea that the inspector is not competent but rather a drunkard, addict, and boaster who tells stories to get money. In fact, Christopher cannot bear to accept that what he has believed to be true since childhood might be wrong, because to accept Kung’s failure would be to accept his failure as an inspector. It would destroy the image he has created for himself as an intelligent and successful detective by associating himself with Kung, who is “*the most revered detective in Shanghai*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 234). Therefore, he defends his own fixed truth about Kung and disregards the possibility that Kung may have changed over time.

Christopher Banks distorts his real-life story in his fictional autobiography and practises self-censorship when he tells his story to heal and integrate his fragmented self. In autobiographies the writers who narrate their own stories “*variously practise self-censorship, present a certain image of themselves*” (Auger, 2010, p. 29). Therefore, autobiographical texts of the postmodern era defy the conventional concept of an autonomous and integrated self and challenge the conventional notion that autobiographies are an accurate reflection of the author’s real life (Thiemann, 2019). As such, postmodern fictional autobiographies are used as a means of “*identity and*

*identification*" (Hornung, 1997, p. 222). Christopher Banks also tends to construct an ideal self-image by writing his story, as his self is damaged by the traumatic experience of his parents' mysterious disappearance, and he does not have a thorough knowledge or intact memories about his mother and father. Hence, he does not give much detail about his painful childhood traumas, and his narration starts at the top of his career, namely just after he has left Cambridge with a university degree. However, he does not talk much about his university life because he tries to hide the fact that his education expense was met by Wang Ku, the Chinese warlord taking his mother as a mistress. Although his real benefactor is Wang Ku, to whom he owes "[his] place in London society," Christopher creates a certain image of himself as "a well-known detective," who was supported financially by his aunt in England to protect his reputation and disavow his connection with a criminal. (Ishiguro, 2000, pp. 344, 356). Accordingly, Christopher deliberately conceals some personal facts in his fictional autobiography to form an integrated autonomous self, which is in control of his life and memories, and to portray himself as a successful, respected detective.

Christopher struggles to reconstruct his past and his self in order to overcome the trauma of his lost parents by reshaping and rewriting past events from his perspective and having contradictory narratives about the past. Therefore, his fictional autobiographical writing becomes "a means of diverting [his] own and others' attention from things [he is] hiding" (Hunt, 2000, p. 154). As an adult narrator, Christopher looks at past events from his biased present perspective, which is shaped by his former experiences. When he is a small child, he meets for the first time Wang Ku, the Chinese warlord, and as a child he regards this occasion as a trivial event that occurred after his father vanished, however when he comes across his photograph in a newspaper while making research about opium trade in China as a detective, he starts "to appreciate for the first time the deeper implications of what [he] had witnessed that day" (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 134). Mature Christopher learns from Uncle Philip that Wang Ku is responsible for his mother's disappearance, so it is not clear whether he is right or wrong to claim that he remembers Uncle Philip's taking part with Wang Ku when his mother disputed with the warlord:

I do not know why, but I got the distinct impression that on this occasion, Uncle Philip was not on 'our side'... and quite possibly this was merely my fancy ... As I say, I cannot point to anything solid to support [my impression] and it is more than possible I am projecting back certain perceptions in the light of what ultimately occurred with Uncle Philip (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 141).

Another instance that points to the possibility that Christopher distorts and reconstructs his past to create a unified self for himself occurs towards the end of the novel when Uncle Philip tells things that contradict the assumptions of Christopher about his parents' disappearance. Since his childhood, Christopher has thought that his parents were imprisoned in Chapei as they disturbed the people involved in opium trade in China. However, Christopher's view on his parents' disappearance is challenged by Uncle Philip, who explains that his father was not kidnapped but "*ran off one day with his mistress*" (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 336), and her mother became "*a concubine*" to Wang Ku, an opium trader whom she offended by slapping him on his face (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 342). It remains unclear whether Christopher's or Uncle Philip's version is true since there are no concrete proofs explaining the disappearance of Mr and Mrs Banks. Besides, the fact that Christopher tends to attribute heroic qualities to his parents as a son, and Uncle Philip's passion and hatred towards Mrs Banks, who remains distant towards him even after her husband's disappearance, make it hard for the reader to trust their objectivity.

