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〔Article〕

Monstrous Motherhood: Unraveling the Past in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

The British-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, is famous for its unreliable narrator. Like the narrator of Margarett Atwood's *Surfacing*, Ishiguro's narrator cannot face unbearable memories from her past; instead, she invents false memories and presents these to the reader. In this paper I suggest that the unbearable issues for Ishiguro's narrator are connected with her inability to perform "ideal motherhood" as it was presented to her in postwar Nagasaki.

Key words: Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*, Japanese ideal of motherhood, unreliable narrator

醜怪なる母性

――Ishiguro の *A Pale View of Hills* における「過去」の解明――

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要　旨

日系イギリス人作家 Kazuo Ishiguro による最初の小説 *A Pale View of Hills* は、信用できない語り手で有名である。Margaret Atwood の *Surfacing* の語り手と同様、Ishiguro の語り手 Estuko は、自分の過去の耐え難い記憶に対峙できない。それどころか、語り手は、偽りの記憶を捏造し、それを読者に提示するのである。この点に関して、この論文では、以下のことを主張したい。Ishiguro の語り手 Estuko が抱える耐え難い問題は、"理想的な母性" を遂行することができないという語り手の不能、つまり戦後の Nagasaki にて現実化するその不能と結びついている。そして、話し手が自分自身を理想的で思慮深い母親として語るその過程で崩壊していく様は、殺意（さつい）をもった怪物なる母親の姿を曝け出すのである。

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I

A Pale View of Hills, the first novel of British writer Kazuo Ishiguro, surprises many readers in its last few pages, text that undermines the reliability of the whole narrative. Like the nameless narrator in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Ishiguro's Etsuko cannot face a personal past that was very painful. Unlike Atwood's narrator, however, who gradually surrenders parts of the truth as the narrative proceeds, Etsuko maintains a rigid imposture which collapses only in the last few pages of the novel as seemingly disparate characters are conflated and a monstrous reality appears.

The unreliability of Ishiguro's narrators has been a topic of critical concern. Cynthia Wong (1995) examines the narrator's inability to face the past in *A Pale View of Hills* and explicates this inability with the theory of Maurice Blanchot. Kathleen Wall (1994) looks at the unreliable narration of Stevens in Ishiguro's third and most famous novel, *The Remains of the Day*. More recently, Ken Eckert (2012) ascribes the narrative deception in *A Pale View of Hills* to cultural factors of evasion and repression in postwar Japan.

While all of this discussion of the failure of Ishiguro's narrators to face up to the past is both helpful and stimulating, none of it approaches what I perceive to be the most critical issue in *A Pale View of Hills*: motherhood, and the apparition of a monstrous version of motherhood. In this paper I will use the Japanese mythic figure of Kishimo, the monstrous child-consuming mother, to construct a symbol large enough to subsume mainstream discourse about what the mother should do and what the mother ought to be.

The novel opens in England, where an aging Etsuko is mourning the suicide of her older daughter, Keiko. Her younger daughter, Nikki, came from London to visit Etsuko in the early spring, and various events during that visit provoke memories of postwar Nagasaki when Etsuko, pregnant, was contemplating motherhood for the first time.

A Pale View of Hills is filled with the discourse of motherhood, and it is my thesis that what drives Etsuko into monsterhood is the unrelenting advice she receives during her pregnancy. In postwar Nagasaki a new society is being build on the charred remains of the devastated city. Etsuko and her husband Jiro seem to be part of a postwar society that has everything to look forward to. They live in a block of apartments to the east of the city constructed upon the ruins of a bombed-out village. The land which stretches from the apartments to the nearby river has the quality of a wasteland, pocked with puddles that breed a population of insects.

Etsuko is pregnant. She tells us that slight things "were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about motherhood" (17). In the present time of the novel, England in the eighties, the sight of a young girl swinging in a park brings back memories of an unconventional mother, Sachiko, and her daughter Mariko, who had lived in the single old dwelling to have survived the bomb. The old hut at the edge of the river becomes "a school for motherhood" as Etsuko, a somewhat conventional woman,

observes the more casual approach to mothering that Sachiko takes.

Etsuko has become friends with Sachiko because she feels more sympathy for that solitary figure than for the gossip-prone inhabitants of her own apartment building; looking at the women's capacity for trivial gossip Etsuko muses

> I found this hard to believe—that their lives had ever held the tragedies and nightmares of wartime. It was never my intention to appear unfriendly, but it was probably true that I made no special effort to seem otherwise. For at that point in my life, I was still wishing to be left alone. (13)

And so, according to Etsuko's narrative, she sympathized with Sachiko rather than with the more traditional mothers in her own community. But Etsuko herself seems to have internalized the maternal code, for as she associates with Sachiko, she cannot help but doubt Sachiko's way of raising her daughter Mariko. Mariko is just a child, but she is often left alone. This causes some anxiety for both the reader and Etsuko, for the reader somehow automatically sides with Etsuko in her representative pseudo-motherhood and feels the sting when Sachiko replies, as she often does when her bohemian way of raising her daughter is mentioned, "It's very kind of you to be so concerned, Etsuko . . . So very kind. I'm sure you'll make a splendid mother" (14).

