



Failing to Bury the Giant: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Violence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Seventh Novel

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Abstract

If *The Buried Giant* had been intended as a historiographic metafiction, its setting could have been replaced with recent locations having witnessed great wars, but then Kazuo Ishiguro would have unwillingly written a reportage-like novel instead of a historical fantasy dealing with magical ways of forgetting past atrocities in order to secure a peaceful future. While in his previous novels Ishiguro introduces only mental monsters, in *The Buried Giant* the characters are sent searching for their forgotten past in a post-Arthurian England with ogres that carry off children, pixies that render people ill and dragons that can erase all memories. The current study proposes an interdisciplinary analysis of *The Buried Giant*, drawing upon psychology, game theory and behavioural economics in order to convey personal and collective violence in connection to power, racism, trauma and spatio-temporal mobility. In the end, all events stem from choices and decisions, which are essentially emotional.

Keywords: Violence; Journey and Mobility; Game Theory; Behavioural Economics Interdisciplinarity; *The Buried Giant*.

Identity Quest

The British writer of Japanese origins Kazuo Ishiguro has won not only his labeling as a global novelist but also his universality as a writer of the human condition by virtue of his psychotherapeutic fiction, which can timelessly tend to both individual and collective traumas. “Recently I’ve been interested in the difference between personal memory and societal memory, and I’m tempted almost to personify these two things” said Ishiguro in his conversation with Neil Gaiman, in 2015 (para. 67).

The Buried Giant may not contain such personifications, yet it takes the reader on a journey down memory lane, both individually and collectively, along with the characters involved in the narrator’s retrospection. While in his previous novels Ishiguro introduces only mental monsters in the form of delusional memories that point out how deep the iceberg of trauma really is, in his seventh novel the author sends his characters searching for their lost past throughout magical realms inhabited by physical monsters. Forgetting is, in this case, a disease magically induced in a world where there are ogres that can carry off children and pixies that can render people ill and dragons that can erase all memories. Despite such evil creatures, there is peace between Britons and Saxons as people are no longer driven by their bloody instincts to defend their national identity.

While writing his seventh novel, Ishiguro considered several recent locations that had witnessed great wars: “I did think about setting it in a very real contemporary, tense situation. [...] I wanted to look at a situation in which a generation (or two) has been living uneasily in

peace, where different ethnic groups have been coexisting peaceably and then something happens that reawakens a tribal or societal memory” (Chang, 2015, para. 24). However, the author has chosen an early medieval setting for his fantasy, a relatively confusing post-Arthurian period with little evidence of what happened between Britons and Saxon migrants. Due to the forgetting mist, the knights of the Round Table are only a vague memory in the minds of very few people while an old Sir Gawain retrospectively tries to justify his bloody deeds in front of those who remember his glorious days.

The main reason why the British-Japanese author has decided against a more realistic setting in the end is that he does not feel ready to write a reportage-like book, although he considers such a prospect in the near future: “Some people write those kinds of books brilliantly. It’s almost like reportage. They’re very powerful and very urgent books. Maybe in the future I’ll feel compelled to write that kind of specific and current book, but right now I feel that my strength as a fiction writer is my ability to take a step back” (Chang, 2015, para. 26). As usual, Ishiguro wants his themes to apply to the human condition in all its fallible greatness, whether regarded through individual or collective lenses, or both, as is the case with his seventh novel:

I prefer to create a more metaphorical story that people can apply to a variety of situations, personal and political. Setting the book in a [...] magical world allows me to do that. Every society, every person even, has some buried memories of violence or destruction. *The Buried Giant* asks whether awakening these buried things might lead to another terrible cycle of violence. And whether it’s better to do this at the risk of cataclysm, or whether it’s better to keep these memories buried and forgotten. (Chang, 2015, para. 27-28)

The protagonists, Axl and Beatrice are an elderly Briton couple that lives secluded in a community that has rejected their company for reasons no one seems to remember. They have neither children nor grandchildren around, so they can rely only on one another, which deepens their already strong love. Not remembering their life together in the distant past reiterates the importance of their memories for preserving the identity of their togetherness as well as their own individualities. In the same vein, lack of remembrance in their community shows the weaknesses of a nation that cannot rely on its past. Ishiguro makes it clear from the outset that the real names of his main characters are not of paramount importance: “In one such area on the edge of some jagged hills, lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps these were not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them” (2015, p. 4). However, Beatrice’s name may remind of the Medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s courtly love for Beatrice Portinari. The author of the narrative poem *The Divine Comedy*, one of the finest pieces of literature to date, met Beatrice only twice in his life yet his feelings for her had the power to ignite his creativity and send it to its highest peaks (Parker, 1993, p.131).

Trusting their enduring love story, the elderly Briton couple sets off in quest of their lost recollections. Along the way, they encounter people who either want the same thing as them or fight against it. So, according to the author, the buried giant of painfully secreted memories applies to marriages as well as nations: “This is essentially a kind of a love story [...] about the long haul of love. [...] I was fascinated about how societies remember and forget. So, exactly the same questions that fascinate me about a society that buries memories of past atrocities seem to apply to a marriage. So [...] at the centre of the story there is this journey and this elderly couple maybe going on their last journey together” (NPR, 2015, para. 3). Beatrice is plagued by a “secret pain”, which is more than a physical wound. However, as a token of her true love for her husband, she spares him of her turmoil, although Axl is aware that her suffering will not go away. The remainder of an unknown sadness makes the couple intuit that some sort of disagreement may have existed between them with regard to their son, and it pains them to think that their relation could have been tense for reasons they cannot comprehend at the moment.