Ishiguro points to the difficulty of recounting past events in an ordered and unified way through his protagonist in *When We Were Orphans*. As a postmodern fiction, the novel does not "*deny the existence of the past real,*" but focuses on the practice of "*imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation*" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 67). Christopher's autobiography, which is "*subjective in the selection and presentation of facts*" (Auger, 2010, p. 29), tends to draw attention to the narrator's idealised childhood, a period in which he felt fulfilled, integrated, and assured as he lived in a world where he was happy with "*[k]ind people,*" "*his toys,*" and his parents (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 309). Dreaming and imagination are the only means for Christopher, who suffers from a disintegrated self and shattered memories, to "*remember and wish [a] good world*" and turn back to his idealised, childhood realm, where he was united with his mother and father (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 310). Therefore, he fills in the blanks in his past through fiction to reorganize and reunite his personal stories. In one instance, Christopher Banks tries to recollect the words used by his mother and the health inspector coming to investigate the complaints about the hygiene of Chinese servants, who were also suspected of being opium addicts. As he tries to recall the scene between his mother and the inspector, he gets aware of the fact that his memories of Shanghai are no longer fresh and unified. Accordingly, Christopher contends that the way he remembers the discussion between the inspector and his mother about Chinese servants might be influenced by the way in which his mother recounted the details about the same

occasion: “I cannot be sure today how much of my memory of that morning derives from what I actually witnessed from the landing, and to what extent it has merged over time with my mother’s accounts of the episode” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 69). As Mrs Banks regards herself the victor of the discussion with the inspector, Christopher tends to remember her mother as the one who was dominant during the argument: “[My mother delivered] a tirade of controlled ferocity in which she put to the inspector the case” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 71). However, Christopher admits that although he might remember the essence of the scene between his mother and the inspector “accurately enough,” he feels himself “less certain about some of the details,” like the words uttered by Mrs Banks, thus he states that he might have “attributed these words to her,” or even he might have “remembered incorrectly the context in which she uttered those words” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 81). Since his memories of his life in Shanghai are not vivid, he feels the need to order the conversation between his mother and the inspector to construct a narrative out of it:

I have been obliged to accept ... that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images. Even tonight, when I sat down here and tried to gather in some sort of order these things [memories about the scene between my mother and the inspector] I still remember, I have been struck anew by how hazy so much has grown (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 80).

Christopher’s decision to go to China to find out his parents is another attempt to unify his disintegrated memories about his childhood. He attempts to regain his self-integrity by searching for his lost parents, who symbolise his shattered, disordered memories and threaten the unity of his self by their absence. Therefore, he naively persuades himself that he will find his parents in their old house in Shanghai even after several years, and he wants a Japanese soldier, whom he claims to be his childhood friend Akira, to accompany him while locating the place of his mother and father. Since Akira is an important figure in his life in China, he makes himself believe that the Japanese soldier is his former friend, who can testify his treatise on the fate of his lost parents. Although the soldier initially contends that he does “not know” Christopher, the latter insists that they knew one another while he was in China and makes him believe that they were “friends” (Ishiguro, 2000, pp. 294, 297). The soldier agrees to accompany him on his search for Mr and Mrs Banks, but he reminds Christopher that he might be wrong about his assumptions about his parents, thus he “must think very carefully” and accept the possibility that he might

not be successful to find his parents since “[i]t is now many so many years” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 315). However, Christopher, who wants to be reunited with his mother and father to feel himself integrated and secured, ignores the soldier’s warnings and believes that he will find the house in which his parents are, and her mother “*will be able to look at [the soldier’s] injury*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 315). Although Christopher denies the impossibility of his reunion with his parents, he accepts that his memory about his encounter with Akira “*is no longer very clear*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 319), which points to the possibility that he imagined this peculiar scene with the Japanese soldier to unify his shattered self and childhood memories. As a result, Christopher’s difficulty in creating a clear, coherent, and ordered narrative because of the growing distance between the past and the present indicates that he attempts to bring together his fragmented memories so as to heal his disintegrated self and assign a meaning to his past.

