

## Aftermath Effects of War in the Select Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro

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### Abstract

War is a conflict carried by the force of arms usually between nations. It has disastrous effects on society. During the Second World War two atomic bombs destroyed two main cities in Japan - Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These two bombs - the Little Boy and Fat Man - caused unimaginable damage in Japan. It devastated the land and wiped out many lives pushing those who survived the catastrophe into depression. The main objective of the paper is to scrutinize the detrimental and unfavorable situations of war elements in Kazuo Ishiguro's first two novels - *A Pale View of Hills (APVH)* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World (AAFW)* (1986). The article also explores how it is portrayed about the rehabilitation of the characters' psyche in these novels by using the settings of pre and post-world war eras. It also examines how the devastated land destroyed the lives of people and how it had personally traumatised them long after the war ended and how they survived for the rest of life is portrayed.

**Keywords:** Post World War, Japan, loss, trauma, identity, Kazuo Ishiguro

The narrators of these two novels recall their agonising memories against the backdrop of war. It is a personal recollection of their troubled lives and the complex historical events which destroyed the world. Many writers have focused on themes related to the war in their works. Some of them are Kurt Vonnegut, Sebastian Faulks, Joseph Heller, Ernest Hemingway, Pat Barker, and Kazuo Ishiguro is one among them. He is a Japanese-born British writer. He was born in Nagasaki, Japan on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1954. His father, Shizuo Ishiguro got the opportunity to do research at the National Institute of Oceanography Centre at Guildford, Surrey so his family moved to England in 1960 exactly nine years after the U S dropped a nuclear bomb on the city of Nagasaki when he was five. He obtained his education in the United Kingdom. His parents and grandparents had suffered during and after the war.

However, Kazuo Ishiguro's family had the intention of returning to Japan. They wanted him to grow with Japanese values by thinking soon they would go to their native land but it become a lasting stay in the country. Ishiguro always had an imaginary picture of Japan as a distinct background. In an interview with

Kenzaburo Oe, he stated that: "I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important another country to which I had a strong emotional tie. ... In England I was all the time building up this picture in my head, an imaginary Japan." His parents had taught him a lot about the values of Japan, its rich culture, and language so he was emotionally connected with his motherland. Yet he first visited Japan thirty years after he published his first two novels *A Pale View of Hills (APVH)* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World (AAFW)* (1986) with the Japanese settings and those were imaginary. While he visited the place he saw a different scenario; from what he learnt from his parents about an idyllic glorious Japan. The life of people and buildings was exploited and was not in the acclaimed condition when he visited the place. It had shattered and razed to the ground by bombardment.

Ishiguro has written seven novels and in four of them, he attempted memory of war and the post-war horrors related themes with different settings in four of his novels. His first two novels *A Pale View of Hills (APVH)* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World (AAFW)* (1986) share the same theme related to the Second World War in Japan. He used the setting of the second atomic circumstance that led to the bombardment in Japan as he felt a strong urge to write about Nagasaki to secure his remembrance of his motherland before it faded away from his memory.

Ishiguro used the pre and post-world war settings as a recurrent theme in four of his novels and the poignancy of the same was compelling. It added value to the theme of his novels. The theme of war also has an emotional connection with his family members. For instance, when the second atomic bomb was dropped in Nagasaki, his mother, a teenager then, was the only victim who survived in her family but with injuries. Ishiguro learnt about the destruction caused in Japan from his mother and movies related to the issue. Later, he used the setting of Japan during and after the war period in his first two novels. In his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, the decline of the British Empire during the post-war period served as the setting. Finally, in his fifth novel *When We Were Orphans*, he used Japan's invasion of China with the memories of his grandfather's place where his father had lived during the period of pre-war in Shanghai.

Through these novels, readers could identify the hardships and changes that happened before and after the World War periods. It had ruined many a life and countries have been wrecked beyond repair. In 1989, Ishiguro explained his theme of war in an interview with Graham Swift which was published in *Bomb Magazine* dated on 01, October 1989.