For the first time, Ishiguro uses a third-person perspective, from an unspecified

Failing to Bury the Giant: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Violence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Seventh Novel

moment in the future, in order to present the intricate cobweb of individualities subjected to memory loss and recovery. Unlike the narrators in his other novels, the storytelling boatman in *The Buried Giant* is aware of his proneness to subjectivity and therefore makes it a conscious act to convey people, places and events as realistically as possible, even though his account may often become dramatic given the roughness of the historical period described. It is the first time that narrative unreliability has been emphasised at such a great scale, although this may also be a device based on reverse psychology, to make the reader relax and take everything at face value. This gives more freedom to the characters to express their thoughts and feelings throughout the novel as well as interpret their beneficial or detrimental interconnection. Ishiguro's boatman, however, seems more than a passive guide who presumably leads souls to their afterlife – he can carry couples across the water to the island of death, where they can remain in peace for eternity, yet only after having tested their marital love. It is therefore up to the reader to decide whether Ishiguro's narrator embodies a modern psychopomp or Hades' boatman Charon, who ferries the spirits of the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron in return for a coin each (Sullivan, 1950, pp. 11-17).

The narrator first appears when Axl and Beatrice start looking for their son and thus the two protagonists learn about the psychological difficulty of the conjugal love test. According to his own words, the boatman is able to tell true from fake love at a glance by analysing couples' memories, both good and bad. What he usually discovers is that people have many unsolved issues that prevent them from spending their eternity together:

“But isn't it hard, sir,” Beatrice asked, “to see what truly lies in people's hearts? Appearances deceive so easily.”

“That's true, good lady, but then we boatmen have seen so many over the years it doesn't take us long to see beyond deceptions. Besides, when travellers speak of their most cherished memories, it's impossible for them to disguise the truth. A couple may claim to be bonded by love, but we boatmen may see instead resentment, anger, even hatred. Or a great barrenness. Sometimes a fear of loneliness and nothing more. Abiding love that has endured the years – that we see only rarely. When we do, we're only too glad to ferry the couple together.” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 52)

The old woman that meets the old couple at some point, whom the boatman has separated from her deceased husband, conveys the picture of an island with numerous people that cannot meet each other. The image may very well stand for the estrangement between people in couples, groups, communities, societies and nations – although they are invariably pushed apart by their egos and survival instincts towards loneliness, competition and judgment. However, on hearing that true couples, rare though they are, have the privilege of going together to the island, Axl and Beatrice get motivated to find the truth about their lost memories, hoping that it will save the remainder of their life as a couple as well as securing their togetherness in death. Until the end, though, the island remains only a mental construct, pieced together from rumours, impressions from those left waiting and unreliable characters like the boatman, who seems to have also deceived other couples. Throughout the journey, Axl calls Beatrice princess and fights with the pixies that attack her, although he is warned that “there's no cure to save” his spouse.

In the end, however, the elderly couple fails the boatman's test: As their memories return, Axl cannot forgive Beatrice for having cheated on him once while Beatrice cannot go over her husband's refusal to take her to their son's grave: “I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 357).

Human Interconnection

There are basically two types of human relations – cooperation and competition – and each of them indicates the blessing and curse of long-term and short-term memory (Ricciardi, et al., 2021,

pp. 1-3). While personal, communal, societal and national history cannot exist outside the memory spectrum, being able to retain every life aspect could have both positive and negative implications. Most often, later perspective adds to the original grudge or dislike, rendering crude feelings stronger with the passage of time.

The act of recollection is directly linked to both short-term and enduring feelings since events are not remembered only factually but also emotionally, and past emotions could grow stronger as time goes by, if left unresolved. According to Freud, there is a natural tendency towards aggressiveness in the individual, which has to manifest in certain contexts in order to preserve cooperation between people in other contexts: “It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (1962, p. 26).

Axl and Beatrice show the contemporary world, which gives people credit for being in the here and now, how barren life could be without the awareness of the past. While they can undergo their habitual activities, the two Britons cannot remember the purpose of their daily existence. However, collective forgetting may represent the only balm that can have effect on the national wounds:

To be obliged to forget – in the construction of the national present – is not a question of historical memory, it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problematic totalization of the national will. That strange time – forgetting to remember – is a place of partial identification inscribed in the daily plebiscite which presents the performative discourse of the people. (Bhabha, 2000, p. 311)

