

Making a ‘Once-upon-a-Time’ Mythology in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*

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Abstract—Kazuo Ishiguro’s challenging novel, *The Buried Giant*, embodies how contemporary writers and readers have to discover the voices buried in our history. By avoiding setting or connecting the modern and contemporary historical incidents such as World War II this time, Ishiguro ventures into retelling myth, transfiguring historical facts, and revealing what has been forgotten in a process of establishing history and creating mythology. As generally known, modernist writers in the twentieth century employed materials from authorized classical mythologies, especially Greek mythology. As an heir of this tradition, Ishiguro imposes his mission of criticizing the repeatedly occurring yet easily-forgotten history of dictatorship and a slaughter on mythology based on King Arthur and its related heroes and myths in Britain. On an open ground, Ishiguro can start his own mythical story and space.

Keywords—English literature, fantasy, global literature, mythology.

I. INTRODUCTION

READING and teaching literature in this century needs understanding the messages concealed in ideological discourse. The literature of the millennium is more or less an embodiment of the globalized catastrophes caused by totalitarianism, the highly technological weapons, expanding fierce terrorism, threatening environmental crisis, and incurable human psychology. It is an endless challenge for the writers to express those catastrophes in this century.

As for his newly-published novel, *The Buried Giant* (2014) [1], Ishiguro in an interview remarks that “he wanted to write about the way societies remember (or forget) their histories, their dark secrets”: Living in this era of catastrophes, Ishiguro confesses that he is concerned about contemporary political issues in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, France after the Nazis occupation, Bosnia, and Japan. [2] These historical incidents are virtually melted into his creation of a myth. The medieval background presumably after King Arthur in Britain in *The Buried Giant* implies a mythological space that represents lost memories, pursued love, endless fights and conflicts due to the difference in race and religion, physically and psychologically injured humans because of the prolonged wars, and uncontrolled climates and landscapes as the fate of the globe since its birth. The birth, transfiguration, and establishment of the society sacrifices the wound, destruction, and death of humanity and human beings. This dark side of the society corresponds to that of the individuals. The crisis is internally enlarged, yet concealed and almost forgotten in the mist so that

Axl and Beatrice’s quest to find their lost son turns a universal quest to find the once-lost negative memories and legacy. King Arthur is nothing but a dictator and his nephew and romantic hero, Sir Gawain, is a brutal soldier who is engaged in the slaughter. Axl and Beatrice gradually experience and encounter the evidences of the past memories. Their secrets and lost son are finally revealed as the icon of internal and external conflicts and evils. Ishiguro attempts to convey as the recurrence of the universal evil that arises at some certain time yet soon becomes the past with the same phrase, ‘once upon a time,’ and its evil legacy is gradually forgotten and intentionally concealed. Oblivion or even amnesia named “mist” in the novel is one of the essential factors in encoding mythology in *The Buried Giant*. Oblivion is solely an excuse that conceals the crime and diminishes the sense of guilt because encoding memories embodies confronting the reason of the physical conflicts and the psychological agony over them.

Within an allegorical frame, *The Buried Giant* outlines the national and international memories of unforgettable chaos and collapse that virtually begin with ‘once upon a time,’ yet never appreciate a happy ending. In an interview, Ishiguro explains:

Setting the book in another, 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. [3]

The irony is what Ishiguro intends to imply in discovering the lost memory and confronting the truth in life. It is Ishiguro’s message that some of our individual memories are buried in the society that eventually controls the human consciousness.

II. MEMORY AND MEMORIES AS THE GROUND OF HISTORY

The Buried Giant manipulates the multiple and crossed meanings of memory and memories as the ground of history. Memory is based on the individual intentions and abilities to remember and store what has happened. It is, therefore, turned to be the faculty that formulate history as a collective memory, which is transfigured into a written, recorded, and retrieved document and information. On the other hand, memories possess the commemoration of a dead person as well as the length of remembering an event, an experience, an incident, and a person. According to Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, there are three kinds of memories; blocked memory, manipulated memory, and abusively controlled memory and passing through these three memories leads to “a path from one figure to the next characterizing the uses and

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abuses of memory.” [4] By relying on Ricoeur’s theory, Yugin Teo analyzes Ishiguro’s novels that were published before *The Buried Giant*. [5] All the novels by Ishiguro including *The Buried Giant* is, in other words, closely connected to Ricoeur’s theory of memories.