*When We Were Orphans* also points to the impossibility of arriving at consistent and universal truths through the case of Christopher Banks, who is unable to provide an unchanging and coherent narrative of his experiences. As a postmodern fictional autobiography, it shows that there are no are-metanarratives or universal facts, but “*there are multiple truths, depending on the time and place*” (Lessem & Schieffer, 2010, p. 274; Gaşiorek, 1995). Christopher attempts to recollect his fragmented childhood memories by forming his own truths according to his individual perspective. Therefore, the truth he reveals “*is not a fixed but an evolving content*” in the process of having a new perspective on his self and other people, and his life writing is “*a kind of fluid and ever-changing fiction*” (Eakin, 1985, p. 3; Hunt, 2000, pp. 152, 155). For instance, Sarah Hemmings, who is also orphaned, appears as a controversial figure for Christopher since there are a lot of contradictory remarks about her character: those who are friends of her ex-fiancée Herriot-Lewis “*described how ruthlessly she had pursued [their friend]*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 21). There are others who “*accused her of manipulating Herriot-Lewis’s friends in order to get close to him*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 21). On the other hand, Christopher comes across those who “*spoke rather well of Miss Hemmings*” and those who describe her as “*clever,*” “*fascinating*” and “*complicated*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 21). Nonetheless, even people who speak in favour of her think that Sarah “*was a ‘terrible snob of a new sort’*” and “*she did not consider a person worthy of respect unless he or she possessed a celebrated name*” (Ishiguro, 2000, pp. 21-22). Christopher, who has no first-hand knowledge of Sarah Hemmings’ story, is confused by all these statements for and against Sarah and cannot form a clear, positive picture of her. However, when he has a chance to develop a close



intimacy with Sarah, he starts to change his ideas about her. Christopher's friendly conversation with Sarah on a London bus, Sarah's decision to marry Sir Cecil because of her belief that "*he's the man to undertake the great mission [of dealing with world affairs]*" (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 169), and her tenderness towards her husband cause Christopher to revise his previous opinions of Sarah in a positive way. He even decides to run away with her to Macao when Sarah leaves Sir Cecil because of his bad temperament. Attracted to Sarah, Christopher attempts to produce an alternative truth about her and tries to refute the negative ideas of Herriot-Lewis's friends on Sarah by arguing that their objectivity "*could hardly be counted on*" because they tend naturally to defend their friend and to put the whole blame on Miss Hemmings (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 21). Rather than depicting Sarah as a snob and a pragmatic woman, Christopher portrays her as a woman with "*light-hearted and assured*" manners (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 192). Sarah's multiple and contradictory images, in turn, make it impossible to form a single, coherent fact about her, suggesting the fluidity and multiplicity of truth produced and reproduced from a personal perspective.

Christopher's narrative, which moves arbitrarily between the present and the past, challenges linear temporality and enables the narrator to make sense of his fragmented early memories. Conventional narrative forms, on the other hand, have a strict chronological order, and they are considered to be "*a mode of 'totalizing' representation*" by the postmodernists (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 62). Therefore, postmodern fiction parodies "*[the] traditional narrative models- both historiographical and fictional- that are based on European models of continuous chronology and cause-and-effect relations*" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 53). Authors of postmodern autobiographies also dispute the traditional notion of linear temporality as they challenge the idea of an integrated whole, and "*[an] unfragmented subjecthood*" (Rich, 2017, p. 4; Hornung 221). In *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro displays discontinuities in Christopher's narration to show that history is individual, and it cannot be put into a chronological order because it is reconstructed by the fragmented self of Christopher, who is under the influence of his traumatic past experiences. The narrator leaps from the present into his past memories, leaving the present narrative incomplete at times in order to make sense of his childhood experiences from an adult point of view. In one instance, he remembers meeting Colonel Chamberlain in England, the man who brought him to London after his parents disappeared, and this meeting evokes a childhood memory in his mind related to the day on which he received the news of his departure from China:

[I]f I were for a moment to close my eyes, I could with ease transport myself back to that bright morning in Shanghai and the office of Mr Harold Anderson, my father's superior in the great trading company of Morganbrook and Byatt. I was sitting in a chair that smelt of polished leather and oak...

...

Then Mr Anderson appeared in front of me ... and said: 'So then, Christopher. It's all decided. This is Colonel Chamberlain. He's most kindly agreed to see you safe to England' (Ishiguro, 2000, pp. 28-29).

When Christopher stops remembering the first day on which he met the colonel, he goes back to the scene in which he, as a mature man, was dining with the colonel at Dorchester. His movement into the recent past is deliberate as he wants to refute the colonel's initiations to depict Christopher as a lonely, helpless orphan who was "*withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing*" when he left China to go to England (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 32). After finishing his narration on the recent past, he turns to the present time of his narration and contradicts the image created by the colonel. Creating an alternative narrative about the day on which he moved from China, he claims that "*according to [his] own, quite clear memory,*" he was not "*miserable on that voyage,*" or a helpless child, as the colonel suggests, but he was "*positively excited about life aboard the ship, as well as by the prospect of the future that lay before [him]*" (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 32). He also assumes that the colonel distorted the past deliberately to "*giv[e] himself the role of an heroic guardian,*" who helped a little child to escape from misery (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 32). As such, Christopher tries to attribute autonomy and integrity to his self, which has been damaged by his childhood trauma, by reordering and reconstructing his past memories, and he attempts to make sense of his blurred and ambiguous past by moving between the present, past, and recent past arbitrarily.

*When We Were Orphans* also critique the illusion of reality created in traditional autobiographical texts, recognizing the fictive nature of the construction of life stories. The novel benefits from postmodernist techniques that display the blurred line between fact and fiction. It has certain references to such real political figures as Mussolini and Chiang Kai-shek, and to such socio-political systems as communism and Bolshevism, but it is the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 that comes to the fore. The war fought between the Chinese and Japanese broke out in 1937 due to Japanese extension policy and ended in 1945 when Japan was defeated by the USA in WWII (Sullivan, 2007). However, the historical facts about Sino-Japanese war are mingled

with the fictional life story of Christopher. When Christopher goes to the centre of the fight between the Chinese and the Japanese to search for his parents, the line between fact and fiction is blurred. As a fictional character, Christopher finds himself among “*the atrocities of the 1937 Sino-Japanese war and the invasion of Shanghai*” (Döring, 2006, p. 77) and gets furious to find the traces of ruined lives of innocent people:

[E]very now and then it would occur to me that in among the wreckage beneath our feet lay cherished heirlooms, children’s toys, simple but much-loved items of family life, and I would find myself suddenly overcome with renewed anger towards those who had allowed such a fate to befall so many innocent people (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 284).

Rather than trying to depict the Sino-Japanese war plausibly or focusing on the political aspect of the war, Christopher displays the impact of war on common people and their personal lives from his subjective perspective, thus dissolving the hierarchy between fiction and truth, and personal and public histories, which is created in conventional life-writing (Henderson, 1998). Christopher’s anger about the destruction of innocent children and their families is related to his frustration he felt when he lost his parents and suffered from a damaged self. Therefore, people who are injured or killed in the war and his wandering among the debris of the war trigger his trauma. Moreover, the shattered human lives and their fragmented belongings connote Christopher’s fragmented self and memories, and “[*his*] exhausted condition” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 285). Accordingly, his movement towards the house in which he thinks his parents are kept imitates his search for his self and personal history. Christopher discovers that the house has “three corpses thrown about the room,” “*the body of a woman ... [whose] [o]ne arm had been torn off at the elbow,*” “*an old lady ... [whose] face was charred [on one side]*” and a little boy “*[o]ne of [whose] legs had been blown off at the hip*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 318). Depicting the disintegrated bodies of casualties and the traumatic experience of war, Christopher “*objectifies [his] self and self-experience*” (Hunt, 2000, p. 152) and materialises his disintegrated self and shattered childhood memories. Indeed, the war he has conducted to conceal his traumatic experience and to show himself as an autonomous and “*a well-known detective*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 322) is futile since it just represses his disturbing past memories rather than providing him with a relief from his tensions, thus he “*obtain[s] new perspectives on, and increasing insight into, [his] self and others*” (Hunt, 2000, pp. 11, 152). When he encounters war casualties, including children, his idealised, childhood vision about the world is shattered and “*discover[s] world is not good*”

(Ishiguro, 2000, p. 309). Christopher recognizes the disparity between reality and his childlike vision when he comes across wounded or killed children with the Japanese soldier, whom he assumes to be his former friend Akira: “*When we were boys, I said, ‘we lived in a good world. These children we’ve been coming across, what a terrible thing for them to learn so early how ghastly things really are’*” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 309). He realizes that the adults are responsible for children’s naive vision about the world as they create an illusion of a good world for children through their narratives about “[a] world better” than the real one (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 310). Christopher, who feels disillusioned, thinks that the idealised view of the real life is “*a lot of nonsense,*” thus “[o]ne mustn’t get too nostalgic for childhood” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 309).

