

The Cathartic Narrative of Trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills - A {Re} Construction of Personal Memory

Pratyush Padhee

Sambalpur University

India

pratyushpadhee@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the approach of narrative by trauma survivors in general and the fictional character Etsuko of Kazuo Ishiguro in particular from his novel A Pale View of Hills. It examines how narrative re-building and fictionalization of her own story Etsuko of the same novel pronounces her own healing through self deceptive language. And how the fictionalization of narrative helps her heal the past angst and trauma. This particular issue of trauma and how narrating the turmoil help release the pain shall be discussed in the light of few instances taken from Greek myth and a French film along with some clinical case study of trauma patients.

Keywords- Narrative, Memory, Trauma, Catharsis, Displacement, Repression, Alienation.

The world has witnessed many years of struggle with wars and their aftermaths. Hence the effects and its responses in the human psyche have never been an ignored undebatable issue. This paper discusses the internal shifts and emotional disintegration of the traumatized subjects who take narrative into task for their healing and catharsis in the realm of the unconscious. This paper shall focus on two instances of narrative ,one from the ancient myth and other from a 20th century French film Hiroshima Mon Amour to discuss how narrative works as a therapy in the

novel A pale view of hills of Nobel laureate Kazuo ishiguro. Story telling has always a healing power as a mother's lullaby. To quote Richard Kearney "one of the enduring functions of narrative is catharsis". Since the ancient Greek days of Aristotle to the contemporary days the healing power of storytelling is surmounting. As Aristotle defines '*Katharsis*' as the purgation of pity and fear, the recreation of the past through story telling releases a pleasure in humans. Through this narrative recreation human beings revisit their past with a different persona and narrative. It gives the past a new future or a rebirth. To Kearney catharsis invites us beyond a pathology of pity to compassion and beyond a pathology of fear to serenity. It literally purges two of our most basic affects - pathos and eleos - until they are distilled and sublimated into a healing brew. Hence narrative itself is like finding the medicinal remedy within the disease. (plato) Art twice removed from reality always entwines some fictional elements with reality. Again to cite the mythical instance of narrative healing lets analyse claude Levis strauss' example of shamanistic invocations of ancient myth for a therapeutic effect.(structural anthropology) He gives the example of a woman who was on the verge of dying during a child birth due to blocked birth canal finds a purgation when the shaman and the villagers recites a battle scene to her. Shaman and other village members gather around the woman in labour and recites aloud the final battle scene where a prisoner escapes from the cave and defeats the monster. During those mythic age, there was no access to clinical intervention or surgery. Hence having looked over the critical condition of the woman the shaman along with the village people take the help of this recitation of a battle scene aloud. Hence the battle scene between the prisoner and monster is metaphoric of the child and the outer world. The cave which is figurative of the birth canal of the mother finds its release from the affect of the hymns. Certainly, this recitation has some therapeutic effect on the woman in labour that ends in the

birth of the baby surprisingly which can be a release off from the labour pain she undergoes. This can be illustrative of how narrative in any form works its way through healing

Hiroshima Mon Amour

Coming to the stream of cinema the release of the French film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in 1959 directed by Alain Resnais tells the narrative of a story of a French actress in the pretext of her shooting in Hiroshima. For the first time, she reveals her past love affair with a German soldier in Nevers. She narrates her story to the Japanese man during their passionate romantic encounter. The tragedy of the French actress and the German soldier's love affair rests on the death of the German soldier on the very day they plan to elope. Ultimately, she is punished by the French town's people by shaving her head and caging in a cellar that results in her madness and trauma. Her recollection and revelation to the Japanese man about her German lover engulfs her with a sense of guilt, panic and embarrassment. Both were married. Elle is the French actress and lui is the Japanese architect. Elle had lost her German lover in the bombing and lui his family. The idea of Hiroshima serves different connotations for both. Lui keeps on saying Elle "You didn't see anything", that means she had not witnessed the war and his losing of family in Hiroshima. On the other hand, the dialogue applies for Elle as well as Lui has never seen what had happened to lui and her German lover in France. Here narrating her past brings her horrible trauma resulting in a sense of betrayal to her German lover. she says;

"I told our story.

I was unfaithful to you tonight with this stranger.

I told our story.