Baillie and Matthews (2009) are among the very few critics who refer to the centrality of the maternal issue in Ishiguro's first novel. "The contradictions in Etsuko's narrative are most apparent in her ambivalence toward motherhood," (49) they assert, and even more significantly continue to suggest that "her narrative is remarkable for its inability directly to acknowledge negative feelings about pregnancy and motherhood." (49). This is in stark contrast to Nikki's unabashed declaration, in the present time of the narrative in England, "So many women just get brainwashed. They think all there is to life is getting married and having a load of kids" (180). The very issue that has haunted Etsuko's life poses no problem for her daughter.

As Etsuko continues with her memories of her early married life and pregnancy in Occupation-era Japan, she betrays not the slightest negative feeling towards the motherhood she is destined for. The reader must look to other clues from the narrative to piece together some semblance of reality. When Etsuko goes into Nagasaki and visits a noodle shop run by an old friend of her mother's, the woman's remarks give the reader a hint that all is not as well as the compliant Etsuko would have us believe. Their conversation centers on Etsuko's upcoming motherhood: "Etsuko, you're looking rather tired today," the noodle shop owner, Mrs. Fujiwara observes. Etsuko tries to pass this off with "It's only to be expected, I suppose" (24). But Mrs. Fujiwara provides us with a bit of reality when she continues, "But I meant you looked a little—miserable" and counsels Etsuko "You must keep your mind on happy things now. Your child. And the future." (24) Even as Mrs. Fujiwara provides us with some vital clues as to Etsuko's real condition, she acts as a cultural agent in returning Etsuko to the cultural icon of the

maternal.

II

Looking back to the early twentieth century *bosei shugi* (the institution of motherhood) debates in Japan yields a perspective that helps us to frame an understanding of Ishiguro's puzzling tale of troubled motherhood. Charlotte Eubanks (2001) explains the historical issue in a helpful way: "the *bosei shugi* debates center on how women might reconcile their socially mandated roles as mothers with their individual desires for social equality and economic independence" (287). These debates, Eubanks explains, appeared in the 1918 issues of the feminist publication *Fujin koron* (287). While the main debate was carried out by prominent literary figures of a stature no less that poet Yosano Akiko, significant contributions were made in a rather oblique way by Okamoto Kanoko and Hirabayashi Taiko. Eubanks' article centers on these contributions, which took the debate in a different direction:

> Rather than argue for any sort of reconciliation between individual desire and social role, however, these two authors widen the debate to include a fourth position: an attack on the social role of motherhood itself. Both authors use the mythical Buddhist figure of Kishimo as the dominant image in their stories, revising the traditional tale in certain ways so as to cast Kishimo as, at best, an ambivalent mother. (288)

Kishimo is the guardian Buddhist deity of children; she was converted to this angelic role in a meeting with Buddha who appeared to her in an effort to make her stop devouring the children of other people. Okamoto and Hirabayashi wrote tales centering on Kishimo "to depict the conflicting desires that exist within the maternal role itself" (288). In Okamoto's version of the story Kishimo becomes the guardian goddess after meeting with the Buddha, but she "will still desire, from time to time, to devour children" (288). In Hirabayashi's version of the legend the meeting with the Buddha never takes place. Eubanks comments:

> By continuing mercilessly in her search for self-knowledge, Hirabayashi's protagonist refuses her role as mother altogether, allowing her child to lie kicking and screaming on the floor as she ponders her new identity as a devourer of children. By centering their stories on such a figure, Okamoto and Hirabayashi are thus able to cleverly expose the social role of motherhood as an idealized image, an unattainable and impossible myth. (288)

III

The figure of Kishimo haunts Ishiguro's story, though she is never named. Etsuko's memories are filtered through the lens of the "unattainable and impossible myth" of motherhood, the idealized figure of the caring mother which dominates Japanese culture even today, some decades after Ishiguro's portrait of a woman confounded by its demands. The reader is lulled into a false sense of security by the irreproachable propriety of Etsuko's behavior as wife, as daughter-in-law, and as expectant mother already believing herself more capable than the renegade Sachiko.