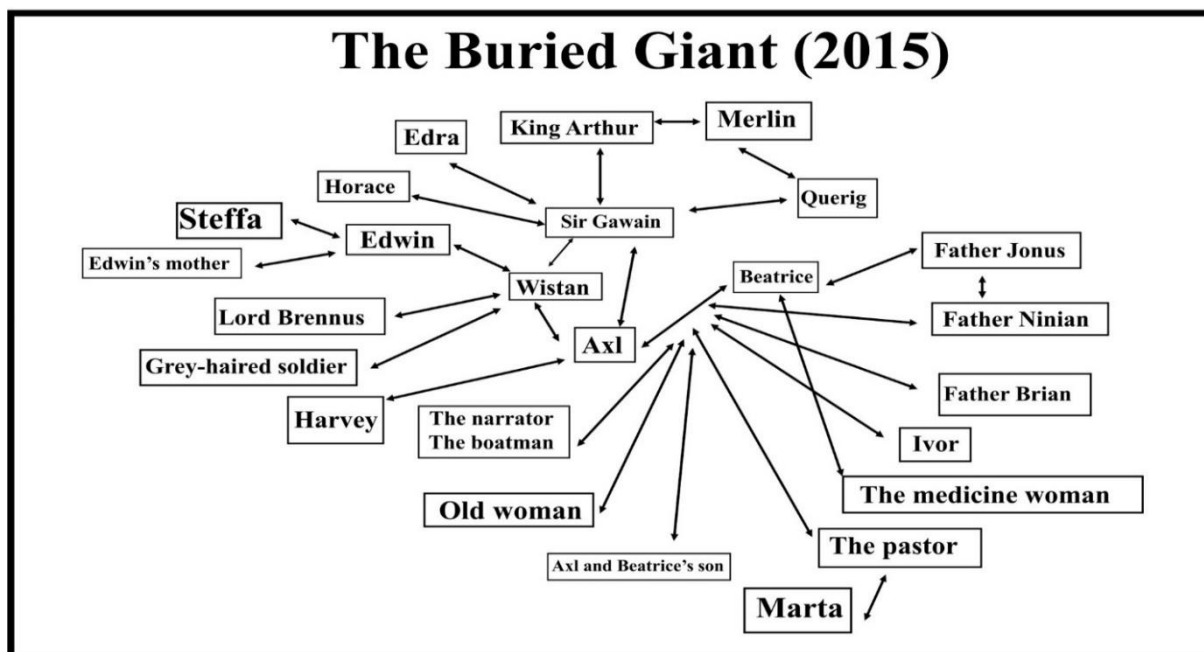


Figure 1: *The Buried Giant*, character relationships

At a collective level, the buried giant protects King Arthur’s decision to sacrifice innocent lives for a greater good while preserving others during the war, a contradiction hard to forget and forgive in a natural fashion. It was the wizard Merlin that had turned Querig’s breath into a mist to be breathed in by both Britons and Saxons and render them forgetful of King Arthur’s disregarding the treaty he had concluded with the Saxons. Merlin’s sorcery might have been well-intended in preventing the continuation of a useless war and covering up King Arthur’s the-end-justifies-the-means mentality, but it comes with a price: Along with the magically-induced peace comes the forgetfulness of individual pasts. On their way towards a different reality, Axl and Beatrice promise to help the Saxon Wistan kill the black-magicked dragoness, thus rekindling everyone’s memories. What the two main characters will find out in the end is that, although they are prepared to accept the bad memories along with the good ones, when the old order is re-

Failing to Bury the Giant: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Violence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Seventh Novel

established, some recollections have the power of recreating the chaos and the tragedies of the war. The conundrum thus deals with the morality of forcibly forgetting a bloody past for the sake of an artificially created peace. What is better: to forget or to dwell on the past atrocities and carry on with hatred and violence? A middle-ground solution – forgiving what cannot be forgotten and move on – is indeed difficult to achieve without conscious effort:

“Even so, sir, isn't it a strange thing when a man calls another brother who only yesterday slaughtered his children? And yet this is the very thing Arthur appears to have accomplished.”

“You touch the heart of it just there, Master Wistan. Slaughter children, you say. And yet Arthur charged us at all times to spare the innocents caught in the clatter of war. More, sir, he commanded us to rescue and give sanctuary when we could to all women, children and elderly, be they Briton or Saxon. On such actions were bonds of trust built, even as battles raged.” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 243)

Like the magically-induced amnesia in *The Buried Giant*, the recurrent symptom of not easily remembering (or not remembering at all) is an early sign of Alzheimer's disease, which does not always cling to the reality of aging. According to research, the gradual loss of memories as well as the inability of making new ones, will culminate with completely erasing all of the non-verbal ones (Weller & Budson, 2018, p. 1161). Memories and emotions are strongly connected, not only through their contents, but also through their common location in the brains. Thus, amygdala is directly involved in the response and memory of emotions, especially fear, while hippocampi are essential in learning and remembering as well as forming and storing memories. Their location in the limbic part of the brain implies the importance of emotions in all aspects of remembering as well as the decision-making process (Ressler, 2010, pp. 1117-1119). Nowadays, neurosciences seek to offer a better understanding of the human brain, showing how its parts collaborate in the daily processes of the decision-making process. The Triune Brain is, for instance, a particular division of the brain areas that is especially important in better visualising and understanding the true nature of people's preferences, choices, decisions, and actions (MacLean, 1990, p. 34). In the light of this division of the brain, studies show that the first brain thinks, the second brain feels while the third brain, and the oldest, decides. In conjunction with what the psychology says about the preponderance of the subconscious mind in the decision-making process, which resides in both the reptilian and limbic brain, it is therefore of utter importance for humans to be aware of their natural tendencies when making choices and decisions. Thus, whether regarded from a neuroscientific or a psychological perspective, emotional decisions can most times lead to large-scale disasters.

