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# Landscape and Self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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## Landscapes in Ishiguro's Novels

There are many memorable landscapes in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. They are unforgettable because they not only provide specific spatial settings for the stories but are pregnant with metaphorical significance conveying the narrator-protagonists' emotions. Especially in the crucial moments of the story, the landscape is so imbued with the narrator's emotion that it seems to function as a mirror which reflects her/his inner self. Ishiguro testifies in an interview, "To me, I'm creating landscapes of the imagination, landscapes that somehow express various themes and emotions I'm obsessed by" (Swaim 96).

If the author does not intend to provide surface details of geographical accuracy, it is natural that the images of landscape in his novels tend to be obscure, which is pointedly demonstrated in *The Unconsoled* (1995) set in a city somewhere in East Europe. It has then culminated in his latest work *The Buried Giant* (2015) in which the landscapes set in post-Arthurian legendary Britain are enveloped in a thick mist that not only obscures the visage of the place but has metaphorical power of obliterating people's memory. Referring to the setting in Shanghai in the early 1900s for *When We Were Orphans* (2000), Ishiguro explains his attitude in choosing a specific landscape for his work:

> Essentially, as a novelist, this is a landscape that I am using for my imaginative purposes. To me, it's location hunting. I have a theme, a story, and I want to put them down where they can best be orchestrated. I need a place for a childhood with the chaos of the modern world, with

> war and international issues as well. As long as I had those things, it could be anywhere. (Frumkes 192)

As for his first two novels set in Japan, however, Ishiguro had another reason for choosing the place beside appropriateness for his theme. Time and again, he stresses that the landscapes of Japan in those novels were constructed from his childhood memories before he left Japan at the age of five. Therefore, they represent the author's memory landscapes, kept in his head, and nurtured by his imagination. Looking back on the days when he started to write a novel, which was to develop into his first novel *A Pale View of Hills*, as a post-graduate student of a creative writing course at the University of East Anglia, he recollects an urgent need he felt to write about *his* Japan:

> It was a precious country that existed only in my head and in my heart, I suppose. And I also realized that with every year that went by, it was getting fainter and fainter, and I think I had a great need to put it down on paper and structure it. And so I think that's what drove me to writing novels in the first place. (Swaim 96)[1]

At the same time, the nature of the landscapes of Japan in his first two novels is not essentially different from that of the other landscapes in his later novels: they were all chosen for his "imaginative purposes," to "express various themes and emotions." Asked about the accuracy of details of the Japanese landscape in his novels, Ishiguro declares, "I'm much more concerned about its mood, its atmosphere, its emotional intensities" (Swaim 96).

However, it seems that critics of Ishiguro have not paid enough attention to his landscape per se.[2] This paper aims at analysing landscapes depicted in his first novel *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) set in an actual city Nagasaki, Japan to show how effectively specific images of landscape in the novel function as

metaphors of the narrator's emotional self.

### *A Pale View of Hills*

*A Pale View of Hills* is a gloomy or even eerie novel. It is haunted by a hint of the ghost hovering around, which is linked with the protagonist's repressed feeling of guilt over her child's unhappy life and death. Images of child-murder and suicide are scattered everywhere. Moreover, the dark shadow of wartime trauma is alluded to behind the flat, reticent narration and conversations. However, although the central part of the story recounted by the narrator takes place in Nagasaki after World War II, it does not directly deal with the aftermath of the catastrophe of the atomic bombing. Rather, the main theme of the novel is the protagonist's inner struggle with her sense of guilt. Ishiguro clarifies his theme and strategy in this novel as follows:

> It's about a Japanese woman, Etsuko, who is exiled in Britain in middle age, and there's a certain area of her life that's very painful to her. It has something to do with her coming over to the West and the effect it has on her daughter, who subsequently commits suicide. She talks all around it, but she leaves that as a gap. Instead, she tells another story altogether, going back years and talking about somebody she once knew. So the whole narrative strategy of the book was about how someone ends up talking about things they cannot face directly through other people's stories. I was trying to explore that type of language, how people use the language of self-deception and self-protection. (Mason 4-5)

Suppose the narrator's story is a way to avoid facing her painful past, we must be aware that the landscape she narrates might also be an imaginary creation on which her self-deceptive and self-protective subconsciousness is projected. Therefore, even with testimony that the landscape of Nagasaki

depicted here is a structure of memory and imagination which the author himself has treasured since his childhood, we must see it first of all as part of the protagonist's story in which her inner self reveals itself in disguise.