As far as memories possess the multilayered experiences, forgetting or amnesia should be redefined in our contemporary society. Especially on her discussion on East Asia’s “textbook wars” caused by Japanese imperialism and colonialism during World War II, Morris-Suzuki points out a paradox of history and of amnesia in this global age. [6] Morris-Suzuki analyzes the crisis of history in this globalizing internet networking world:

Our visions of history are drawn from diverse sources: not just from the narratives of history books but also from photographs and historical novels, from newsreel footage, comic books and, increasingly, from electronic media like the Internet. Out of this kaleidoscopic mass of fragments we make and remake patterns of understanding which explain the origins and nature of the world in which we live. And doing this, we define and redefine the place that we occupy in that world. [6]

Living in “this kaleidoscopic mass of fragments” of diverse sources of history Ishiguro rejects it and returns to a simple yet essential stage of ancient times in *The Buried Giant*. This simplified motif is, however, not just a superficial and primitive embodiment of history, yet a more open and potential representation of historical resource. In this context, therefore, amnesia in *The Buried Giant* is the first stage of distorted history and the origin of the dilemma of history. Morris-Suzuki makes a crucial comment on the connection between the crisis of history and amnesia.

The crisis of history is, then, is not a simple matter of amnesia. Rather, it reflects a profound dilemma: in an age of global mobility and multiple, rapidly changing media, how do we pass on our knowledge of the past from one generation to the next? [6]

In revising the mythological world, Ishiguro challenges to encoding the dilemma. Memories, especially in the modern and contemporary societies, have been examined and reexamined since such historical incidents as the Holocaust and Hiroshima left the unforgettable wounds and the inevitable assignments of memorizing them. In this context, the conflict between memorizing and forgetting is a crucial procedure to establish a new history.

A. An Individual Memory as Unauthentic Competence

An individual memory is the starting point of collective memories that are confronted with the fading and forgetting process as unauthentic competence. The aging couple, Axl and Beatrice, as well as the other characters around them, is obsessed with the negative or even distressing memories. In his argument on Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* (1995), Brian W. Shaffer points out that the “uncanny” experience of the protagonist can be explained by Freud’s theory in which the uncanny” is linked with such senses as frightening and horror [7, pp.89-99]. This uncanny experience is also applied in *The*

Buried Giant. The novel begins and ends with their personal quest to find their son, so that their narratives are subjective and perceptive enough to reveal their inconsistent and frightening senses and emotions. Their narratives are formed by the contradictions of their stories and reformed into the individual memories as unauthentic competence.

The novel is constructed upon the journey during which Axl and Beatrice seek for the revelations and resolution of individual memories. The fact that Axl and Beatrice are excluded from a group of the other villagers and they are faced with difficulties in their daily lives embodies their secret dark past that they bury and forget. It is clear that their exclusiveness is proven by the villagers’ negative and even hostile attitude toward them. Because the lack of their memories is based on their own wish to hide or forget them, their purpose of life is ambivalent at the beginning. In such a circumstance, however, they decide to go to find their lost son even though they do not know the reason why he left them. As for the contradiction of memorizing and forgetting, Ishiguro explains that his novels are basically about “individuals struggling with their personal memories” without “knowing when to hide from their past and when to confront their past for some sort of resolution.” [8] Their quest to find their son embodies their quest for their lost selves and lost memories. This quest to find their missing son turns to be their discovery of their veiled past that is filled with misconducts and immoral behaviors. To Axl, Beatrice confesses what is hidden in the mist of oblivion.

‘It’s simply this, princess. 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 me this at least. Promise, princess, you’ll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment. For what good’s memory’s returning from the mist if it’s only to push away another?’ [1, p.280]

The seemingly ideal relationship between Axl and Beatrice is eventually nothing but the broken one that caused their son’s departure from home and from them. They gradually remember that they betrayed each other and Axl’s malady was caused by her initial betrayal to her husband and his betrayal to her. At the beginning of their journey, Axl and Beatrice have no other people to rely on so that they keep reassuring their strong tie and love whenever they face difficulties. At the beginning of their quest, the paradox between their love and hate in their individual memories has already been engraved as the core of their lives. Their journey brings to an ironical and shocking closure when Axl and Beatrice admits the fact that their son has been dead and they make a final decision to continue living together. Their misconducts and their son’s death are forgotten as the worst private memory that determined and enclosed their lives. Their journey ends when they can find the past within them and realize what this past means in their lives.