While the Ishigurian case study does not entirely rule out the possibility of people being plagued by a collective brain disorder that causes them to forget, it proves that the process of forgetting or misremembering may not always be a sign of neurological dysfunctions, but rather a prevalent feature of the human mind. Connecting the reality of dementia with the effects of long-term and short-term memory loss in Ishiguro's fantasy could be yet another proof that the author pushes the right buttons in the reader's mind when he reiterates his favourite theme with every new novel. By making his readership dwell on the capacity of the mind to remember and forget, Ishiguro implicitly emphasises the interchangeability of all life aspects in connection to the fragility of human interconnection. Along with the familial dramas triggered by the loss of personal identity, Ishiguro stresses the shifty nature of individual and collective choices and decisions in the course of time: “A society, a nation, goes on and on, for centuries: it can turn Nazi for a while and cause mayhem. But then the next generation comes along and says, you know, ‘We're not going to make that mistake again.’ Whereas an individual who happens to live through the Nazi era in Germany, that's his whole life” (Gaiman, 2015, para. 67). From a behavioural perspective, Ishigurian characters' quest for regaining their identities proves the preponderance of the confirmation bias in people's lives. Once someone has formed a belief, they selectively search for relevant information that confirms that belief while ignoring or rejecting anything that may prove it wrong. For instance, Beatrice and Axl want to find their

memories in order to reconfirm the strength of their love for each other. When the fog is about to rise, Beatrice becomes somewhat conscious that their bias may be shaken by a past reality beyond their control:

“Axl, tell me. 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?”

“Didn’t you say it yourself, princess? Our life together’s like a tale with a happy end, no matter what turns it took on the way.”

“I said so before, Axl. Yet now it may even be we’ll slay Querig with our own hands, there’s a part of me fears the mist’s fading.” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 217)

Ishiguro wants to make it clear that it is not Wistan’s courage that steers the course of events back to war, but the weakness of circumstances, culminating with the aftermath of Querig’s inglorious killing. In the end, memories are restored to people and nations, which leads to the resuming of the war between the Britons and the Saxons as well as the breaking of Axl and Beatrice’s union. Induced amnesia cannot last forever, so the only solution humankind can find is learn to forgive whatever tormenting realities cannot be forgotten.

Axl and Beatrice’s quest for identity proves exactly the opposite in real life. As the father of American literature says, “all life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better” (Emerson, 1984, p. 294). Nature is therefore within each representative of humankind. All ordinary humans can be great as long as they realise that no past moment can be more important than the present. Life is therefore a process full of experiences, not a quest or a journey with a purpose to be fulfilled at the end. “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment” Emerson also says as he promotes self-reliance (2014, p. 13). Axl and Beatrice’s attempt to find themselves indeed proves that only by living out of the limitations of traditions, religious forms and social habits can human beings find their true identities.

Emotional Intelligence

Ishiguro’s novel gives birth to many questions with psychological and socio-political implications: Why do conflicts between people degenerate into wars? Is it a long-lasting solution to consciously forget past atrocities, although they still stir in the subconscious? Is it possible to bury for good the giants of injustice and violence in the depths of the collective subconscious? Do married people really forget the painful moments of their lives together? Can people really forgive their spouses for having hurt them? Whose side of the truth is really genuine? Is being human, and therefore prone to error, truly punishable?

At the beginning of the novel two warring nations co-exist peacefully, magically oblivious to their prior confrontations. Yet what does not come naturally, from within, cannot last, Ishiguro wants the reader to understand. The characters in the novel go to great lengths to recover what they consider to be the essence of their very existence, and when the mist dissipates, an ethnic tragedy is resumed. Suddenly, King Arthur is no longer regarded as the great hero that defended his lands from invaders, but as the leading Briton figure that urged his people to massacre the Saxons only to fail to drive his enemies away. In the end, nothing historically significant was achieved, although a painful price had been paid. In other words, Ishiguro points out that, in hindsight, nothing else will be remembered, apart from the bloodiness of the useless wars and the failure of keeping Britain ethnically pure. Moreover, what seemed at the time the right thing to do – to fight for keeping the boundaries of a country safe – becomes, in retrospect, exactly the opposite: What would have become of modern Britain if history had not recorded the inevitable intermingling of the Britons and Saxons, however bloody at the time?