Realising the fact that his attempts to idealise his childhood or to find his vanished parents would not cure his childhood traumas, Christopher uses autobiographical writing as a means of dissociating himself from his traumatic past. As a mature, successful detective he suffers from his failure to find his lost parents, thus he prefers not to dwell much on the disturbing memories of his past in his narrative. For instance, when he meets the woman, whom he claims to be his long-lost mother, in Hong Kong, he prefers not to give much detail about the meeting, but his narrative focuses on the fact that he has achieved reunion with his mother, who is not offended with his failure to find her. He claims that she was not frustrated with or disillusioned about him as she was happy that “*he’s doing well,*” and “*she’d never ceased to love [him]*” (Ishiguro, 2000, pp. 358, 359). Therefore, autobiographical writing, which “*provide[s] distance and a framework for painful feeling,*” (Hunt, 2000, p. 152) enables Christopher to re-evaluate his past and his meeting with his mother from his present, mature perspective. It also makes him realize that he was wrong to assume that his public image as a successful detective would rehabilitate his fragmented self, which is injured by the absence of his parental figures. When he writes about his last meeting with his mother in Hong Kong, he understands that his “*utmost*” endeavours to find her “*wouldn’t have made any difference*” about his mother’s feelings towards him because “[s]he said there was nothing to forgive” and “[a]ll she’d ever wanted was for [him] to have a good life” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 359). He understands that he does not need professional success or fame to gain his mother’s love and appreciation, or to recover his fragmented self. He discovers this fact through his life writing, which enables him to evaluate his disturbing past memories from narrative distance, “*making them more manageable, and sometimes providing cathartic relief from trauma*” (Hunt, 2000, p. 152). Since Christopher wants to have a detachment from his turbulent past, he conceals his real identity and introduces

himself to his mother as a foreign visitor rather than her son, and he does not want to take her to England with him as she becomes a part of his traumatic childhood which should be left behind. Therefore, he sees “no reason to take her away” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 359) and justifies his decision to leave her in Hong Kong and return to England, which he associates with a fresh beginning and “the future” (Ishiguro, 2000, p. 32). In this way, Christopher realizes that what he needs to overcome his painful childhood experiences is to get forgiveness and free himself from his troubled past, “focusing on [himself]” and “obtaining new perspectives on, and increasing insight into, self and others” rather than being overwhelmed by the distressing memories of the past (Hunt, 2000, p. 152). Consequently, his narrative about his reunion with his mother provides a kind of relief from his traumatic memories at fictional level.

### **Conclusion**

Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*, a postmodern fictional autobiography, points to the inadequacy of memory to reach a single, fixed truth through the case of Christopher Banks, the narrator who recounts his childhood and adulthood memories from a subjective perspective. Christopher cannot evaluate past events perfectly from the present perspective, thus he reconstitutes and reproduces the past and produces his own truths about his life to define himself as a famous and successful detective. As such, Christopher’s search for his parents is actually a search for himself, complicated by contradicting and inconsistent narratives about his past. Christopher also uses autobiographical writing to relieve himself from the tensions caused by his parents’ mysterious disappearance. Trying to cope with his traumatic childhood experiences, he fills the blanks in his memories by reshaping and reconstructing past events from his present, mature perspective, or he just uses his imagination and distorts his past experiences. Moreover, Christopher’s autobiographical writing allows him to realize that he needs to free himself from his traumatic past rather than holding on idealized childhood memories to feel autonomous and integrated.

Extending the studies that examine the postmodern principles and unconventional textual elements defying the generic features of detective fiction in *When We Were Orphans* (e.g., Machinal, 2009; Ringrose, 2011; Tellini, 2016; Hopartean, 2018; Sönmez Demir, 2020) and the previous arguments about the role of memory and nostalgia in the novel (e.g., Lalrinfeli, 2012; Weston, 2012; Drag, 2014; Shang, 2017), this study concludes that *When We Were Orphans* shows how autobiographical writing can be used as a means of self-identification and self-