It was, you see, a story that could be told. (73)

Hence telling her story to the Japanese man she permeates a betrayal to the German beloved who is dead over the Japanese man who listens to her. Moreover, what could be assumed here is narrating the past is solely considered to be a betrayal to the past, which is figurative of her German lover. She had never narrated to anyone but kept it to herself as a private trauma. This film is more about the process of forgetting through remembering and narrating. During her last stay with Lui, she unconsciously mutters I was unfaithful with the stranger, I told our story. I believe having said this Elle builds a narrative to forget that carries elements of purgation with it. Because her tragic catastrophe was to be expressed somehow someday to somebody for her healing. This above dialogue can be a pronouncement of the return of the repressed.

On the other hand, these above two examples illustrate two different contexts of narration. One is in the ancient myth how narrative in the form of recitation of a heroic event helps a woman give birth which was almost impossible and another story from the French film illustrates how narrating past appears to be a betrayal and catharsis unconsciously. Hence this article must study the cathartic effects of narrative in the context of trauma survivors. I believe taking both the effects of narration into account I must proceed how narrative helps in releasing one's trauma when narrating one's past appears to make one unfaithful and infidel. Because it would be unjustified if I shall discuss the narrative of past keeping in view only the betrayal factor. Though narrating of one's past acts as a betrayal for the trauma survivor as portrayed by the French actress in the film *Hiroshima Mon amour* on the other hand it helps in healing the labour pain of the woman too in the Greek myth and the French actress Elle aswell though on an unconscious level . It shall be an unbiased analysis of narration both as a betrayal and catharsis. In the same breath Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *A pale view of hills* must be located in this context of

narrative catharsis as it shares the Japanese widow Etsuko's narration of her past to her English daughter Niki in first person narration. Etsuko's story retells another story of a Japanese woman she befriends on a summer after the bombing. Yet by using this Sachiko plot Etsuko purges off her own pain of losing her Japanese daughter Kieko. But ultimately a psychological topos may be located in this as Etsuko was telling her own story.

Etsuko's Narrative Manipulation-

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko the narrator-protagonist narrates her past in Nagasaki after the World War bombing of Japan. She retrospects her life in Nagasaki when her English daughter, Niki pays her a visit in her English countryside home. Etsuko narrates it to Niki her English daughter who had come with a mission of consoling her mother with regard to the suicide of Kieko. The whole novel shares Etsuko's past narrative of Nagasaki that is dominated by the life story of Sachiko and Mariko (mother daughter) who happened to be her neighbor in Japan according to her. Etsuko tells about her marital life in Japan with her Japanese husband Jiro san, which appears to be unhappy and abusive. Here Etsuko's narrative of Sachiko and her daughter Mariko is constructed with the unreliability of her memory what she herself admits and it unfolds at the end of the novel as to be a nonexistent story in real but a fantasy building of Etsuko in order to redirect her trauma of Kieko's suicide. This redirection of Etsuko's past can be well illustrative of Freudian displacement. The story though revolves mostly around Sachiko story in Japan it has the disturbing backdrop of Kieko's suicide (Etsuko's Japanese daughter) Etsuko's guilt and repressed trauma is shared by her English daughter, Niki as well as she dreams of her stepsister Kieko though implicit in her narration. The whole narrative of Etsuko in gazing backward to Sachiko-Mariko incident ambiguously and

deceptively narrates her own memory that is distortive and hazy baffling the readers. By narrating Sachiko story, she speaks her own story of her dead Japanese daughter Kieko through Mariko and her emotional alienation. Her dual existence is a narrative manipulation of Freudian displacement (as opined by Berry Lewis) in order to heal her traumatized self unconsciously. Some examples of Etsuko's narrative that echoes parallels of Kieko and herself would be best illustrated in this context of narrative memory and healing.

Mariko, daughter of Sachiko, happens to be a disturbed alienated child who hardly socialize herself. Sachiko had an American boyfriend, named Frank, who deceives her into believing that he would take her to America where they could get a better education for Mariko. Mariko despises Frank as she says he pisses like a pig. Mariko's hatred pronounces her reluctance for going to America with him as he is not his real father. Mariko most often is found playing near the river or in the darkness alone much against the knowledge of her Mother. Mariko's hatred for Frank echoes Kieko's hatred for Mr. Shereyngham too, the English husband of Etsuko. Kieko does not come to the funeral of her English step father creating a sibling difference with Niki, the English daughter of Etsuko. Niki's bad dream about Kieko echoes the guilt of Etsuko's negligence and child abuse. As she says "Dad should have looked after her a bit more, shouldn't he? He ignored her most of the time. It was not fair really." (Ishiguro, 175, 1982) This hint of parental negligence has its parallels with Sachiko's neglecting and abusive behaviour for Mariko. Sachiko never shows her serious concerns even if Mariko plays by the river in nights. Sachiko slaps her thighs and holds her hands very rudely at some events without making her understand as a small kid is supposed to be made understood by its mother. The kittens of Mariko are figurative of the abusive behavior of Sachiko as she drowns them in the end in front of Mariko and slaps the kittens being angry calling them a 'filthy little animal'. By

narrating the Sachiko episode in first person Etsuko stands outside of her own life narrative heals herself. By telling the Sachiko story she redirects her emotional trauma into a safe memory narrative what she enjoys and hides ultimately healing her traumatized self. By standing out of the narrative Etsuko the narrator plays a defensive role of being safe escaping the aftermath of the events that follow up. For instance: “Now I don’t doubt that amongst those women I lived with, there were those who had suffered those with sad and terrible memories.”(Ishiguro, p1982.) Here by saying amongst those women I lived with there were those with sad memories directly denotes that Etsuko was not one of them, but she is the one who stands outside of their sad and terrible pain. Her narrative manipulation baffles the readers as if she never experienced such pain. This can be treated as a defense mechanism to feel safe and a fantasy building of her traumatized mind in order to escape the angst of the same memory of loss that these women have experienced. Another instance may be illustrated here; “It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today. But I remember with some distinctness that eerie spell, which seemed to bind the two of us as we stood there in the coming darkness looking towards that shape further down the bank. Then the spell broke and we both began to run. As we came nearer, I saw Mariko lying curled on her side, knees hunched, her back towards us. Sachiko reached the spot a little ahead of me, I being slowed by my pregnancy, and she was standing over the child when I joined her.”(Ishiguro, p41, 1982) Here by confessing her own memory loss she plays safe of the narrated event as she says as we stood there in the coming darkness looking towards the shape she plays with the effects of light too as it was darkness according to her (as in darkness any human perception can be distorted) and she sees Mariko as the readers understand but beneath her narrative it was actually Kieko whom she does not want to reveal to the readers. Hence this

kind of narrative strategy is a defense mechanism of projection to heal her wound of loss, by loss in particular I mean loss of Kieko. Mariko is only a disguised narrative object displaced in Etsuko's memory slipped into her narrative makes her feel released off. By such cathartic act of narrative the narrator releases off her inner pity of loss and fear of being reminded of the trauma again.

The deceptive narrative at times is intentional as the traumatic subject Etsuko here fabricates her history. Fabricating involves hiding and selecting things that she wants to show the readers. Thus the implied reader finds it difficult to detect the implied author's intention behind it. While telling Sachiko's story Etsuko pauses and confuses the reader with ellipses, blind spots and unfinished sentences. "I assure you, I was merely..." or "But I do wish you well. And I assure you I ..." (Ishiguro, p.45, 1982). This kind of hesitation in narrative is symptomatic of traumatized victims. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud contends that there is a compulsion in the mind of the traumatized person to repeat the traumatic experience (Freud, 24, 1920), often with different people, in different circumstances or through retelling the trauma, in order to make meaning or deal with the consequences of the traumatic event, with the intent, "to restore an earlier state of things." As in the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the French actress mutters 'I told our story to a stranger' which is a slip of tongue that occurs with most of the trauma patient. (Cathy Caruth) Yet in Ishiguro's novel this return of the repressed takes the psychological defense of displacing the pain of past into some object and people. Moreover, according to neurobiological research results, traumatic memories are stored differently from ordinary memories and consequently, they are also retrieved in a way that is not verbal (linguistic) in the usual sense of the word, but rather reoccur in the form of unusual feelings, bodily sensations, flashbacks and nightmares (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 172). The traumatic

language is prone to be evasive and reclusive as it speaks out less and hides more, which is a key feature of Ishigurian narrative. Etsuko's alter ego Sachiko serves as a psychotherapy for healing her trauma. This narrative mode of using "double" is a brilliant narrative technique mastered by the Ishiguro. The emotional purgation through narrativization is pronounced in the novel of Sylvia Plath as well where the traumatized Esther Greenwood takes to writing her wounded self under the societal pressure. This healing power of verbalization can be located with Etsuko's narrative formation with an alter Ego and Sylvia Plath under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Sylvia Plath's pseudonym Victoria Lucas serves here as her alter ego pronouncing autobiographical elements in her novel, *The Bell Jar*. Though this verbalization of one's trauma does not necessarily heal the subject completely rather complements their loss and angst. It has partial healing power of releasing the repressed.

As Etsuko purges off her guilty past through her narrative double Sachiko, Sylvia Plath in her novel *The Bell Jar* undertakes Victoria Lucas as her pseudonym for personal healing from her depression. Though it is no accident that Victoria Lucas plays a cultural role behind Sylvia Plath's societal and gender roles during 1965 America, Plath's autobiographical elements in the novel cannot be turned blind without a reading of Esther Greenwood's life. Though Esther is not Plath, there are certain parallels in between the author and narrator as most of Plath's life has been a reading through *The Bell Jar*. In the same breath, Etsuko's life can pose a better reading of Sachiko in *Nagasaki*. Through the narrative double of Sachiko episode Etsuko narrates and purges her own traumatic and alienated self. As the novel, *A Pale View of Hills* is a verbalization of Etsuko's past to her English daughter Niki. Hence it is no denying the fact that both Plath and Etsuko's narratives are unconsciously confessional narratives about themselves. Perhaps it would not be wrong if this process would be called a 'psychic relief'. The history of

literature has witnessed many such retelling of traumatized pain that is subjected to one's therapy in some way or the other. The holocaust survivor Anne frank's diary memoirs is no exception. Aristotle was may be the most pristine artist to have told about narrative catharsis. (Katharsis)

Trauma Enacted As A Play-

In this context of cathartic healing Helen Bamber's witnessing of a war survivor must find mention in her biography by Mark Belton. As she was investigating the war survivors in the concentration camps her goal was to turn their un verbalized traumas into stories as a good listener. As she says the unspeakable stories of the survivors are very tough to listen both on the part of the speaker and listener as the traumatized survivors suffer from a sense of unspeakability yet what Helen takes note out of these unspeakable stories was that these stories are to be understood less as tales of triumph over adversity than wounded quasi narrative that call out to be heard. Adding to this, Bamber also mentions further about a play that the survivors enacted not for their entertainment but as a therapy through recalling the repressed past. (Narrating pain the power of catharsis) According to Aristotelian Katharsis, this trauma subjects by retelling or reenacting their own past relives the pain, which can be treated healthy but this reliving comes with a certain estrangement or some dramatization of plot what Etsuko does with Sachiko story. The previous pain was so intolerable that they can't face it directly but through these forms of estranged narrative they relive their un lived pain. To quote Richard Kearney "Narrative catharsis, is a way of making absent things present in a unique balancing of compassion and dispassion, of identification and contemplation, of particular emotion and universal understanding. It is a task which, if finely and delicately achieved, may proffer some

measure of healing” (Narrating pain-The power of catharsis) By retelling the story Etsuko and all the trauma archetype subjects not only heals but regains a spiritual transformation.

Grief Should Not Be Buried-

To quote Bostico; One woman told a story about a friend of hers who had lost his son about five years after she and her husband lost theirs. She observed that although he seemed to be doing well, he never talked about his son or the death. He later developed stomach problems for which his doctor couldn't find a cause. After he had changed to a more homeopathic doctor, he discovered that his symptoms were related to depression and his denial of his need to grieve. She reported that he had improved physically and mentally since he had dealt with the guilt. The lesson of her story was that people need to pay attention to their grief work and not bury their feelings. Here it shall be located that narrative denial can lead to depression. The woman's friend who never talked about his son's death had stomach problems that is symptomatic of his depression that had necessarily stemmed out of his repressed guilt. Moreover, the grief should be grieved rather than buried in one's memory. In relation to this example, Etsuko's grieving of her loss and guilt is symptomatic of her emotional healing which can be considered as healthy.

Taking all these above examples into account it must be hypothesized that the primary affect of these narration in the context of trauma is therapy. With regard to it Etsuko's narrative manipulation of using a double of Sachiko is no different in serving the purpose of her healing. “Each time I tell my story it occupies less space and grief in my soul” (Downs, 1993, p. 303) Etsuko's story telling not only helps her heal but it lets the reader detect her psychological problem of trauma that needs a serious diagnosis and treatment.

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