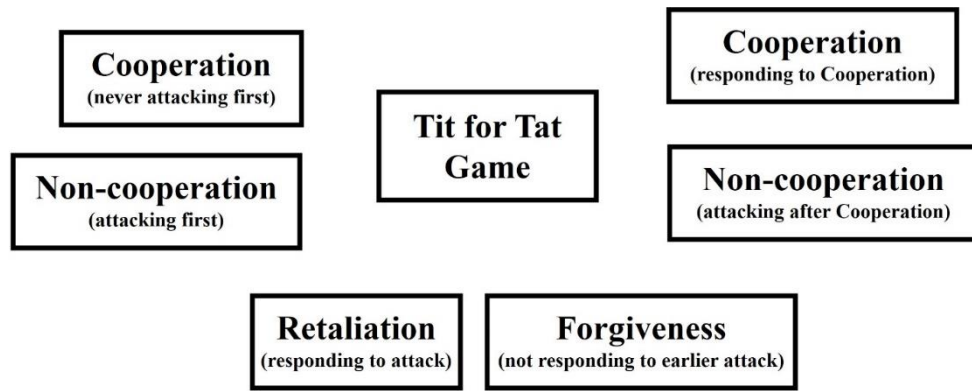


Figure 2: Tit-for-tat strategies

The magical forgetfulness in the novel could be the equivalent of consciously pushing at the back of the mind that which hurts. It may be feasible at a personal level, in couples that share a life together, yet the collective mind is a living organism, a system based on the interconnection of millions of individual minds, so its proneness to entropy and chaos is a universal truth. If one mind fails to consciously forget, it has a butterfly effect upon the wellbeing of the entire system (Abraham & Ueda, 2000, p. 91). One moral of the novel is that painful memories can be a choice. However, the author cannot separate the habitual memory from the historical memory – had he been able to do that, his characters would have most likely sifted through their subconscious and chosen to remember only the endearing events from their personal and collective pasts. Selective memory can be a better choice when one is still conscious of one's past pains. Therefore, when all memory is restored, the revengeful part of the war will inevitably come back. The Saxons will thus retaliate, forgetting their recent alliance with the Britons, since old wounds reopen and the dead are asking for revenge. It is payback time for the Saxons. This is a typical case of tit-for-tat reality, a strategy that shows the cooperating or the competing results of repeating the prisoner's dilemma game (Rapoport, et al., 2015, pp.1-11). The expression is mainly a game-theoretical reformulation of the saying *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*, which comes in line with most of the teachings in the Old Testament.

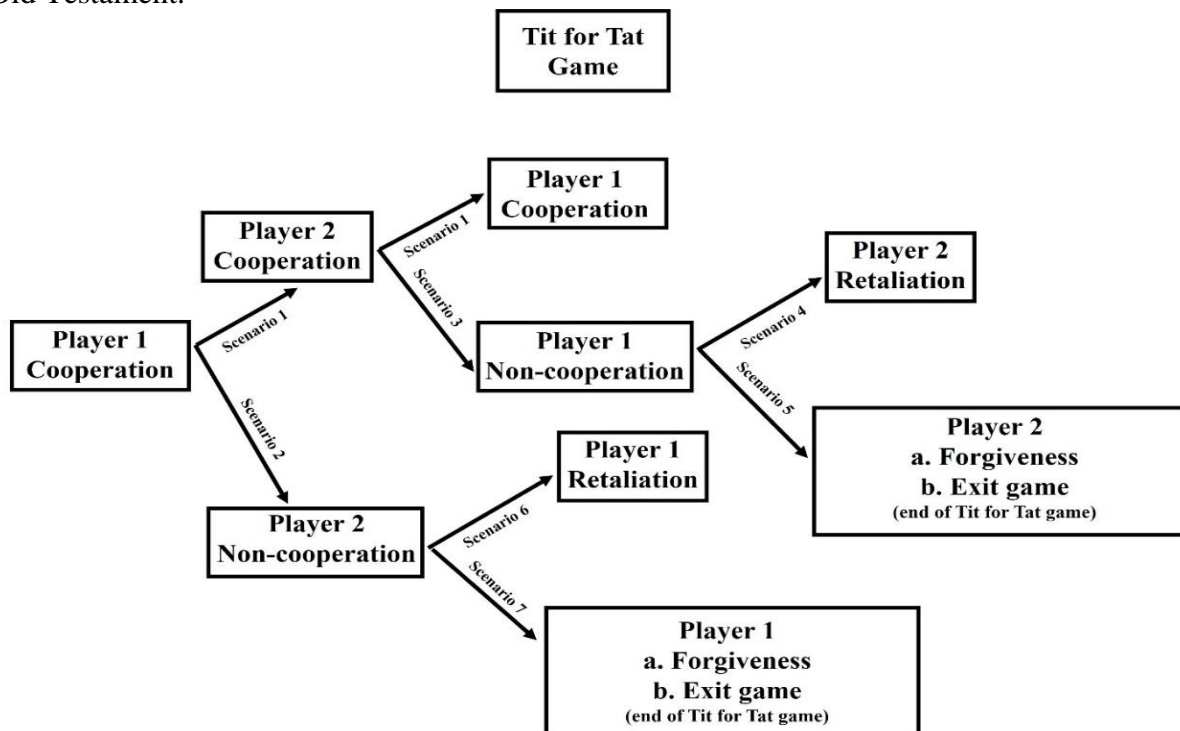


Figure 3: Tit-for-tat scenarios

In the prisoner’s dilemma, the players’ cooperation seems to be the best option. Nevertheless, they both find Nash equilibrium in confessing to their crime, because they have no reason to believe that they will not be betrayed by the other. In strictly competitive zero-sum games, there is only one strategy, in which one player wins while the other loses (Forst & Lucianovic, 1977, pp. 55-64). In *The Buried Giant*, The Britons and the Saxons start cooperation after having played a combination of the prisoner’s dilemma and the zero-sum game underlying the bloody rules of any war. They start defecting, thinking that the other party will betray them anyway. Then, the longevity of their conflict turns their interaction into the zero-sum strategy that is applicable to wars. At first sight, it appears that the Britons won while the Saxons lost when, at an existential level, the large number of casualties on both sides indicates that nobody won and everybody lost. It is such a pity when human lives become a price to pay in strategical interactions!

	Prisoner 2 Saxons				Country 2 Saxons		
Prisoner 1 Britons		Cooperate	Betray	Country 1 Britons		Peace	War
	Cooperate	1,1	5,0		Peace	0,0	-1,1
	Betray	0,5	3,3		War	1,-1	0,0
Table 1: Prisoner’s dilemma, Britons and Saxons				Table 2: Zero-sum game, Britons and Saxons			

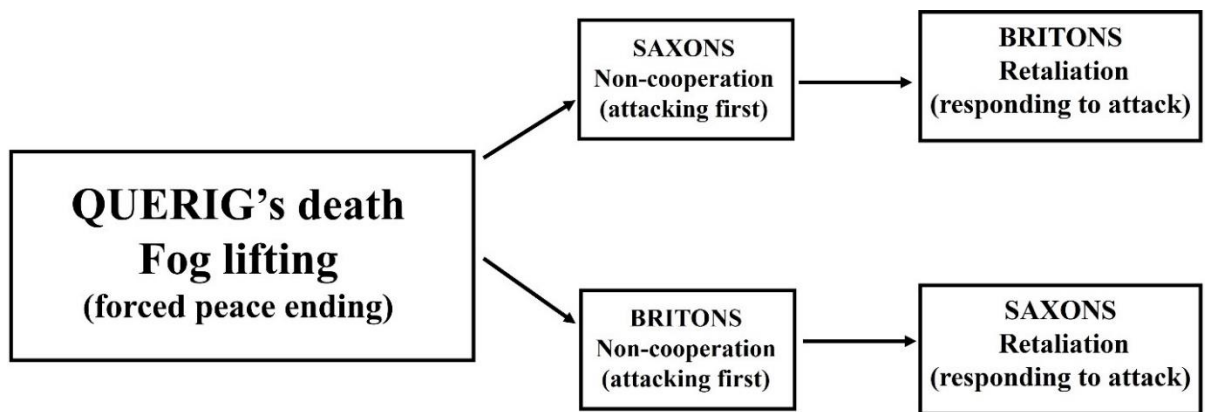


Figure 4: Tit-for-tat game after fog lifting

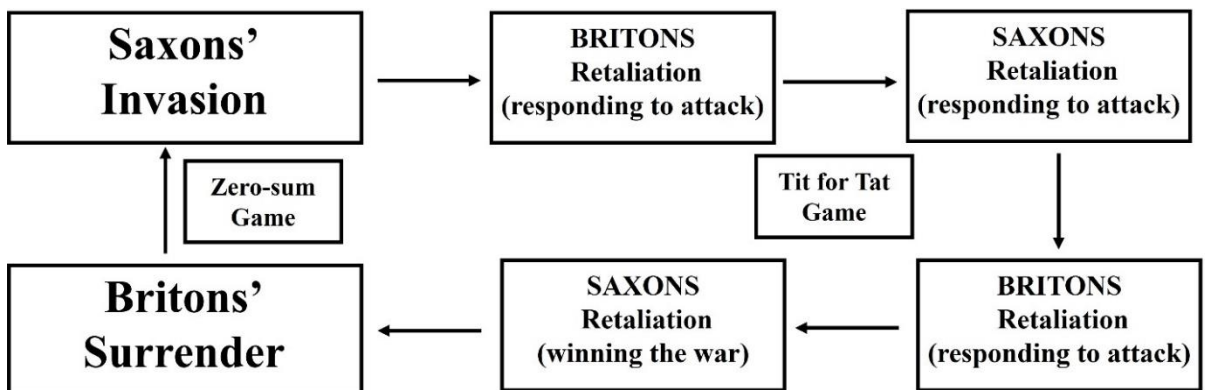


Figure 5: Saxons and Britons’ combating strategies

After the dragoness has been killed and all memories have returned, the Britons and the Saxons will start playing the competitive version of a tit-for-tat game. Young Saxon Edwin, who has taken no part in the old rivalries, is, for instance, made to vow by his companion

Failing to Bury the Giant: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Violence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Seventh Novel

Wistan that he will forever hate the Britons, including the ones he has befriended and grown up with: "It was Britons under Arthur slaughtered our kind. It was Britons took your mother and mine. We've a duty to hate every man, woman and child of their blood. So promise me this. Should I fall before I pass to you my skills, promise me you'll tend well this hatred in your heart. And should it ever flicker or threaten to die, shield it with care till the flame takes hold again" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 243). This is a case of an iterated prisoner's dilemma combined with zero-sum game, in which the Saxons will use the course of action previously employed by their opponents. In such hypersensitive environments, it is difficult to decide who betrayed first, although the starting point may be considered the Saxons' invasion. In that case, the interaction between the two nations can be regarded as a non-cooperative tit-for-tat game until one nation wins (Saxons) and turns the whole combating strategy into a zero-sum game.

Which is, then, better: to remember or to forget? The characters in *The Buried Giant* prove that there is no clear-cut answer to this question, as is the case with all existential questions. Humans may often choose not to remember their violent pasts, or not to focus their attention on what their past deeds mean for their present and future. This irrational form of escapism comes from the fear of confronting the emotional monsters of past events, or, in the case of the next generations, from their desire to detach from their ancestors' mistakes. However, humans cannot forget that which has hurt them, until they find a way to make peace with their past trauma. The fact that this strategy is hard to apply, especially at a collective level, has made leading propagandists believe that, through coercive strategies such as bans, interdictions or denials of painful truths, they can manipulate masses into forgetting they were wronged. The only way out of a psychological conundrum is through negotiation and cooperation for attaining the best outcome. Countries all over the world should therefore do their best to make and keep people aware of their decisive role in maintaining worldwide peace by using special nudges¹ and incentives instead of imposing mist-like forgetfulness on people: "Foolishness, sir. How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery? I see how devoutly you wish it, for your old horrors to crumble as dust. Yet they await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 278). So why do people go to war? Is it mostly because they are greedy or want to defend their religious or socio-economic visions? Or is it because of more emotional reasons, like taking revenge for past wrongdoings and fulfilling a national dream that requires mass sacrifice? Either way, wars are triggered by recurring images of conflictual events retrieved from the past through collective recollection based on the mass alteration of personal memory: "So many skulls we trod on before coming out to this sweet dawn! So many. No need to look down, one hears their cackle with each tread. How many dead, sir? A hundred? A thousand? Did you count, Master Axl? Or were you not there, sir" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 264)?