## Looking out of the Window

In this novel, the narrator-protagonist, Etsuko is often depicted as making a gesture of looking out through the windows. The novel starts with Etsuko's memory of the recent visit of her second daughter, Niki to her country house in England, which makes the framing structure to the main part of the story. On the second day of Niki's visit, Etsuko was sitting with her in front of "the windows to watch the rain falling" on her garden (9). They had a common topic to ponder but could not communicate it easily because it was about her first daughter, Keiko, who had committed suicide some time ago. Looking out into the garden, they had only a short conversation about Keiko and her death. However, the narrator concedes that "the subject of Keiko's death" "was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked" (10). Later in the evening, Etsuko was again "standing at the windows, looking out into the darkness" (10). It is apparent that she was not looking at the landscape in the dak; her eyes were instead turned inward. Her daughter asked her, "What are you thinking about now, Mother?"

The gesture of looking out of the window is also applied to Niki. On the last day of her visit, she finally opens up her mind to communicate her thoughts on Keiko's death to her mother and tries to defend her mother's decision to bring Keiko to England. Nevertheless, their conversation was often interrupted by silent intervals of musing. During this short conversation scene of just two pages, Niki is depicted four times as "looking" or "gazing" "emptily out into the garden" (175-6). In short, Ishiguro uses the gesture of looking out of the window as a sign of the characters' brooding and self-reflective mood. In other words, it is a gesture of withdrawing into the realm of reveries and memories of

one's self.

It is in such a state of mind that Etsuko begins to recount her memories of "one summer many years ago" when she was living with her first husband in an apartment building near the river in Nagasaki after World War II. She remembers her short-time friendship with a woman named Sachiko who had moved in an old cottage standing in the vast expanse of waste ground that stretches from under the window of her apartment. She recalls, "Often, during my empty moments, I would stand at my window gazing at it" (12).

As we shall see later in this paper, Etsuko's gesture of looking through the window could also indicate her wish to escape from the confined life in a small apartment with her somewhat aloof husband. In that sense, it is also a gesture of her longing for a wider world, for somewhere and something that may not be found at hand.

## The Barren Landscape: Memory of War and Isolated Self

Etsuko lived with her husband in one of the four concrete apartment buildings erected by the government rebuilding programme after the war. However, the plan seemed to come to a halt, and their apartment stood in the forefront facing "an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches" where "the drainage was appalling" and "in the summer months the mosquitoes became intolerable" (11). It is in the midst of this desolate landscape that the shabby old cottage of Sachiko stood as the only remnant of a small village which had been utterly destroyed by an atomic bomb.

In the beginning, the narrator confesses that she felt sympathy for Sachiko who was dwelling in the isolated cottage because she felt "something of aloofness" about her (13). It might be a bit of surprise to the readers that Etsuko, despite her image as a restrained, dutiful wife in her recollected story, had sympathy with a woman who lived in the waste as an outsider, with her American boyfriend's visits arousing curiosity and disdain among the

neighbours. However, she tells us that she also distanced herself emotionally from the other housewives in the building, who seemed to occupy themselves in everyday life, "busily involved with their husbands and their children." It did not seem to her eyes "that their lives had ever held the tragedies and nightmares of wartime" (13).

Though married to an able, hardworking husband and pregnant with their first child at that time, Etsuko still lived in the shadow of the war in which she had lost her parents and probably her lover as well (76). Mrs Fujiwara, her late mother's friend remarked that she looked "miserable" or "so unhappy" (24, 77), having sensed some apprehension beneath her positive prospects of future, especially about the expectation of a baby. When Etsuko says "We may have lost a lot in the war, but there's still so much to look forward to" (112), her words sound as forced make-believe. Considering her life afterwards, especially her decision to leave her husband and Japan, about which we are left untold, we may also detect in those words her discontent with her current life and a wish for a more fulfilling life.

