

# Traumatic Spatio-Temporality in Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels

Amalia Călinescu

## **ABSTRACT:**

The current study proposes an overview of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels from a psychological perspective on the distorted nature of the characters' spatio-temporal perception with the overall purpose of proving their therapeutic potential. Owing to his ability to write elliptically about the human condition, Ishiguro's works possess a magnetic power that can draw the reader towards their core from a subconscious dimension hard to put into linguistic forms. Their hybrid nature thus allows the author to explore delicate themes with such an emotional candour that it is hard not to accept their universal preponderance and let go of the denial or reactive mode that falsely ensures human survival. In short, for all their narrative audacity, and sometimes awkwardness, Ishiguro's novels speak directly to the reader's psyche, which makes them impossible to erase from the mind, even when their form proves quite incongruent with the reader's conscious expectations. Overtly or otherwise, and in accordance with Cathy Caruth's psycho-literary beliefs, the Ishigurian reader is willing to redress their spatio-temporal perception for the betterment of their life.

**KEYWORDS:** Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, spatio-temporal perception, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, choices, decisions and behaviour, literary psychotherapy



In "Trauma and Experience: Introduction", Cathy Caruth speaks about post-traumatic stress disorder, an intensely emotional phenomenon present in literature, sociology, film and political activism as well as everyday life. Why is it important to consider, for instance, the literary representation of life experiences with traumatic effects? Because, says Caruth, literature can offer surprising psychotherapeutic modalities (3-4). Traumatic recollections are not mere memories, nor can they be considered simple post-traumatic nightmares. On the one hand, the images of the trauma itself remain undistorted by the passage of time; on the other hand, they seem to have a malicious identity of their own, and rarely can they be consciously controlled(6). This comes to intensify the normal temporal distortion all experiences suffer in time.

According to Ricoeur, first-hand events become second-hand realities as they are lost in the fabric of recollection: "The nature of living experience over a period of time necessitates that a temporal distance often separates us from a lost object, which undergoes some form of change during its period of disappearance" (65). Thus, anyone who has gone through a trauma remains a slave to the past, and the desperation with which they try to emotionally detach from that recurring experience can only increase the intensity of the post-traumatic stress instead of ever curing it. According to Rothfork, "emotions are not only technically meaningless — requiring language to explain them — they often overwhelm us, causing us to lose direction and purpose" (Confucianism 2004). According to Ray, this emotional overplay can be regarded as a "deficiency of realism", which "betrays the narrator's repressed, erring human self" (306).

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the authors with overt psychotherapeutic intentions. His novels place great emphasis on the sense of identity and therefore the traumatic past plays a decisive role in each of them. The conflicting feelings experienced by Ishiguro's characters create distorted temporal dimensions as they scan "their pasts for clues to their sense of identity, loss, or abandonment" (Childs 23). The same thing happens in real life: The basis of any emotional healing is to accept that temporal sequences are simultaneous. Humans can only perceive physical time linearly, although they are all the embodiment of temporal simultaneity: past, present and future at the same time. But how could Ishiguro's characters live only in the present, when the past is tentacular (the memories of unresolved life experiences), and the future overwhelming (the incurable hope that traumas can be cured, as well as post-traumatic stress)? The only way out is through.

Healing the attitude to the past is the first step towards a truly present life, in which expectations are related to daily actions, not to the emotional and mental images of past traumas that go deeper and deeper into the subconscious (Poidevin 27). As prisoners of sick memories and post-traumatic stress disorder, Ishiguro's characters find it hard to master the present emotions adjacent to their recollections. Memories can have as many faces as one's present states. Either consciously or unconsciously, Ishiguro's characters ignore or alter their haunting past, thus changing their timeline, and consequently, their destiny.

Ishiguro states that he is so interested in the difference between individual and collective memory that he seriously considers personifying the two types of memory in a future work (Vorda and Herzinger 1994). The life of a society is less dramatic than the life of an individual living in a particular period. Ishiguro's psycho-literary therapy aims at teaching his readers how to formulate concise existential questions in order to find true answers to them. That is why his characters seem incapable of change and his plots remain somehow unresolved at the end. The afterlife of his novels becomes intense for all his readers, who have implicitly accepted this interactive psycho-literary interconnection since the first pages. The author knows that the only way to heal the past is by embracing it, not by resigning oneself to it. The past, in its non-physicality, has its own individuality and mind, and most often it seems to become the deviant weapon of a bad-intended and misdirected Janus, the two-faced Roman god of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and endings, looking to the future and to the past at the same time (Forsythe 14).