"I chose these settings for particular reason: they are potent for my themes. I tend to be attracted to the pre-war and post-war settings because I'm interested in this business of values and ideals being tested, and people having

to face up to the notion that their ideals weren't quite what they thought they were before the test came." (Ishiguro, Kazuo)

Etsuko is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982). At the beginning of the novel, she is a Japanese widow who lives in England. She remembers her life in Nagasaki after the Second World War and how it battered the land and people. As she looks back into her life, she recalls her life with her first husband, Jiro in Nagasaki. She recalls the destruction of places and people's lives. The following lines show Etsuko's recollection of war and the havoc in Japan.

"My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city, a short tram-journey from the centre of town. A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins. Rebuilding had got under way and in time four concrete buildings had been erected, each containing forty or so separate apartments. Of the four, our block had been built last and it marked the point where the rebuilding programme had come to a halt; between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches. Many complained it was a health hazard, and indeed the drainage was appalling. All year round there were

craters filled with stagnant water, and in the summer months, the mosquitoes became intolerable. From time to time officials were to be seen pacing out measurements or scribbling down notes, but the months went by and nothing was done." (APVH 11)

All that happened when Etsuko was in her third or fourth month of pregnancy. Whenever she stayed alone and felt lonely, she used to see through her window. On one such occasion, she looked at one wooden cottage that had survived the devastating war and the government bulldozers. During that time Etsuko met her friend Sachiko who lived with her only daughter Mariko. Sachiko had lost her husband and all her wealth in the Second World War. As she was in dire straits, she wished Etsuko introduced her to Mrs. Fujiwara. She was Etsuko's mother's friend who ran a noodle shop. Sachiko felt she could assist Mrs. Fujiwara in her noodle shop and the income she earned would ease her financial problem. Mrs. Fujiwara also lost her husband and her children in the war. That forced her to open the noodle shop just to survive with her elder son, Kazuo for the rest of her life. When Etsuko and Sachiko were talking, Etsuko talked about Mrs. Fujiwara's life "She had five children. And her husband was an important man in Nagasaki. When the bomb fell, they all died except her eldest son. It must have been such a blow to her, but she just kept going" (APVH 111).

Sachiko was worried about the upbringing of her only daughter Mariko. She shared her emotions with Etsuko as to how “unfortunate that Mariko’s education had to be interrupted from time to time. ... But these are difficult times we’ve come through, Etsuko. If it wasn’t for the war, if my husband was still alive, then Mariko would have had the kind of upbringing appropriate to a family of our position.” (APVH 45)

Etsuko and Sachiko went out for a short trip to Inasa. Etsuko pointed at a particular spot where everything was throbbing with life. The same area was once affected so badly when the bomb fell. Etsuko mentioned how even she had lost all her family members and became an orphan because of the Second World War. She stressed how the war spared no one, even someone like Mrs. Fujiwara. Etsuko went on to motivate Sachiko by speaking about Mrs. Fujiwara’s optimism despite a huge loss in her life. Sachiko responded, “ ‘How right you are Etsuko, we shouldn’t keep looking back into the past. The war destroyed many things for me, but I still have my daughter. As you say, we have to keep looking forward.’ ” (APVH 111)

Through Etsuko’s narration readers could feel both trauma and undying hope about life. Similar to the first novel Ishiguro depicts the miseries of war through the characters’ life in his second novel *An Artist of the Floating World* too. Masuji Ono is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Iain Maloney in his review in the Japan Times mentions that this novel *An Artist of the Floating World* is a sensitive

examination of the turmoil in post-war Japan, a time when certainties were overturned, gender politics shifted, and the hierarchy of the generations seemed to topple and even the geography of cities changed.

Ono was a reputed artist before the Second World War in Japan but he lost his reputation during and after the war period. He is a passionate painter by nature, who is a retired artist when the novel begins. He has lost his wife and his son, Kenji. His artistic talent and good nature had made Akira Sugimura’s daughters sell their house at a nominal price. They sold the house for half of the property’s value. He never dreamt of living in such a house in his lifetime.