## The Dark River

The darkest corner of Etsuko's self is ominously represented by the river and the woods beyond it. It is on the bank of this river that Etsuko met Sachiko's ten-year-old daughter Mariko, who was neglected by her mother and often left alone at the isolated cottage.

Both critics and the author have pointed out a parallel between the two sets of mother-daughter relationship: Etsuko-Keiko and Sachiko-Mariko. Ishiguro explains that Etsuko tells the story of Sachiko because it is relevant to her own life; she really wants to talk about herself, but as she cannot face her responsibility for her daughter's unhappy life which resulted in suicide, she talks instead about another woman's story (Swaim 99). However, at a point in her story, the cover of her self-deceptive consciousness slips. At the end of her

story, "she forgets that she is supposed to be not talking about herself" (Swaim 99) and starts to talk about herself: she speaks to Mariko as if she were her not yet born daughter, Keiko (173).

If Etsuko's story of Sachiko and Mariko overlaps at least some of her life, the darkest moment in her story evolved by the river might also reveal, in a metaphorical way, one of the most painful moments of her past.

When Sachiko was busy packing for moving to Kobe as arranged by her American boyfriend, Mariko tried to make sure of her mother's promise that she could keep the kittens. Irritated by her persistence, Sachiko responded sharply, saying "Stop being so childish," and in a rage, drowned Mariko's kittens in the river (164-168). For all that she knew that the kittens were her daughter's only playmate and solace, she destroyed them mercilessly and deliberately in front of her eyes. Holding a kitten with both hands under the surface of the river, she "threw a glance over her shoulder towards her daughter" (167). This scene could be read as "a symbolic act of child murder" as Shaffer puts it. Sachiko's cold composure in her sadistic action shudders the readers. Mariko's "blank expression" at this moment can be understood not as a sign of her "masochistic pleasure" (Shaffer 34), but as demonstrating how deep and serious the damage on her soul was. It is a psychological murder. As Bennett has pointed out, "she inexplicably and irrevocably condemns her daughter to a world of trauma" (Bennett 87). The horrible image of Sachiko kneeling on the muddy ground with her untidy hair and the sleeves of her kimono drenched with the "dirty" water of the river, in her desperate effort to drown the struggling kittens, is a visualization of her maliciousness of destroying the childhood of her daughter.

The dark forest beyond it reinforces the eeriness surrounding the river. Mariko often talks about a woman who, according to her, comes from across the river (though Etsuko believes no one lives there) to take her to her house while she is alone. Sachiko explains that the woman is "not entirely imaginary" (43); she is a vision of a woman whom Mariko saw once in Tokyo some years

before. The incident has become her trauma because what she witnessed then was a mother drowning her baby in the canal (74).

Setting the murder scenes in the river or a canal may remind us of the traditional image of the river as the boundary between this world and the realm of death.[3] In fact, the author seems to impart a deeper meaning of the act of crossing the river. Etsuko's feeling when she crossed the bridge for the first time to search for Mariko in the evening twilight is depicted with a sense of forebodings:

> That was the first time I had crossed to the far side of the river. The ground felt soft, almost marshy under my feet. Perhaps it is just my fancy that I felt a cold touch of unease there on that bank, a feeling not unlike premonition, which caused me to walk with renewed urgency towards the darkness of the trees before us. (40)

On the other side of the river, they (Sachiko and Etsuko) found Mariko lying in a puddle, and they thought at first "she was dead" (41), which assures us that the feeling of "a cold touch of unease" and a feeling of "premonition" Etsuko had when crossing the river is a foreboding of death. In another scene just after the murder of kittens, she crossed the small wooden bridge again searching for Mariko in the dark, this time by herself. Having questioned her on her plan to go to America and its possible negative impact on Mariko, she had left Sachiko at her cottage. After moments of tension between them, she finds herself in a strangely "tranquil" state of mind on the bridge.