Is long-term cooperation only a dream, whether the participants are individuals, like Axl and Beatrice, or nations, like the Britons and the Saxons? Can a tit-for-tat game based on non-cooperation and retaliation change over time into an altruistic game, when people generally mimic the actions of their peers? A defeated country can give up its national pride and accept living in peace with its invaders when the disutility of losing so many lives in a continued war is definitely larger than the expected utility of fighting back. Taking full responsibility for harmful acts and apologising for past mistakes can thus be the best approach to rendering too active an ego dormant: "I accuse you of nothing. That great law you brokered torn down in blood! Yet it held well for a time. Torn down in blood! Who blames us for it now? Do I fear youth? Is it youth alone can defeat an opponent? Let him come, let him come" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 204). However, people can be more motivated to keep their distance than

¹ Nudges are non-invasive behaviour-changing strategies through which people are presented with options that can change their lives for the better so that they can choose whatever option feels right for them, without being forced or pushed into a certain decisional or behavioural direction (Möllenkamp, et al., 2019, pp. 1199-1209).

to try to live in peace with their neighbours. In other words, they will hesitate to accept the unknown payoff of a potential armistice or treaty than the predictable payoff of staying the same by doing nothing (status quo). There is no shame in admitting that humans usually fail to maximise the utility of their decisions for the natural reason that they have limited cognitive systems and time resources to weigh up all the options available. However, most wrong decisions are taken only when hearts are closed and egos rule. In other words, rationality can get on very well with an open heart so long as there are no competitive agendas. As Carl Sagan says, humankind can only come to terms with its history if it embraces the truths of existence and takes full responsibility for all their deeds, past, present and future: “The significance of our lives and our fragile planet is then determined only by our own wisdom and courage. We are the custodians of life's meaning. We long for a Parent to care for us, to forgive us our errors, to save us from our childish mistakes. But knowledge is preferable to ignorance. Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable. If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a worthy goal” (Sagan, 2011, p. 23). Not being able to acknowledge the mistakes of the past can lead to the perpetuation of hatred and vengeance, with consequences as serious as the ones Ishiguro presents in his novel: “Those small Saxon boys [...] would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken. Look how deep runs the lust for vengeance” (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 288)!

Ishiguro does not provide the reader with a solution. On the one hand, he states that leaving wounds untended may allow gangrene to set in. On the other hand, awakening the turmoil of the past will only make it come back in an avalanche. Yet, if the only solution were to force people into oblivion in order to achieve and maintain peace, then it should be done for the right reasons, not for satisfying personal interests. Personal selfishness can also prove a canker eating away at the heart of a nation. Good collective changes should therefore be founded on people's continued desire to fit in, as a positive aspect of the social conformity bias. People treasure their individualities yet, at the same time, they want to belong to groups with the same set of values, beliefs and behavioural patterns. Whether it shapes itself as peer pressure or remains a subconscious urge to socialise, social conformity underlies all great changes in the course of history, be they cooperative or conflictual (Bond, 2005, pp. 331-354). The rise of the magical fog brings people's memories back and, along with them, the differing social norms that make the Saxons and Britons' identities clash with each other. Their present need for conformity is replaced by an exacerbated sense of national identity, which reignites the old desire for war. With their memories erased, the Saxons are accepted as members of the Briton communities, as they willingly adopt the norms and laws of the conquerors although they still speak two different languages. If the fog had persisted, the differing views in individual perception among the members of the two nations would have been gradually replaced by collective mindsets and attitudes, whose automatism would have maintained both societal and personal harmony. What could nations or couples do, then, when neither normative nor informational² conformity can bring people together? On a societal level, nudging can be used by authorities to guide people towards decisions that are in their best interest. People that have already experienced violence or war may not need nudges from governmental or socio-economic entities to get involved into maintaining peace at all costs, but younger generations will most likely do. On an interpersonal level, love can be regarded as a form of human attachment in the same way as people fall in love with their possessions, especially when they handle them physically. Thus, however unfair it may sound, love can link two biases together, the endowment and IKEA³ effects, as it creates a sort of amalgamated attachment between

² Normative conformity refers to people's tendency to alter their behaviour to become part of a group. Informational conformity indicates their tendency to adhere to groups to gather useful information (Bond, 2005, pp. 331-354).