therapy. Autobiographical writing is employed by the narrator to rewrite his personal history in order to unify his fragmented memories and his self, which is damaged by his childhood traumas. Moreover, as a postmodern fictional autobiography, *When We Were Orphans* portrays the discrepancies and contradictions in the life story of the narrator, who is biased and haunted by a sense of insecurity due to the absence of his parental figures, to underline the unreliability of his personal narrative. Using the example of Christopher, who recalls his memories of childhood and adulthood in a subjective fashion, the novel highlights the role of memory to redefine and recast the self and history. It reveals Christopher's attempts to recreate his memories and his self in a positive light in order to overcome his image as a lonely, abandoned and helpless orphan. Hence, autobiographical writing is used by the narrator as a means of self-therapy and self-discovery to bring stability and integrity to his personal life. Moreover, the violation of conventional linear chronology in Christopher's narrative, dissolves the narrative distance between the past and the present, enabling the narrator to better perceive the inconsistencies and fractures in his story and to make sense of the multiple and ambiguous truths provided about his past. Accordingly, the novel shows how postmodern fictional autobiographical writing can be used to re-evaluate the self and one's own experiences by dismantling the temporal distance, and to gain new insights and a deeper understanding of one's self and history.

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### Summary

Drawing on arguments about postmodernism and autobiographical writing, this article studies *When We Were Orphans* as a postmodern fictional autobiography to demonstrate that the narrator employs autobiographical writing to textualize his story in an attempt to unify his self and his fractured early memories. Postmodernists use autobiography as a means of identification and self-discovery. According to Hunt (2000), fictional autobiographies might also be used as a means of self-analysis or self-therapy, offering opportunities to concentrate on the self, to objectify the self and one's own experience, and to acquire new perceptions and enhanced understanding of oneself and others. Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* can be considered a postmodern fictional autobiography since the novel demonstrates that the memory is unreliable as a means of arriving at a single truth, using the case of Christopher Banks, the mature narrator who recounts his childhood and adulthood recollections from a subjective point of view. Ishiguro portrays Christopher as an unreliable narrator in *When We Were Orphans*, who is biased and affected by the trauma he experienced as a child when his parents disappeared. As such, Christopher uses fictional autobiography as a type of self-therapy, or a tool in the journey of self-discovery.

Christopher's quest for his parents is in fact a pursuit of his own self, marred by contradictory and incompatible narratives about his past. Trying to identify himself as a renowned, accomplished detective, Christopher seeks to recast his childhood memories in a positive fashion so as to transcend his image as a desolate, lonely and vulnerable orphan.



Similarly, he alters his actual story and performs self-censorship while retelling his life story in an effort to repair and reintegrate his fractured self. As his self is affected by the trauma of his parents' disappearance and he lacks in-depth knowledge or sound memories of his mother and father, Christopher is inclined to build an integrated ideal self through fictional autobiography. As a result, he avoids providing a detailed account of his early life and university education, starting his narrative at the height of his professional career. In order to cope with the traumatic loss of his parents, Christopher reconstructs his memories and his self by rewriting his story from his point of view and by creating conflicting narratives about his past. Since Christopher has a fragmented self and memories, he is prone to romanticising his early life, when he had a sense of fulfilment and confidence. Hence, he uses fiction to reassemble his memories and fill in the gaps in his past.

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher strives to establish single truths regarding his experiences and those who have shaped the course of his life so as to bring stability and integrity to his personal life, destroyed by the trauma of his parents' absence, without much success in reaching a consistent truth. Recognising that truth, like himself, can evolve over time, Christopher seeks to recapture his shattered memories of childhood, using his individual perspective to create his individual truths. Furthermore, Christopher's narration, which shifts randomly between the present and the past, disrupts linear chronology, allowing the protagonist to create an integrated self and construct meaning from his fractured childhood memories. When Christopher discovers that his efforts to create an idealised version of his childhood or to find his missing parents are unlikely to resolve his early traumatic experiences, he turns to autobiographical writing as a means of self-therapy. In doing so, he tries to distance himself from his painful past. As he is haunted by his inability to find his missing parents, the adult, accomplished detective avoids focusing too much on the troubling recollections of the past in his narration. Christopher recognises that achieving forgiveness and releasing himself from his troublesome past are what he needs to overcome his painful childhood memories. Therefore, his account of his final meeting with his lost mother offers, on a fictional level, a sort of rescue from his tormenting recollections. Consequently, Christopher employs autobiographical writing as a means to recreate his story and produce his own reality in an effort to mitigate his childhood traumas and give meaning to his shattered memories.