> While crossing it, I stopped for a moment to gaze at the evening sky. As I recall, a strange sense of tranquillity came over me there on that bridge. I stood there for some minutes, leaning over the rail, listening to the sounds of the river below me. When finally I turned, I saw my

> own shadow, cast by the lantern, thrown across the wooden slats of the bridge. (172)

The contrast between this tranquillity and the tension of those disturbing scenes that precede (the murder of kittens and the confrontation with Sachiko over a parent's responsibility) is distinct. Etsuko now stops to "gaze" the landscape ("the evening sky") and listen to "the sounds of the river." When turning her eyes back, she sees her "own shadow" cast on the bridge. If the other side of the river signifies the other world, whether of death or of imagination, she is now drawn to the other side in which she exists as a "shadow."

Having crossed the bridge, she finds the girl on the spot. (In this scene the narrator deliberately refers to the girl as "little girl" or "child" without using the name Mariko except in the last sentence). The girl tells her she does not want to go away (to Kobe and then to America in Mariko's situation), nor does she like the man her mother wishes to marry. On hearing her say "He's like a pig," Etsuko responded with anger, and two of them "stared at each other for a moment" (172). Then having resumed her composure, Etsuko tries to persuade the girl in a calmer tone, "He's very fond of you, and he'll be just like a new father. Everything will turn out well, I promise" (172-3). The confident tone of her words suggests that she is not talking about Frank-San, Sachiko's American lover, whom she does not know in person, she is talking instead about her second husband-to-be, Mr Sherlingham.

At this moment of her story, the hidden realm of the narrator's psyche opens up, and her self-deceptive protection fails her. She is facing her own child in the past, which is the very thing she has avoided to do for years. In that shadowy realm, Etsuko promises to the girl, now apparently Keiko, "if you don't like it over there, we can always come back." "But we have to try it and see if we like it there. I'm sure we will" (173).

It is doubtless, however, that her promise was not kept. Although her daughter was never happy in England, they did not return. Although she knew Keiko missed her father, who "was a good father to her" for the seven years they lived together in Japan (90), she brought her to England to marry an Englishman. On the other side of the river that night, hearing her promise that they could return to Japan if she did not like it over there, the child "was watching" her "closely," and questioned about a piece of rope (an allusion to the noose) in Etsuko's hand (173). With a poignant memory of Mariko running away in fear of her, Etsuko's story of one summer in Nagasaki ends.

At the end of the novel, the narrator recalls the last day of Niki's visit when she finally talks about her thoughts on her sister's death. Niki uttered her criticism of her late father for his indifference to Keiko. On hearing her words that "it wasn't fair really" (175), Etsuko abruptly voices blame on herself: "I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same" (176). At this moment, her guilty feeling surfaces in her consciousness; it is a moment of confession that she sacrificed her daughter to pursue her own happiness, in a quest for a fulfilling life.

## A Pale View of Hills and Longing for Escape

In this conversation between Etsuko and Niki, the daughter plays the role of her mother's defender though Niki's words might also be Etsuko's self-defence uttered through the other person's mouth. Niki contradicts her mother's guilt and regrets, arguing the rightfulness of her decision to leave her first husband to remarry and bring Keiko over to England with her. She says, "you did everything you could for her. You're the last person anyone could blame" (176).

However, Etsuko knows it is not true. While hearing Niki's words, Etsuko might think that her daughter is "rather idealistic" just as her second husband was, and she remarks that Niki looks "very young" (175-6). Though

the conversation between them used to be short and fragmentary, Niki is more persistent this time in protecting her mother's decision to leave Japan: "sometimes you've got to take risks. You did exactly the right thing. You can't just watch your life wasting away," (176). She continues to insist that it is "stupid" "if you'd just accepted everything the way it was and just stayed where you were" because in that way you "just waste away" your life (176).

Niki's defence is probably not only that of her mother's decision but also her self-defence, or self-justification for having left home and living in London with friends. In any case, what interests us is a similarity between Niki and Etsuko: they both harbour an aversion to the conventional life of women. In that summer in Nagasaki, Etsuko did not seem very happy with her pregnancy. She admits what serves "today to bring a certain distinctness to that summer" is the memories of the loathsome journey through the wasteground to Sachiko's cottage, which she made "regularly," and "those misgivings about motherhood" as well as "Ogata-San's visit" (99). As Niki loathes babies, Etsuko had apprehensions about having a baby. Furthermore, she also confesses a feeling of "emptiness" she had when she was living in the apartment in Nagasaki.

> I spent many moments—as I was to do throughout succeeding years—gazing emptily at the view from my apartment window. On clearer days, I could see far beyond the trees on the opposite bank of the river, a pale outline of hills visible against the clouds. It was not an unpleasant view, and on occasions it brought me a rare sense of relief from the emptiness I spent in that apartment. (99)

The "emptiness" she felt in "those long afternoons" in the apartment in Nagasaki evinces her dissatisfaction with her life and probably with her husband, Jiro. Her depiction of Jiro, especially of his cold, indifferent attitude toward his father, Ogata-San has a reproving tone. Nevertheless, she never

ventured to bring up her concern to share with Jiro. She recalls, "in any case, it was never in the nature of our relationship to discuss such things openly" (127). She tells nothing about her last days in Nagasaki, so we never know why and how she left her husband and came over to England with Keiko. However, the "rare sense of escape from the emptiness" she felt while looking at "a pale outline of hills" through her apartment window strongly suggests her dissatisfaction with her present life and longing for escape and liberation. In that sense, "a pale view of hills" is a mirage of the narrator-protagonist's hope, a yearning for the far and wide world which would be able to give her a more fulfilling life.

## The Picturesque Landscapes: Nagasaki and England

On the geographical level, the pale view of hills Etsuko could see from her window was the hills of Inasa, a popular hilly resort of Nagasaki overlooking the harbour (103). In the middle of her story, she remembers a day of an outing to Inasa with Sachiko and Mariko. This episode makes a rare sunny spot in her story. Crossing the harbour by the ferry, she enjoyed a refreshing wind, and even the noises from the harbour brought her "a certain uplifting feeling" (103). Her narration of this outing clearly shows her delight in escaping her confined life in a small apartment. She recalls that she had "looked forward to it for days," and having crossed the harbour, she found the sea-wind blowing "more freely" and "the day no longer felt so stifling" there (103).

It is very suggestive, therefore, that on the final day of Niki's visit, Etsuko brought out a calendar on which a photograph of the Nagasaki harbour viewed from Inasa was printed. It was the only remaining sheet of an old calendar, and though she said nonchalantly, "I've no idea why I've kept it," passing it to Niki to give it to one of her friends, we should suppose that she had a good reason for having kept it (179).

Afterwards, she tells Niki that she "was remembering" that she "went

there once, on a day-trip" (182). It seems apparent that she is referring to the day-trip to Inasa with Sachiko and Mariko that hot summer's day. To the readers' surprise, however, she continues: "Keiko was happy that day" (182). It is another moment when the unreliability of the narrator is revealed. In other words, it is when we come to understand Ishiguro's explanation of his strategy of making Etuko's own story and her story of Sachiko overlap to demonstrate how people talk about other's story in order to talk about themselves. The boundary between the fact and fiction blurs in ambiguity. Etsuko herself admits the unreliability of memory as a kind of excuse to the readers. She says, "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here" (156). Therefore, we might be able to conclude that her memory of rare moments of Mariko's childlike liveliness overlap, in her mind, memories of her own daughter, Keiko when she was a happy child in Nagasaki.

The view of the harbour from Inasa in Nagasaki belongs to the category of the picturesque landscape, a type of landscape agreeable to everyone. It attracts tourists and is photographed, reproduced and distributed in the forms of postcards and calendars.[4] In this novel, Ishiguro places the protagonist's happy memory or her yearning for a happier life in the landscape of picturesque beauty. Just as Etsuko's longing for a wider world was projected to a pale view of hills, her happy memory of Keiko in those days was also connected to the picturesque landscape. As the pictures on the calendar are felt somewhat unrealistic or superficial, this choice of the landscape by the author might imply the illusionary and deceptive nature of the protagonist's longing for a happy life.