In Akira Sugimura’s house, Ono lives with his second daughter, Noriko. Sugimura’s house was once grand and like how their land of Japan was once prosperous. He was the most respected and influential man before the war. But his death had driven his daughters into their present miserable condition. War had not only damaged their house but had also turned the younger daughter into a thin, ailing old woman. Their difficult times forced them to sell their cherished parental house.

Though the two daughters were emotionally connected with their house, and despite their dire monetary requirements, they sold it to Ono at a minimal price. When Akira Sugimura was alive, he patronised the artist and his art. Like true daughters, they appreciate the constraints of Ono and sell their house at an affordable

price hardly bothering about their financial pressure.

Ono spent his evenings in Mrs. Kawakami's bar in the old pleasure district with his friend Shintaro. There were only very few customers who come to her shop. She lost her family in the war, so she started to concentrate more on business to run her life. War had wreaked havoc in her life, but she started and ran her business with determination. When many of her competitors had already lost hope and shifted their places, she was the only one to remain in the same place relying on her instinct that one day she would earn better. Her confidence bore no fruit but she had made a little improvement over the years.

Mrs. Kawakami often dreamt of becoming rich suddenly and nurtured plans of buying property and expanding it. Despite her dreams, her financial condition hardly changed for the better. Yet, this never changed her nature or how she treated people. She was as pleasant and kind as ever. All around her bar, there was nothing but a desert of debris. When Ono walked through, he saw shattered buildings that tormented his mind. His heart longed for a healing touch that would revive all life, but he saw the bulldozers had pulled down everything and where nothing remained except mere rubbles on the sides of the streets.

Ono worried about Mrs. Kawakami's life. She lives in a graveyard in a gloomy area. Her business too wasn't very profitable and that made her life increasingly difficult. Ono describes her to his friend, Shintaro:

'As for Mrs. Kawakami, although she will do her best not to allow the current mood to affect her, there is no denying she has been greatly aged by the war years. Before the war, she may still have passed for a 'young woman', but since then something inside her seems to have broken and sagged. And when one remembers those she has lost in the war, it is hardly any wonder. Business too has become increasingly difficult for her; certainly, it must be hard for her to believe this is the same district where she where she first opened her little place those sixteen or seventeen years ago. For nothing really remains of our old pleasure district now; almost all her old competitors have closed up and left, and Mrs. Kawakami must more than once have considered doing likewise.' (AAFW 23)

Ono thought about his losses during the war. The bombing raid had destroyed his wife's and his son's life. It also destroyed a large portion of his house. Before the Second World War, Ono's family life and career as a painter had been good. But during and after the war, his position had changed drastically and remained in dark. During the war period, he helped the police but people started to look at him as a renegade. People accused him of leading Japan in the wrong direction. He betrayed people during the period of war by acting as a police informer. They started criticising him vehemently. It affected his second daughter Noriko's life and resulted

in her marriage's cancellation. War impaired Ono's personal life, family life, career and social reputation. He seriously searched for a groom for his daughter. People still resented his past failings, but his hope never failed. Noriko got married into a reputed family; her happy married life made Ono happy.

As discussed, these novels dealt with the theme of war, loss, death, change and grief. Post-world war sufferings were haunting. The characters had to live through unimaginable and unbearable situations. Ishiguro depicted damage and pangs of war through almost all the characters — Etsuko, Sachiko, Mariko, Mrs. Fujiwara, Masuji Ono, Akira Sugimura's two daughters, and Mrs. Kawakami. These are novels set in Japan that were immediately during the post-war: period of reconstruction. The characters had undergone terrible situations in their life which could not be replaced by anything. Moreover, Ishiguro's characters' lives are so shattered that they never dwelt upon their darkest phase of life. Instead, they moved forward by looking at their life more optimistically. They never allowed the despair to haunt their life beyond a point.

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