³ The endowment effect explains the value people give to the things they own. It was famously exemplified by behavioural scientists in studies showing that people's willingness to pay is quite

people. The latter type seems the strongest of all since life partners become conscious parts of each other's identities, so much so that they will not want to lose their sense of self by giving up on their beloved. Moreover, they will find it hard to separate from each other even when their relationship proves toxic. This is what love does from a scientific point of view: It imbues people with powerful energy so that losing each other will be perceived as a real threat to their own individualities. However, for all its biased nature, love, in all its manifestations, from compassion to respect, harmonises people's inner and outer worlds. Everything is binomial in the Universe: "That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing" (Scully, 2003, p. 321). Also, any wholeness is androgynous – that is, it assumes both feminine and masculine qualities, hence the principle of Yin and Yang (Abel & Hare, 1997, p. 34). All things considered, Axl and Beatrice's relationship proves the fusion between biases and existential truths. Both of them want their memories back. Although what they feel for each other at present is undeniably love, they are both afraid of what they might discover when their past returns in their minds, Axl much more than his spouse:

"Should Querig really die and the mist begin to clear. Should memories return, and among them of times I disappointed you. Or yet of dark deeds I may once have done to make you look at me and see no longer the man you do now. [...] Promise, princess, you'll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment. For what good's a memory's returning from the mist if it's only to push away another? [...] 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. 280)

In retrospect, Axl sees how egotistically he has approached the conflict with his wife, depriving her of her motherly right to see her son's grave, as a punishment for having had an extra conjugal affair:

"What did you hope to gain, sir, preventing not just your wife but even yourself grieving at your son's resting place?"

"Gain? There was nothing to gain, boatman. It was just foolishness and pride. And whatever else lurks in the depths of a man's heart. Perhaps it was a craving to punish, sir. I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance. A petty and black thing I did her, and my son also." (2015, p. 57)

All in all, Axl and Beatrice's present love fails to rewrite their past relationship. A behavioural explanation for their separation can come from the projection and the false consensus biases together with the hot-cold empathy gap (Luger-Bazinger & Kühberge, 2013, pp. 189-200). Axl has not anticipated correctly what his future reaction will be towards Beatrice when his memories are restored to him, although it is him that urges his wife to remain faithful to her current love for him no matter what she finds out about their shared past. Therefore, Axl cannot evaluate correctly what his future self will feel when his past is revealed, so he promises his wife to love her no matter what (the projection bias). On the other hand, both he and his wife overestimate the degree of resemblance between their individualities after a life spent together (the false consensus bias). Once again, the power of human emotions prevails over reason. People tend to believe that what they perceive, do and feel is shared by their peers and therefore easily understood, when, in reality, not even their future selves can keep the same mental and behavioural patterns (Loewenstein, et al., 2003, pp. 1209-1248).

In short, it is hard to take accurate long-term decisions from a present perspective. Axl believes he will still love Beatrice after learning the truth that lies in their common past based

different when ownership is involved in transactions (the mug and the pens example; the NCAA final four tournament tickets example) (Carmon & Ariely, 2000, pp. 360-370). The IKEA effect proves that people manifest a strong attachment even for things they do not actually own, but only work with, or pretend to own (Norton, et al., 2011, pp. 453-460).

on what he feels in the present for his wife. So does Beatrice, which prompts her to accept the boatman's matrimonial test. Accepting to remember their past dooms their present union and separates them forever. The Briton couple has underestimated the power of their emotions while overestimating the measure of reason in taking their decision to remain together (the hot-cold empathy gap). This is a ramification of the projection bias, since emotions are hot while the intellect is cold, hence the duality of the decision-making process. Axl and Beatrice are in a hot state, emotionally bound to each other as they are, so they believe they will stay together even when their reason processes their past. Being in a state of intense love, similar to courtship love at the beginning of a relationship between two people, seems to be the side effect of having forgotten their long life together. The enamoured couple inaccurately predicts how they will behave in the other state because they do not realise how powerfully their current emotions are influencing their present relationship.

If the boatman is really an embodiment of Charon and the island a metaphor for death, then Axl makes the right decision not to follow Beatrice, healthy as he still feels. On the other hand, it would be selfish of Beatrice to ask him to go with her, depriving him of the time left for him to spend in his physicality. However, Ishiguro prompts the reader to ask themselves whether Axl and Beatrice could have saved their relationship somewhere along the way. The answer is certainly yes, by training their emotional intelligence – that is, by learning to name and deal with their partner's feelings correctly as well as with their own (Perez, et al., 2005, pp. 181-201). It is no small feat for humans to become aware of their feelings, let alone of others', so it is quite understandable why Axl and Beatrice fail to identify their strong emotions in their common past, especially during Arthurian times, when the psychology of the human being was a mere chimera (Mayer, 2004, p. 2). Failing to give their feelings accurate names, the protagonists further fail to use them to their advantage in their choices and decisions related to their own family. Thus, in the end, they fail to tackle their disagreements and regulate the strong feelings that lead to their estrangement.

By being true to themselves and each other, Axl and Beatrice would have stopped venting off their frustrations and sadness on the other and started rebuilding their relation. Honing their adaptive skills would have saved not only their relation, but also their son's life – such is the power of sincerity in a relationship! However, considering the hard times that they were living in, Axl and Beatrice still had a special relationship, such as it was. Yet again, Ishiguro indirectly urges the reader to admit the fallibility of the human condition and its high dependency on the socio-economic environment in certain historical periods. Regardless of age, it would have been impossible for the couple to harness and manage emotional states like denial, anger, sadness, depression, fear, anxiety or stress, and all the more so for two nations with conflicting worldviews. In the end, all events, momentous or not, stem from private choices and decisions, which are essentially emotional.

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Failing to Bury the Giant: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Violence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Seventh Novel

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