

The Meaning of Having Memories for Kazuo Ishiguro : Regarding the Metaphor of a ”Childhood Bubble”

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's father, who was an Oceanographer, was asked to work for the British government in England in 1960, so the family moved to England when Ishiguro was five years old. Despite their first intention to stay temporarily, after all the family immigrated. Thirty years after his departure, Ishiguro visited Japan for the first time, and had an interview [in Japan] with Oe, Kenzaburo. In that interview, Ishiguro spoke about Japan as follows: "...I grew up with a very strong image in my head of this other country, a very important other country to which I had a strong emotional tie" (67). It is clear that Japan is now his "other country" and not anymore of his "mother country". He also mentions:

... I realized that this Japan, which was very precious to me, actually existed only in my own imagination, partly because the real Japan had changed greatly between 1960 and later on. I realized that it [my memory of Japan] was a place of my own childhood, and I could never return to this particular Japan (67).

We can never go back to the past no matter how strong we desire to do so. Ishiguro consistently uses the first-person narrator and the protagonists in his novels reminiscence about the past as if they are trying to retrieve something that they could never regain. Ishiguro wrote his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (hereafter referred to as PV) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (hereafter referred to as AFW), based on the "Japan" which is his personal Japan, obviously constructed by his memories and imagination. It is fair enough to say that he reproduced a "Japan" that remains in his memory. Further, in *Never Let Me Go* (hereafter referred to as NLG), Ishiguro writes a story on clone children whose lives are limited to about thirty years and suggests how important it is to have memories in our lives. The element of "memory" occupies an enormous position in Ishiguro's novels.

In this thesis, I would like to explore the meaning of memory in Ishiguro's novels and cast a light on the "childhood bubble" he repeatedly uses after returning from Japan for the first time after thirty years. In Chapter 1, I will examine the studies on "childhood memory" in the developmental psychology field and discuss them in relations

with Ishiguro's novels. In Chapter 2, I would like to consider what a “childhood bubble” means to Ishiguro. In Chapter 3, I would like to extract the “childhood bubble” from Ishiguro's novels and consider the meaning of having memories.

1. Memories and Childhood

According to Nobata, Tomoe and Hakoda, Yuji experts consider that the oldest memories people have are the events that happened between the age of three and four (9). Tanaka, Ken reports the oldest memory occurred conspicuously at the age of five for men and three for women in Japan (“Yojiki”(2) 36; my translation). Ishiguro moved to England at the age of five, so as he mentions frequently in the interviews, his memory of Japan feels clear. In addition, Tanaka states “many scholars equally admit that childhood experience significantly affects one's personality development” (“Yojiki”(1) 11; my translation).

Kaneda, Mitsuyo and Sato, Toshiyuki carried out an experiment among seven Japanese who were born between 1923 and 1934 and spent their childhoods in Japan and moved overseas later on. They let the participants talk about their childhood freely in order to allow them to face their inner-selves to prevent or mitigate cognitive impairment for the aged using a method called Kaiso ho, or life reviewing. The background of the participants was similar to that of Ishiguro's, so I think when considering memories in Ishiguro's novels, the results of this experiment become useful; therefore, I would like to take a closer look at it.

In this thesis, I will examine six participants out of the seven. Their brief personal histories are explained in the footnote.¹ Ms. Thomas talks about the textures of her hand-made toys otedama, or a small bean bag, she received from her mother and grandmother when she was a child. She describes how she felt playing with them (107). Mr. Sunaoka recalls the smell of konbu, or dried seaweed, that was piled up in a storage room which was his friend's and his play place. Kaneda and Sano state, “It seems that the smell of dried seaweed remains as a strong memory and the scent filling the storage evoked a special feeling to the participant, and it looks as if it is inseparable from the enjoyment of playing hide-and-seek” (109). Mr. Sunaoka even talks as if “his body is actually there playing it” (109). Ms. