
Gender Roles and Exploring Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's Women Characters: A Psychoanalytical Study

20

Bhavesh Pathak

Nilofar Akhtar

Abstract

Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, a writer of many voices, through the octave of his words creates a symphony which always lasts long in the memory of a reader. Etsuko of *A Pale view of Hills* and Miss Kenton of *The Remains of the Day* are one among the many characters of Ishiguro who not only provided a field for gender roles and studies but also presented a deep exploration of human psyche. A master of his craft, Ishiguro gained many accolades and achievements for his works including the Nobel Prize and the Booker Prize. A conspicuous quality displayed in the works of Ishiguro is the subversion of gender roles and giving female characters a firm and independent personality in his works. The female characters in his works are as germane

Bhavesh Pathak

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English, M.B.Govt.P.G. College, Haldwani, Nainital, Uttarakhand, Email: bhaveshpathak2211@gmail.com

Nilofar Akhtar

Professor and Head, Department of English, M.B.Govt.P.G. College, Haldwani, Nainital, Uttarakhand, Email: 27nilofer@gmail.com

Anu Books, India

Gender Roles and Green Concepts: Pathways to Environmental Sustainability

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/Book.AB302-F24.Chapter1>

as the male ones and their presence is what makes the story complete and profound.

A Pale view of Hills (1982) is the debut novel of Ishiguro where through the protagonist, Etsuko, a Japanese woman who is trapped within the circle of patriarchy and subservience leaves for England, remarries and spends her later life in that country. Her mind oscillating between the memories of past and her present life, Etsuko's character provides a testimony to the literary prowess of Ishiguro.

The Remains of the Day (1989), third novel of Ishiguro and his first to be set outside Japan brought him The Booker Prize. An intriguing story of Stevens, a butler and the protagonist of the story, brings out the best in Ishiguro as a novelist. Miss Kenton, one of the important characters in the novel who also played a major role in the life of Stevens is a renowned character of Ishiguro's literary oeuvre. Her love for Stevens and challenge against his authority, waiting for Stevens's reciprocation of her love and later moving on and marrying another man, her act of regretting and accepting, her quest for happiness and identity places her among other notable female protagonists of English literature.

With the help of literary and psychoanalytical theories this paper will bring forward a comparative study of these two characters, i.e. Etsuko and Miss Kenton and explore the vast and widespread dynamics of human psyche with respect to gender roles.

Keywords

Gender roles, Psychoanalytical theory, Psyche, Identity, Memory.

Introduction

“Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don’t go along with that. The memories I value most, I don’t ever see them fading.”

– Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*

Kazuo Ishiguro, a writer born in Nagasaki who later on moved to Britain at the age of five with his family, became one of the most celebrated authors of contemporary English literature. Through his rich literary oeuvre, Ishiguro touches several themes and genres of the novel. From historical fictions to sci-fi, Ishiguro is trying to leave no stone unturned. Being a witness of both the eastern and western cultures and a man of glorious imagination, Ishiguro subverts and challenges the role of gender through his works. Characters like Kathy, Etsuko, Sachiko, and Miss Kenton prove to be a testimony of this art. Another of the qualities which appeals his readers is his diction. His dignified diction displays the dynamics of the human psyche and memory in a vivid manner, which makes his works more striking to the readers’ eyes. These qualities of Ishiguro brought him several nominations, awards and accolades, including the Booker Prize in 1989 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017.

A Pale View of Hills (1982) is the first novel written by Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, for which he was awarded the Winfred Holtby Memorial Prize in the same year. This novel narrates the story of a Japanese woman named Etsuko who is now living in England with her younger daughter Niki and with the memories of her life in Japan and the suicide of her elder daughter Keiko. The novel encompasses within it several themes like identity, memory and loss.

The Remains of The Day is one of the most notable works of Ishiguro, which appeared in the year 1989. It shares the story of a butler named Stevens, who is also the protagonist of this novel. Stevens has served a long time in Darlington Hall under the lordship of the eponymous man. In 1956, the new owner of the Hall offered Stevens to go on a car trip and take a break. One of the most beautiful car trips in literature where Stevens goes to meet a former colleague (Miss

Kenton) creates an enchanting narrative. Filled with memories of the past of Darlington Hall and Lord Darlington, this journey dives deep into the human psyche. Miss Kenton, who is a former colleague of Stevens, plays a vital role due to her relationship with the protagonist and her later decisions which change the course of the two lives, *viz.* Stevens's and Miss Kenton's own life. This novel was the one that brought Ishiguro the Booker Prize for Fiction in the same year and later was also adapted as a film starring Anthony Hopkins as Stevens and Emma Thompson as Miss Kenton. The film was also nominated for eight Academy Awards.

Etsuko and Miss Kenton are the women characters selected for further study in this paper in the context of subversion of gender roles and psychoanalytical theory. The current paper has been further divided into four parts where the first part is about the gender roles and their subversion in the selected works and characters, the second part deals with the psychoanalytical study of the selected characters including the description of the theory used in the novel, the third part is about the connections the characters possess with nature and final part is the conclusion.

Gender Roles and their Subversion by Ishiguro

Gender is not a mere word defining the sex or natural state of a human body, it has transcended the boundaries of physique and natural state of body and has added several social/ societal and other factors to the academic discourses linked with identity. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* considers gender as a cultural and social construct instead of being based on natural conditions, and also challenges the binaries of male and female. Literature being an integral part of society played a pivotal role in bringing forward the portrayal of gender and how a specific gender is put into a frame of specific set of roles. Gender roles in literature often display the cultural and societal factors behind constructing the gender and their treatment. Literature here becomes a powerful tool in redefining and reframing gender, as it possesses the powers to subvert the roles and change doctrines related to the gender.

Gender criticism is a branch of literary criticism which deals with such study of gender roles by reassessing the older and contemporary texts through the glasses of novel theories in the mentioned field.

One of the many conspicuous qualities that can be observed in the works of Ishiguro is his way of redefining and subverting gender roles through his narrative. In *A Pale View of Hills*, which is set after the post war circumstances and its aftermath, he has not only subverted the gender roles but also shows the societal factors and ideology which constrict or criticize a specific gender against some actions. This description of Etsuko's former husband, Jiro along with his father and colleagues discussing how one's wife voted for a different party than her husband and how it is something unexpected shows of the conformist behaviour a married woman is expected to have in the society:

“A wife these days feels no sense of loyalty towards the household. She just does what she pleases, votes for a different party if the whim takes her. That's so typical of the way things have gone in Japan. All in the name of democracy people abandon obligations.” (65)

These lines are spoken by Ogata -San, Etsuko's father-in-law which showcases the orthodox ideology and patriarchal chains which are not meant to be broken or destroyed by the woman of that society.

Etsuko, who is also the narrator and protagonist of this novel is a Japanese woman who is also expected to live in similar constraints and has to become an obedient and subservient wife and mother. Ishiguro through Etsuko breaks this stability of gender and brings change as here in the novel Etsuko leaves her earlier husband Jiro and the city Nagasaki to go and live in England and have a new life. Another character of the novel Sachiko who is Etsuko's friend also moves to America with another man along with her daughter Mariko. Even the other characters like Niki, the younger daughter of Etsuko who has come to visit her mother after the demise of her sister does not conform to the ideal way of living defined by the society and lives her life on her own grounds. Even in one incident Niki, her daughter admires her decision in the sixth chapter when she tells Etsuko that one of her

friends is writing a poem about her and how Etsuko made the right and brave choices:

“So many women”, she said, “get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they are just miserable. But they can’t pluck the courage to do a thing about it. They will just go on like that for the rest of their lives.”

“I see. So you’re saying they should desert their children, are you, Niki?”

“You know what I mean. It’s pathetic when people just waste away their lives.”

I did not speak, although my daughter paused as if expecting me to do so.

“It couldn’t have been easy, what you did, Mother. You ought to be proud of what you did with your life.” (90)

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro again subverts the gender roles and brings out a new and different aspect of the characters which again challenges the norms and beliefs of the society. Stevens and Miss Kenton, both the characters here face a situation of unrequited love in their life. Stevens here is the one who is a conformist and loyal person, quite with his thoughts and less expressive about his feelings. Miss Kenton on the other hand has qualities contrary to Stevens and is more expressive in comparison to Stevens. In this novel too the male authority has been challenged as Miss Kenton tries to make Stevens open up his feelings to her and through her actions like invading the room and private space of Stevens, she tries to break the male superiority. When her love is not reciprocated by Stevens, Miss Kenton does not wait for acceptance of Stevens like several other female characters in literature. She keeps moving forward in her life, marries someone else and does not wait for Stevens for too long which displays her breaking the image of submissive qualities of women towards the men in the society.

Even at the end of the novel, we find Miss Kenton to be a woman who has moved forward when she answers one of Stevens’s questions about her married life:

‘I feel I should answer you, Mr Stevens. As you say, we may not meet again for many years. Yes, I do love my husband. I didn’t at first. I didn’t at first for a long time. When I left Darlington Hall all those years ago, I never realized I was really, truly leaving. I believe I thought of it as simply another ruse, Mr Stevens, to annoy you. It was a shock to come out here and find myself married. For a long time, I was very unhappy, very unhappy indeed. But then year after year went by, there was the war, Catherine grew up, and one day I realized I loved my husband. You spend so much time with someone, you find you get used to him. He’s a kind, steady man, and yes, Mr Stevens, I’ve grown to love him.’ (251)

Miss Kenton and Etsuko, both the characters transcended the social boundaries of set roles and redefined them in their own way.

Exploring Identities: A psychoanalytical study of Etsuko and Miss Kenton

“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.” –Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*

These above lines by Etsuko define how germane the impact of memory and past is on the human mind.

Psychoanalysis is a branch of psychology which deals with the unconscious, subconscious, past, memories and suppressed desires and traumas of the human mind, behaviour and personality. Psychoanalysis was established by Sigmund Freud who through his theories of id, ego, superego and displacement, *etc.* laid a deep foundation of this discipline. On the groundwork of Freud, later on psychoanalysis as a discipline grew its branches and stems through several advancements and innovative approaches by several others like Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, Erik Erikson, Eric Fromm, Otto Rank, Alfred Adler, Anna Freud etc. Further it got divided into two parts, *viz.* Psychosexual (psychoanalytical approaches which majorly deal with sexual development and its impact on personality) and Psychosocial (psychoanalytical approaches which majorly deal with

the social factors and their impact on the development of personality). Psychoanalytical approaches in literature majorly analyse literary works using the theories and techniques of psychoanalysis to understand the psychological state of the characters and sometimes the factors behind it.

The psychoanalytical approach used to analyse the selected characters is based on the Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development. In his works, Erikson proposed eight stages of psychosocial development of a human being, where each and every stage here has a certain psychosocial crisis and some qualities as their basic strengths or virtues. These stages of Erikson start from the stage of infancy where a child goes through the psychosocial crisis of Basic trust and mistrust and here the basic strength is hope. The second stage is the stage of early childhood where the psychosocial crisis is between autonomy vs. shame or doubt and here the basic strength is will. The third stage is the play age where crisis often occurs between Initiative vs guilt and the basic strength is the purpose. The fourth stage is the stage of School age where the psychosocial crisis is Industry vs. Inferiority and the strength is competence. The fifth stage is the stage of Adolescence where Identity vs Identity confusion becomes the psychosocial crisis along with Fidelity as the basic strength. The sixth stage consists of young adulthood where the psychosocial crisis is between Intimacy and isolation and the basic strength is Love. The second last stage is the stage of adulthood where the psychosocial crisis is between generativity vs stagnation and strength is care. The stage selected here for the analysis of the selected characters is the eighth and final stage among these stages. The final stage is of the psychosocial development is the old age. According to Erikson in this stage psychosocial crisis one goes through is the crisis of Integrity vs despair. The Basic strength of this stage is the quality of wisdom which one has gained so far. Dignity becomes one of the important aspects of this stage and physical activities along with mental ones take a slower pace at this point in life. The counterpart of Integrity is despair in this stage, where either of them can come in the individual.

While analysing the character of Etsuko, we find that she is filled with the memories of her past. Her narration feels to be ambiguous as the story of Sachiko, her friend running away with some other man to a foreign land resembles a bit her own story and Mariko's dislike for this new man is similar to the relations which Keiko is being shown to have with her step-father. Etsuko is an old woman now who is haunted by the memories of her past and often the narrative of the novel consists of her past life which she had in Japan. Etsuko's narrative is highly filled with regret and remorse, we find one such incident in the sixth chapter of the novel:

I feel only regret now for those attitudes I displayed towards Keiko. In this country, after all, it is not unexpected that a young woman of that age should wish to leave home. All I succeeded in doing, it would seem, was to ensure that when she finally left — now almost six years ago — she did so severing all her ties with me. But then I never imagined she could so quickly vanish beyond my reach; all I saw was that my daughter, unhappy as she was at home, would find the world outside too much for her. (88)

Several such incidents can be found in the novel where Etsuko, while in her psychosocial crisis stage between Integrity vs. Despair, it is despair which wins as there is a sense of incompleteness. Etsuko's narrative of her life also shows other elements of psychoanalysis like projection where one's own past and traumatic elements or the unacceptable feelings of one's own self are often attributed or given to some other character or person and is made a part of someone else's life. The element of regret and despair creates such impression in the novel at several times where Etsuko (although she is calling them the incidents or situations of Sachiko and Mariko) projects her own past to someone else's, mostly Sachiko. This even puts a question of whether Sachiko and Mariko are someone Etsuko actually met or she made up those to reduce her own despair.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Miss Kenton's character also fits properly in the stencil of the eighth stage of psychosocial development defined by Erikson. Although most of the incidents in the novel have

Miss Kenton in earlier stages of her life but the analysis made here is based on the later stages and post-married life where both the Integrity and Despair, the psychosocial crisis of the eighth stage, are visible clearly.