But evidence slowly mounts up, unwilling though the reader may be to take notice of it, that something sinister accompanies the unrelenting goodness of Etsuko's care for others. Three women are conflated in the story into a figure that resembles Kishimo. The first is Etsuko, the narrator of the story; the second is her bohemian friend Sachiko, who occasionally leaves her young daughter Mariko alone to drink with servicemen in the bars of Nagasaki; and the third is a mysterious woman Mariko claims lives on the uninhabited island just across the river.

This mysterious woman is first mentioned the second time Etsuko meets Mariko; the young girl is trying to find homes for some kittens about to be born and asks Etsuko to take one. When Etsuko demurs, Mariko tells her that "The other woman said she'd take one" (18). Etsuko believes that Mariko is mistaking her having met Etsuko by the river the previous day; this conflation of Etsuko and an unnamed woman who lives near the river continues through the narrative. It takes on more sinister hues when Sachiko tells Etsuko about Mariko's having witnessed a mother drowning her baby in the misery of postwar Tokyo. Mariko has been claiming that the woman visits her and invites her to her house since that incident. Etsuko and the woman are conflated in the image of Kishimo.

This conflation is particularly obvious in Mariko's apparent fear of Etsuko. On one of the nights that Etsuko goes in search of Mariko along the river, Etsuko tells us that a piece of rope somehow got attached to her sandals and was dragging behind her. When Mariko sees this rope her fear of Etsuko is ignited:

> "Why have you got that?
> "I told you, it's nothing. It just caught on to my foot." I took a step closer. "Why are you doing that, Mariko?"
> "Doing what?"
> "You were making a strange face just now."
> "I wasn't making a strange face. Why have you got the rope?" (84)

It is not long after this conversation by the river that Nagasaki is beset with a series of child murders. The third victim is a young girl found hanged from a tree, and it is this image of the child

swinging from the tree that provokes Etsuko's memories of the long-ago summer in Japan, the summer of her pregnancy, the summer of her friendship with Sachiko and Mariko.

In the present time of the novel Etsuko explains to her daughter Nikki that the dream she had of a girl swinging in the park, the image that provoked the Nagasaki narrative, was a bit different from what she had thought at first: "I realized something else this morning" she tells Nikki. "You see... the little girl isn't on a swing at all. It seemed like that at first. But it's not a swing she's on" (96). It is Kishimo's face we catch a glimpse of here, gazing at the small figure swinging from the tree.

IV

It is the mastery of Ishiguro's technique that keeps us believing in the propriety of Etsuko and her ways until the very last pages of the novel. The unpredictable Sachiko has wavered back and forth about living in America with her undependable boy friend Frank, who always pulls out of these international plans at the last minute. Etsuko is a pillar of common sense for this volatile friend, urging her to choose the more stable possibility of going to live in her uncle's house in Nagasaki. Just when Sachiko seems to have chosen this respectable option Frank appears again and the stable future is scrapped for a new plan to go and live with Frank in Kobe.

Mariko's interest in these topsy-turvy plans has mostly to do with the fate of the kittens she plays with every day. Going to live with relatives in Nagasaki meant the kittens' future was safe, but there can be no such extra baggage in the Kobe future. Mariko confronts her mother with her broken promise about the cats' future. This provokes Sachiko to pile the kittens into a cage-like wooden box which she carries to the nearby river as her horror-struck daughter watches. Kishimo reappears as the scene of the drowning of the cats becomes conflated with the mysterious woman who had held her infant under water in Tokyo, the scene which Mariko has never forgotten. Mariko runs along the riverbank watching the slowly submerging box head down the river.

Once again Etsuko goes in search of Mariko along the dark river where the cats have drowned; this time, when she finds Mariko, in just a few subtle brush strokes Ishiguro undoes the duality of good Etsuko and bad Sachiko. When Mariko declares she doesn't want to go and live with Frank because he is pig-like, Etsuko's tone is no longer that of an outsider; it is the voice of Mariko's mother. "if you don't like it over there we can always come back" (173) she tells Mariko, and the *we* undoes the narrative deception that has shaped the tale. Etsuko and Sachiko are conflated; it is Etsuko who will go to live abroad, and Mariko may be the Keiko who has recently committed suicide in the present time of the novel in England.

But someone else is also present on the dark bridge where Etsuko and Mariko face each other. Kishimo is present; Mariko asks Etsuko, "Why are you holding that?" (173) Once again the mother has a rope in her hands. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not going to hurt you," Etsuko tells the

girl who is already running away. In the space of a page and a half Ishiguro has pulled the rug out from under the respectable tale of a Japanese mother-to-be who disapproves of bohemian life styles and sloppy motherhood and revealed the figure of ambivalent, destructive Kishimo, who cannot be named in the text. This is not the repentant Kishimo, chastened by Buddha's intervention, but the Kishimo of Hirabayashi's story, still pondering her role as devourer of children.

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