Any psychotherapeutic modality indicates that healing comes only from clarity. The past is the most interpretable aspect of one's life. One sees it as one is in every present moment of one's life, so everything seems like an endless battle, with no chance of ever winning it (Gergen 21). When one's subconscious becomes convinced of the futility of fighting the past, one is lost – one's present gets sick and so does one's future. Therefore, the only solution is to get into the eye of the tornado, where there is always very calm weather, regardless of the cyclonic strength (Wurman 12). One should therefore let the past be exactly what it is, a shape-shifter, while trying to re-experience it with the heart, not with the mind. This is called allowing, not acceptance. The British-Japanese Kazuo Ishiguro knows all these quantum-psychological truths, which is why his characters are obsessed with the past. All his novels are related, in one way or another, to the past, especially to the pre- or post-war

periods. This aspect may turn his novels into historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 5), but the real reason why the author himself declares that he is attracted to these periods is that they best test all socio-human values (Lewis 46).

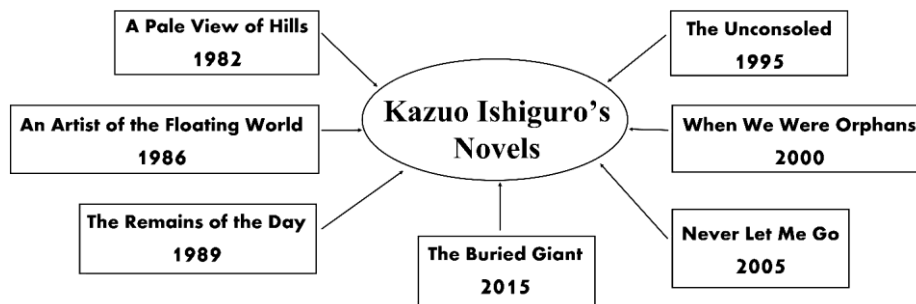


Figure 1: Kazuo Ishiguro's novels

Except for *The Buried Giant*, all of Ishiguro's novels are written in the first person. Narrators are normal people, with obvious flaws and traumas – as obvious as the subjectivity of their storytelling (Wong 17). Ishiguro writes for the subconscious of his readers: One always likes or considers influential the things one resonates or interacts with, either actively or passively.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's mother knows her older daughter's suffering, but does nothing to save her. For this reason, the reader is inclined to judge her. Instead of doing this, the reader should think of a particular corollary of the law of magnetism: One is not allowed to change anyone but oneself. It seems that Etsuko knows this truth. To intervene in one's life makes the other responsible for altering one's destiny. If mother Etsuko had done it, she might have saved Keiko, or not. Parental choices can irreversibly affect children's lives – this is another truth that the reader will acknowledge by reading Ishiguro's first novel. Can this book help readers become better parents? Yes, it can if, instead of judging mother Etsuko's imperfections, readers choose to focus on the life lessons she indirectly teaches them.

Does the main character in *An Artist of the Floating World* learn anything from his past mistakes? Apparently not. Ono lives in an illusion until the end. He cannot heal his past, nor can he reconfigure his present. His regrettable existential blindness should teach the reader that honesty is always the best policy while choices and decisions underlie the architecture of human life. *Dare! Get rid of all masks!* Ishiguro advises his readers through

his second novel. The most important thing is to be oneself in every life circumstance. Professional life should complement, not replace, personal life, which is about feeling good. The main point of reference, even when one knows nothing about the law of universal magnetism, is emotion – what one feels in every instance. Feeling good, beyond the ego, is the only true purpose of life. No profession, no matter how good one may be at it, is worthwhile if it causes one to lose the sincerity of one's open heart.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' personal life does not matter when it comes to preserving his professional dignity. *Persona* actually means wearing social masks, and, when such subpersonalities engulf one's true identity, one's life is wasted. Stevens reflects on his lost opportunities. What would his life have been like if his professional relationship with Miss Kenton had turned into a love affair? The title *The Remains of the Day* seems to have negative connotations when, in reality, it does not. The remains represent Stevens' present and future alike. Liberation from the past is healing. Stevens can therefore be anyone, even the author himself. For the fear of acknowledging his feelings for Miss Kenton, Ishiguro considers Stevens a monster the world should be afraid of yet it is not (Mason 336). There are many cases when humans experience intense feelings of which they can become fully aware only in retrospect. All humans are afraid of being hurt in love, so the natural temptation is to run away from it. It is in human nature to choose the easiest path – it becomes too tiring to be constantly vigilant. What should the reader learn, then? That life is no joke – choices will always define human existence. All humans can be good in positive circumstances and reactive in negative ones. Exaggeration and rigidity are sickness. When humans put too much value on something transitory, they will eventually lose. The same happens when they choose not to experience everything their hearts tell them to do. A wasted life is like a bad joke, or rather like failed banter. The old butler Stevens knows this best.