Miss Kenton was open about her feelings towards Stevens but Stevens was the one reluctant about expressing or reciprocating them. Miss Kenton, unlike other female protagonists, does not decide to wait for Stevens's approval. In their final conversations, she even accepts this move of her as just "another ruse to annoy Mr. Stevens" and shows how she has finally moved on in her life and let the past be the past. Here both integrity and despair are visible in Miss Kenton's words as she on the one hand claims to be happy and satisfied but there is also a question which sometimes appear in front of her:

'But that doesn't mean to say, of course, there aren't occasions now and then extremely desolate occasions when you think to yourself: "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life." And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I might have had with you, Mr Stevens. And I suppose that's when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave. But each time I do so, I realize before long my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful.' (251)

Miss Kenton, who is now Mrs. Benn, in several letters earlier in the novel showed a quite unhappiness and reflected sorrow on her decision but in the final part of the novel when Stevens meets her, she displays a sense of satisfaction and holds her integrity as a married woman. In the above quoted lines from the novel, we can find the elements of integrity and dignity as she does not succumb again to the unrequited love for Stevens and finds contentment in her current married life, she displays that how one should be grateful to what one has and dwelling in the past will not help in the present. Despair can be witnessed by the question in the form of "what if?" which is there or

appears in the life of Mrs. Benn (Miss Kenton's married name with which Stevens addresses her in the final stages of the narrative). Her letters to the Stevens also show that how while reflecting back on her life she had a tinge of despair in her life.

Both of the selected characters, Etsuko and Miss Kenton, fit in the eighth stage and provide a vivid description of the human psyche and memory.

Identity and Nature

Nature is something which always finds a special place in Ishiguro's works. Whether the setting is England or Japan, Ishiguro's description of nature and of its calmness and beauty is what makes those works more interesting. The identity of the characters in the novels never leaves to be in tandem with nature. In both the novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day*, the lovely description of nature is present and in a subtle way it sometimes acts as a place of belongingness to the characters.

For Mariko, it's a place she always goes to whenever she gets a chance to escape and it's mostly Etsuko who goes to find her. For Etsuko, nature's scenic beauty works both as a medium of tranquillity and a canvas painted with her memories. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro does not leave a chance to glorify and paint the mountains and valleys of Japan in this novel. The river plays an important role here as it not only symbolises nature's way of accepting everyone but also relates with the passing of time and also resembles the life of Etsuko. Like the river accepts everything and keeps flowing, whether it's a corpse or something good in the same way Etsuko also had to move on. The corpses on the river symbolise something similar to the bad and traumatic past of the characters but its flowing nature symbolises how human life goes on, especially the life of Etsuko where even after a sad past in Japan and the recent and sudden passing away of her elder daughter Keiko, she keeps on living and her life keeps on flowing like the river which appears in the novel.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Miss Kenton is also in touch with nature which also displays her personality traits, her liking of flowers

and their beauty which is different than of Stevens shows her expressive and open nature. The description of landscapes and their beauty in this novel brings out another captivating quality of this work.

Conclusion

Ishiguro through characters like Etsuko and Miss Kenton gives female characters a firm and independent personality by subverting the gender roles and breaking the stereotypes and social constructs related to gender.

A psychoanalytical study of Miss Kenton and Etsuko using the theories of Erikson explores the themes of integrity, despair, old age, memory and trauma. It shows how eloquently Ishiguro brings out the turbulence and calmness inside a human mind and psyche.

Characters' relation to the nature and their description in the novel symbolising the characters' traits and personalities is done in a subtle and adept way which accentuates the narrative and keeps the reader engaged.

References

1. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. Faber and Faber, 1982.
2. —. *The Remains of the Day*. Faber and Faber, 1989.
3. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2005.
4. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "psychoanalysis". Encyclopedia Britannica, 19 Jan. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/science/psychoanalysis>. Accessed 31 January 2024.
5. Hall Calvin Springer et al. *Theories of Personality*. 4th ed. J. Wiley 1998.
6. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Kazuo Ishiguro". Encyclopedia Britannica, 28 Dec. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kazuo-Ishiguro>. Accessed 31 January 2024.
7. Kazuo Ishiguro – Biographical. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. Wed. 31 Jan 2024. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/biographical/>>

8. "Representation of Women & Gender Roles in Literature: Guide & Examples." *Custom*, custom-writing.org/blog/gender-roles-in-literature. Accessed 31 Jan. 2024.
9. Erikson, Erik Homburger. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1994.
10. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1989.
11. Brown, Robin S, editor. *Re-Encountering Jung Analytical Psychology and Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2018.
12. *What Is Psychoanalytic Literary Theory? - Literarywonders*, literarywonders.com/what-is-psychoanalytic-literary-theory/. Accessed 31 Jan. 2024.