An individual memory is so unsettled and even so open that it is transformed into a shared lapse of memory.

B. Collective Memories as the Foundation of History

As an individual memory turns to be shared memories, shared memories are trimmed and reconstructed into collective memories in which the dark side of the memories are erased and completely deleted. Consequently, collective memories formulate the foundation of history, that is, social memories.

The social background of the journey of the aging Briton couple embodies the post Arthurian society after the Britons defeated the Saxons in the bloody wars and massacres. During his journey, Beatrice is recollected by both Wistan, a Saxon warrior, and Sir Gawain, another aging knight under King Arthur's authority and power, so that Beatrice is revealed as one of those who joined the wars, kidnapped and raped the women, and killed the Saxons.

'What are all these skulls, sir?' Beatrice suddenly asked the knights. 'Why so many? Can they all have belonged to babies? Some are surely small enough to fit in your palm.'

'Princess, don't distress yourself. This is a burial place, nothing more.'

'What is it you suggest, mistress? The skulls of babes? I've fought men, beelzebubs, dragons. But a slaughterer of infants? How dare you, mistress!' [1, p.189]

The burial place with a countless number of skulls proves that their lives are based on their direct involvement in the massacres. Beatrice's personal memories are absorbed into collective memories and his journey is a passage to encoding the history that is constructed and established at the sacrifice of the cruel and dark side of personal and shared memories.

The loss of the individual memories is related with the cruel part of social memories as Ishiguro says that he really wanted to "write about that kind of struggle at the societal level" because most countries "have got big things they've buried." [8] In *The Buried Giant*, there exists an irony in the scheme of establishing monuments whose original meaning is denoting a burial place in Middle English.

Some of you will have fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of history. You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is always possible the giant's cairn was erected to mark the site of some much tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in the war. This aside, it is not easy to think of reasons for its standing. One can see why on lower ground our ancestors might have wished to commemorate a victory or a king. But why stack heavy stones to above a man's height in so high and remote a place as this? [1, p.291]

The monuments represent the remains of the past glories and famed figures, so that they are regarded as part of the established and authorized history. The monuments are, therefore, constructed outside the untold stories, the forgotten memories, and the buried history. Ishiguro criticizes what the buried history portrays

Even though there are the monuments as physical proofs, they are constructed upon by a blend between mythology and history in the Arthurian story.

Over the centuries, the Arthurian romance has taken a hold on the national consciousness and, factual or not, become part of connections, and many landscape features thus acquired names and places where Arthur had fought a great battle [9, p.171].

It is said that there are over 150 places in Britain "with Arthurian connections" even though King Arthur is a legendary figure. [9, p.168] The existing monuments and remains can be defined as sort of physical proofs without historical proofs. Among them, the monuments represent what collective memories are stored as the foundation of history. Those Arthurian monuments, however, imply how history is established in an uncertain way. In this paradox in founding history as the collective memories, Ishiguro formulates *The Buried Giant* in this controversial era.

III. A PARADOX OF MYTHOLOGY

In creating his own world, Ishiguro manipulates how mythology works in his presentation of memory and oblivion. It is a well-known theory that modern writers such as James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot virtually connect classical mythology with human consciousness and psychology in exploring the creative world in the twentieth century. [10] In an interview, Ishiguro admits that his reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* enabled him to launch into his writing *The Buried Giant*, yet he also insists on the primary reason:

I wasn't interested in the usual King Arthur stuff, ladies in pointy hats and tournaments, but I thought, this kind of barred, weird England, with no civilization, that could be quite interesting. [11]

The post Arthurian England can liberate all the restrictions that bind the concept of time and space. As pointed out, there is "a philosophical conundrum" in *The Buried Giant*. [12] The mythical land, the journey of the aging couple, their encounter with allegorical figures, and the mist make it possible to examine the human consciousness that is buried at the heart of dark history that reflects our contemporary events.

A. The Giant in a Paradox of Mythology

King Arthur is the most famous figure as a British national hero and king and the landscape of the British Isles in ancient times implies the essential time and space for the British subjects. With a critical perspective, moreover, King Arthur "has been used by historians – medieval and modern – as a potent, but empty, social signifier to which meaning could be attached that served to legitimate particular forms of political authority and cultural imperialism." [13] Moreover, medieval British literature should be viewed:

not only as an assertion of dominant Christian traditions but also as a complex and vibrant confluence of mythic influences: in the medieval literary traditions of Britain, the voices of the gods of the Celts, Romans, Saxons, and Vikings combine in a chorus that can seem chaotic and confused, but one that also offers us a rich and distinctly British melody. [14, p. ix]

This “British melody” is, however, the aftermath and representation of forced invasions, abuses, destructions, and massacres. Britain itself was a myth for the Romans.

The origin of the name Albion is obscure; it has been suggested that it came from the white cliffs of Dover, albus in Latin, but this is far from certain. It was current as an alternative poetic name for Britania by the mid-thirteenth century, when this story seems to have been written. It draws on the common tradition that the earth was inhabited by giants, that ‘there were giants in those days’, but it may also have had political overtones, because Edward I was trying to establish his claim as overlord of Scotland, and this story shows the island as a single political unit. [15, p.3]

According to Geoffrey Ashe, the earliest inhabitants in Britain, called Myrddin’s Precinct, were giants who “are reputed to have been descendants of Noah’s son Ham, and to have come from Africa in the second millennium before Christ and taken possession.” [16, p.13] It is also recognized that this acknowledged name Ablion was taken from the giant since the giants’ king was Ablion [16, p.13]. Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* is founded upon this paradoxical implication of mythology of Ablion. In order to encode this paradox of mythology, the giant plays a leading part as far as the buried giant embodies the buried history and memories.

The giant, which is employed in the title of the novel, therefore, implies the primary and profound darkness of mythology that is virtually associated with the long-lived vice on this globe so that it represents the paradox of mythology.

B. King Arthur Revived in History

As the giant symbolizes the buried history and memories, King Arthur represents the living history and memories because he is a transnational hero beyond time and space. In 1956, Sir Winston Churchill wrote about King Arthur in his *History of the English Speaking Peoples, The Birth of Britain:*

And wherever men are fighting against barbarism, tyranny, and massacre, for freedom, law, and honour let them remember that the fame of their deeds, even though they themselves be exterminated, may perhaps be celebrated as long as the world rolls round. Let us then declare that King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of a world order, sustained by valour, physical strength, and good horses and armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of foul barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time [13, p.1].

King Arthur is engraved as if he were a living hero who reminds the British citizens of the immortal and unbeaten heroism. This wrongly-input heroism is easily revived in different political scenes in different eras. The most dangerous example is witnessed in justifying nationalism and extreme political inclination such as Fascism.

Hitler’s reading of the Middle Ages is mediated by Richard Wagner, whose music drama, *Parsifal*, is the subject of the Führer’s lecture. Like Wagner, Hitler

transforms Arthurian romance into an ordinary historical moment. [13, p. 194]

It is ironical that medieval heroism is transfigured into the heroism of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Hitler idealized Arthurian kingdom, battles, knights in Fascist Germany. As he indirectly criticizes Nazism in *The Remain of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro intends to make a critical debate on globalized yet chaotic politics in this century.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Buried Giant outlines Ishiguro’s trial to leave a message of remembering the repeatedly occurred catastrophes that have threatened human bodies and souls. The most crucial mistake is to forget what has happened and what conflicts human consciousness has confronted. Instead of describing the contemporary issues that most of the readers remember, Ishiguro dares to indulge himself into locating the state in the Middle Age whose memories, stories, and history are ambiguous, uncertain, and unclear. In Preface of *Kazuo Ishiguro in a Global Context*, Rebecca L. Walkowitz dares to analyze “how the global circulation and reception of Ishiguro’s novels make a difference to the critical perspectives” (xii). [17] In examining contemporary British novelists including Ishiguro, Emily Horton remarks that those writers attempt to how the discourses of history, science, and culture “function at the level of the global.” [18, p.217] Because of the enlarging and multilayered global crisis in this century, Ishiguro cannot avoid what his contemporary readers are confronted with.

The journey to clear the mist of this oblivion is nothing but the quest for the new concept and ideas of history in this contemporary society where we can receive all the visual and written documents, whether reliable or not, through a countless of webs of internet. Memories are easily buried and forgotten and wars are repeated.

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