At first sight, *The Unconsoled* is difficult to digest in a relaxed reading. Both its form and substance may give headaches to those who desperately want to tie up all the loose ends before the book finishes. In fact, this novel is one of the most special literary books when it comes to the law of universal magnetism, comparable perhaps only with James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*, famous for its experimental style. That is why the critique of this book is dichotomous: Those who cannot see its psychological purpose consider it very bad while the others can feel its therapeutic energy to the point of ignoring its weird literary style. The piano player Ryder can honour neither his promises nor his commitments. He is the typical modern man, who

suffers from chronic lack of time. The frustration caused by one's inability to control one's life can have serious effects on one's wellbeing. The first step humans need to take for a real change is to get rid of everything that does not serve them: mental and physical decluttering. The less they have to do, the more they can focus on what is really important. Without focus, human life is wasted. *The Unconsoled* can thus become a meditative novel if the reader is willing to give up looking for specific answers while reading it. That is to say, it should be read through observation, without letting personal thoughts interfere with the narrative thread. If the reader manages to stay emotionally or cognitively detached, or both, away from the main character's anxious stream of consciousness, they will have an enlightening experience at the end. The novel is mainly about spatio-temporal freedom as well as inner liberation.

*When We Were Orphans* is a novel about truth and falsehood, reality and illusion. One pertinent question that might early arise in the reader's mind is why Christopher Banks has to wait more than a quarter of a century to return to Shanghai and try to find his parents. In his own words, such a long time was necessary for him to become a true professional in his field, a condition absolutely necessary to ensure the success of his search. But, given the type of investigations he was undertaking to acquire the highest level of expertise, the importance he gives to his profession can only reflect "the limits of Christopher's limited psyche" (Jaffe 2001). It is from this moment on that the reader can assume, without mistaking much, that the notorious detective will rather present a world of his own than facts and events of an objective reality – pretty much like all the other protagonists of Ishiguro's novels. Can finding the truth bring Christopher Banks peace of mind? Delving deep into the past for solving its mysteries could very well be a two-edged sword. *Let bygones be bygones. Let the sleeping dogs lie.* What should readers learn from Ishiguro's fifth novel? When humans dedicate their present to solving the mysteries of the past, they can risk wasting their lives.

The dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* aims to answer major existential questions: Does life purpose really exist? According to mystics like Osho (11) and Sadhguru (2014), the only true, egoless life purpose is to be. Can love heal or solve everything? Unfortunately, the answer is no, it cannot, since humankind has always experienced too many kinds of hurtful love. True love, with its absolute detachment from the object of love, can indeed change and heal, yet it is rarely experienced in its authenticity by the

human being. Can artistic creation be the healing expression of the soul? What happens to those who are not creators, only consumers, like the character Tommy? All people are inherently creators and consumers alike, they just need to be aware of these two innate qualities. Creation, of any kind, is indeed the expression of the soul. Therefore, there can also be negative creations, stemming from tormented souls. What does cloning mean, metaphorically? Are we all, in fact, mimetic, which turns freedom into a much-coveted illusion (Girard 4)? Individuality is understood in an extreme sense by modern society, precisely because of the fear of accepting that humans are, in fact, very similar in behaviour and appearance. Thus, the novel may convey a message that many critics may still find very controversial: Humans cannot change their destiny; they can only make peace with it. Allowing brings peace of mind, and peace of mind can lead to unexpected changes. *Never Let Me Go* means *Always Let Go* through reverse psychology! A novel wherein acceptance and rebellion intersect brilliantly against the backdrop of a cyclical temporality is *Cloud Atlas*. The clone Sonmi-451 does not accept her destiny, and the universe submits to her wish. David Mitchell's novel is thus viewed as one of the most daring images of reincarnation and spacetime travel.

