

## Think India (Quarterly Journal)

ISSN: 0971-1260 Vol-22, Special Issue-05

ONE DAY NATIONAL SEMINAR

ON

**DISABILITY, REPRESENTATION AND LITERATURE**

held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department  
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



### **Aesthetic Amnesia and National Identity: A Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's**

#### ***The Buried Giant***

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#### **Abstract**

Disability is part of the human condition. Almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life. A person's environment has a huge impact on the experience and extent of disability. Inaccessible environments create disability by creating barriers to participation and inclusion. Long term memory loss is also a disability that has a tremendous effect on the victim. Memory is one of Japanese-born British novelist, Kazuo Ishiguro's enormous themes. Through the illustration of a nationwide circumstance of forgetting, *The Buried Giant* connects the disability of a nation in remembering its past. *The Buried Giant* projects an elderly couple of Briton, Axl and Beatrice, set out across the post-Roman post-Arthurian landscape in search of their son who, for causes unknown, no longer lives with them. No one remembers either their individual past or their collective past. As they begin their journey, Axl and Beatrice meet Edwin, a young Saxon boy of unusual experience and abilities, a

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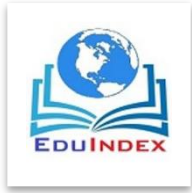
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Saxon warrior called Wistan and an aged Sir Gawain, the nephew of great Arthur, who once ruled those lands. It is understood that years of intense war and bloodshed between the Britons and the Saxons comes to a pause because of the breath of a she-dragon, Querig, as it causes memory loss across the land. The novel pivots on whether memory will be reestablished to the nation, as doing so will have devastatingly negative consequences, as well as positive ones. The paper analyses the lost identities and the fragmented memories due to the disability of the nation as a whole.

### **Key Words: Disability, Memory, Fragmented memories and National identity**

Disability is part of the human condition. Almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life. A person's environment has a huge impact on the experience and extent of disability. Inaccessible environments create disability by creating barriers to participation and inclusion. Long term memory loss is also a disability that has a tremendous effect on the victim. Memory is one of Japanese-born British novelist, Kazuo Ishiguro's enormous themes. Through the illustration of a nationwide circumstance of forgetting, *The Buried Giant* connects the disability of a nation in remembering its past. *The Buried Giant* projects an elderly couple of Briton, Axl and Beatrice, set out across the post-Roman post-Arthurian landscape in search of their son who, for causes unknown, no longer lives with them. No one remembers either their individual past or their collective past. As they begin their journey, Axl and Beatrice meet Edwin, a young Saxon boy of unusual experience and abilities, a Saxon warrior called Wistan and an aged Sir Gawain, the nephew of great Arthur, who once ruled those lands. It is understood that years of intense war and bloodshed between the Britons



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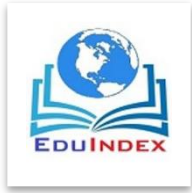


and the Saxons comes to a pause because of the breath of a she-dragon, Querig, as it causes memory loss across the land. The novel pivots on whether memory will be reestablished to the nation, as doing so will have devastatingly negative consequences, as well as positive ones. The paper analyses the lost identities and the fragmented memories due to the disability of the nation as a whole.

Ishiguro has efficiently captured Old England and a narrative on people undergoing amnesia with their fragmented memories. Axl and Beatrice, the age old Britons live with a forgotten past. The community in which they live in survives in a state of reverie as “past was rarely discussed” (7). The couple does not even remember the whereabouts of their son except that he is a “fine and good man” (28). They embark on a journey in search of their son with very vague memories. As Axl remembers,

‘When I was outside just now, doing my best to remember all I could in the stillness, many things came back to me. But I can’t remember our son, neither his face nor his voice, though sometimes I think I can see him when he was a small boy, and I’m leading him by the hand beside the riverbank, or when he was weeping one time and I was reaching out to comfort him. But what he looks like today, where he’s living, if he has a son of his own, I don’t remember at all.’ (28)

Forgetfulness becomes a malady of the whole community and it seems to be “cruel” (34) when they are unable to remember their past. The land has been cursed with “a mist of forgetfulness” (51) as they are bereft of moments they “enjoyed and treasured” (51). But still the old couple stays optimistic by saying that their memories are “just mislaid somewhere on account of the



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wretched mist” (52). Their journey makes them witness more characters with their atmost amnesia and forgetfulness.

The whole community wanders around with forgetfulness and as Teo writes, “Ishiguro prefers to work with the disjointed elements of memory, allowing for a more fragmented view of past events” which is all the more “realistic from the point of view of human perception and experience” (34). Amnesia can be temporary or have a psychological root and is a term used in reference to memory problems. Amnesia in fiction offers authors an efficient and dramatic device to tackle themes such as identity, personal liberty, or guilt.

Wistan, a manly Saxon warrior sent by his king to kill the she-dragon, named Querig, whose magical breath literally causes the mist that takes away people’s memories and past. By slaying her, Wistan aspires to remove the shroud of forgetfulness from the community that has forgotten the traumatic experience of war, and ethnic cleansing executed by Arthurian knights against the Saxons. The uncertain mission of Sir Gawain, entrusted to him by King Arthur, to protect the dragon, whose lasting presence on the one hand causes amnesia, but on the other one ensures relative peace in a society which has forgotten its agonizing past.

Renan insists nation as a “soul or spiritual principle” (19). It is based on two things: “One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (19). Renan offers two time frames for a nationhood to work – it is the past and the present. It is only in the combination of the past and the present that a successful nation continues. The community of Old England as presented by Ishiguro has lost its collective

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traditions and recollections of the past. The amnesiac stricken society and nationhood, leaves its citizens waver around in a perpetual present with little sense of their individual or shared identity. The she dragon has polluted the atmosphere “robbing memories both happy and dark” (355). It is reiterated that keeping Querig alive prevents justice and hides up all the atrocities of war. On the other hand, killing her will end up in enabling the series of violence and vengeance between the Britons and the Saxons than reconciliation. Wistan suggests that the “customs and suspicions have always divided” (340) the Britons and the Saxons. He also fears that the buried memories may stir up the revenge between the two communities on the slaughter of the she-dragon. As he further says:

‘The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours’ houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance. For you Britons, it’ll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You’ll flee or perish. And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people’s time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended’ (340)

Ishiguro’s Old England is freed from amnesia and given back the past recollections but the rich fortune of memories turns out to be a heavy burden; as the act of slaying the dragon is destined to bring chaos not peace. The buried enmity between the two communities will bring out

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unbearable vengeance and horrors. Britons and Saxon migrants live peacefully together. But this peace depends on the fog of forgetfulness. As the fog lifts, Axl, Beatrice and the others who travel with them remember a blood-spattered time when Britons, following the command of their king, used war and slaughter in an effort to ethnically cleanse Saxons from the land. The return of memory means the return of war.

Axl and Beatrice fall short to attain the initial intention of their task as their son turns out to be long dead, but they do recover memories of their past life together, counting its harshest moments as well. Beatrice's "small moment" (356) of unfaithfulness to her husband, Axl's ensuing anger, and the couple's reconciliation are consequent memories regained after the slaying of the she-dragon. Axl, out of vengeance, thwarts both of them from visiting the grave of their son, mourning his death. As Axl confesses, "It was just foolishness and pride. And whatever else lurks in the depths of a man's heart. Perhaps it was a craving to punish, sir. I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance" (357). The "small chamber" in his heart, where the resent has been furtively obscured for years, is finally unlocked upon Querig's death, and Axl finds that in the course of time, he has coped to excuse his wife - "And I think now it's no single thing changed my heart, but it was gradually won back by the years shared between us . . . A wound that healed slowly, but heal it did" (357).

Ishiguro's Sir Gawain, the shield of the dragon and collective amnesia, is an aged shadow of the fourteenth-century knight. His mission to suppress the memory and the atrocities of war as well dooms to be a failure. He is portrayed as recalling his vigorous contribution in the

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genocide of the Saxons and seeing this act as the only way of preventing further war echoes Ishiguro's voice against the consequences of war. Gawain's foremost target seems to be to lessen the violence of war amidst the two varied communities.

Ishiguro uses his novel *The Buried Giant* to smudge the divides between the binary opposites like individual/collective, love/hatred, war/peace, and utterly excels light on their shared qualities. In writing about their disabled life with erased memories, Ishiguro enquires into the modes of living that requires peace ahead of war and bloodshed. Ishiguro, in dealing with collective memories associated with nationhood, delineates the difference between personal memory and societal memory. Ishiguro indirectly voices the traumatic problems of racism in the contemporary world which requires a collective forgetfulness or amnesia of personal vengeance and war crimes.

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