Moreover, in the novel's last scene, we will find another picturesque landscape linked to the protagonist's happy memory. Strolling around the field with Niki and looking back towards the orchard belonging to her house, Etsuko suddenly remembers the day her husband first brought her to this country

house. She tells Niki that she was thrilled to see the fields and the house, which was just what she had imagined England should be:

> "It was all fields, and you could see the house from here. When your father first brought me down here, Niki, I remember thinking how so truly like England everything looked. All these fields, and the house too. It was just the way I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased." (182)

The house and the surrounding country landscape seemed "so truly like England" to her eyes because it was just like the image of England she had probably constructed from some photographs and nurtured in her head. The landscape of green fields and a large country house represents her image of "true" England. It might remind us of the view of "the rolling English countryside" in Ishiguro's third novel, *The Remains of the Day,* in which the protagonist, Stevens saw "a quality that will mark out the English landscape," that is, "greatness" of the country (28).

However, the picturesque landscape of England which Etsuko admired as the epitome of Englishness is an illusion or only a part of reality at most, as Niki's subtle but negative response to her mother's words suggests. It was an imaginative construction of Etsuko to which her dream, her longing for another world is projected. It is probably true that when she first saw the landscape in real England, she was happy to see her dream, her "pale view of hills," come true. However, the illusion has evaporated. She is haunted by the image of Keiko "hanging in her room for days on end" (54), having the same dream of a little girl (47, 55, 95), awakened in the early hours and frightened by a small sound from Keiko's room (88, 174). She mentions that she is thinking of selling the house (183). Left alone in a big house, she will probably repeat her story to herself again and again because that is the only way she can face her past with

bitter regrets.

## Notes

1. For further biographical information about Ishiguro's memory of Japan blended with his imagination and about the episode of writing his first novel driven by the urgent need to preserve it, see his recollection in his Nobel Prize Lecture, "My Twentieth Century Evening—and Other Small Breakthroughs."
2. As a rare example, see Groes 211-24, in which he analyses "mental landscape" in *Never Let Me Go,* disclosing the symbolic meanings of the landscape of East Anglia depicted in the novel.
3. In an attempt of psychological analysis of this novel, Shaffer compares the river in this novel with the Styx in the ancient Greek myth. See Shaffer 27-31.
4. Ishiguro uses calendar pictures of the landscape again in *Never Let Me Go*, in which clone-children are taught geography of England with pictures of each county printed on calendars (64).

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# Landscape and Self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

Rie MATSUYA

要旨：

カズオ・イシグロの小説において風景は、語り手－主人公の感情と切り離しがたく結びついており、その意味で作者自身が言うように「想像の風景」と言える。本稿は、イシグロの第一作『遠い山なみの眺め』を取り上げ、そこに描かれた風景を語り手の内面を映す鏡として分析する。この作品では、自死を遂げた娘に対する罪の意識を抱きながらも、過去と向き合うことを避けてきた語り手が、戦後の長崎で娘を妊娠中に出会った母娘との交流を回想しつつ、結果的に自己自身の隠蔽された記憶を蘇らせる姿が描かれている。語り手の物語は、主人公の住むアパートに隣接する荒涼とした空き地の広がりとその傍らを流れる川、そして対岸の暗い森で構成された、暗く、不吉で、恐ろしい風景の中で展開する。そこには死（とりわけ子殺し）のイメージがつきまとい、語り手の記憶の暗部を映しだす。その一方で、主人公がアパートの一室から眺める遠い山なみには、彼女の夢、別世界への憧れが投影されている。その夢は、イギリス人と再婚し娘を連れて渡ったイングランドの美しい田舎の風景の中に実現したとも言えるが、そこにはピクチャレスクな風景が孕む欺瞞性が潜んでおり、亡き娘の気配におびえ、安らかな眠りを奪われた現在の彼女は、他者の物語に仮託して己自身の過去を物語らざるをえないのである。

*Keywords:* Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills,* landscape, contemporary British novel

キーワード：カズオ・イシグロ、『遠い山なみの眺め』、風景、現代イギリス小説