*The Buried Giant* could be regarded as a historical novel, although the fantasy of its post-Arthurian setting cannot be compared to the beleaguered locations of humanity's more recent past. As usual, Ishiguro analyses the fallibility of human memory through both individual and collective lenses. What prompts spouses and nations to awaken the buried giants of safely secreted recollections? It is always the thirst for knowledge, old and new. Whether they acknowledge it or not, humans invariably yearn to find out what is lying beneath the seemingly still surface of their reason: "There's a whole society where people are suffering some sort of collective, and strangely selective, amnesia. [...] There's a couple who fears that without their shared memory, their love will vanish. [...] the nation around them is in some kind of strange tense peace" (Chang 2015).

By virtue of their psychotherapeutic nature, Kazuo Ishiguro's novels are among the most interactive postmodern novels. This is, however, a case of passive-meditative interactivity: Readers have to become observers in order for their subconscious to assimilate the life lessons offered literarily. The characters' flaws and traumas can heal readers of their own, yet only if the latter are offered proper tools of psychotherapeutic decoding. One such instrument is the Japanese aesthetic perspective of wabi-sabi – 侘寂 – which



invites to embracing the impermanence, transience and faultiness of existence, in all its manifestations, as it stems from the three Buddhist marks of existence: impermanence (aniccā), suffering (duḥkha) and lack of identity (anattā). In Richard Powell's own words, "[w]abi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect" (5). Although initially understood in a resigned way, the two terms later took on a liberating connotation, blending the quiet minimalism of wabi with the experienced beauty of sabi (Koren 4-6). In the same vein, Ishiguro's novels invite readers to embrace their own representations of wabi-sabi as they glorify the decaying nature of all there is and lives, instead of condemning or reacting to it. As such, readers will acquire another sense of literary assimilation, if they know from the outset that they will start to read psychotherapeutic novels with which their individuality can resonate.

**WORKS CITED:**

- Caruth, Cathy. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction". *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 3-12.
- Chang, Elysha. "A Language That Conceals: An interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Electric Lit*, Mar.2015. [electricliterature.com/a-language-that-conceals-an-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-author-of-the-buried-giant/](http://electricliterature.com/a-language-that-conceals-an-interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-author-of-the-buried-giant/).
- Childs, Peter. *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2012.
- Forsythe, *Time in Roman Religion*. Routledge, 2014.
- Gergen, Kenneth J. "Mind, Text, and Society: Self-memory in Social Context". *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self Narrative*. Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush (eds) Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994.
- Girard, René. *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York, 1988.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. Vintage International, 1990.

- . *An Artist of the Floating World*. Vintage International; 1st edition, 1989.
- . *The Remains of the Day*. Faber and Faber, 1989.
- . *The Unconsoled*. Bloomsbury House, 2013.
- . *When We Were Orphans*. Vintage, 2001.
- . *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2010.
- . *The Buried Giant*. Faber and Faber, 2015.
- Jaffe, Valerie. "Fatal Ambition: Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*." *The Brooklyn Rail. Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Culture*. May-June 2001, [www.brooklynrail.org/2001/05/books/fatal-ambition](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2001/05/books/fatal-ambition).
- Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. Faber & Faber, 2002.
- Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1994.
- Lewis, Barry. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester Univ. Press, 2001.
- Mason, Gregory. "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 30, No.3, 1989.
- Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Random House, 2004.
- Osho. "Life – Philosophy – Purpose?" *The Book of Wisdom*. [www.osho.com/osho-online-library/osho-talks/life-philosophy-purpose-cd0d1884-c75?p=7907293e8269f993db220917fe2c3d6b](http://www.osho.com/osho-online-library/osho-talks/life-philosophy-purpose-cd0d1884-c75?p=7907293e8269f993db220917fe2c3d6b).
- Poidevin, Robin. *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Powell, Richard R. *WabiSabi Simple*. Adams Media, 2004.
- Ray, Kasturi Sinha. "Memory and Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels: A Review." *Literary Herald*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2017, pp. 292-309.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Course of Recognition*, translated by David Pellauer. Harvard UP, 2007.
- Rothfork, John. "Confucianism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*." *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2004, [www.qlrs.com/essay.asp?id=394](http://www.qlrs.com/essay.asp?id=394).
- Sadhguru. "What Is the Purpose of Life?" *Sadhguru Exclusive*. July 2014, [www.isha.sadhguru.org/au/en/wisdom/article/what-is-the-purpose-of-life](http://www.isha.sadhguru.org/au/en/wisdom/article/what-is-the-purpose-of-life).
- Vorda, Allan, and Kim Herzinger. "Stuck on the Margins: An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*. Houston: Rice UP, 1994.
- Wong, Cynthia F. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005.
- Wurman, Joshua. "Doppler on Wheels." Center for Severe Weather Research, 2008.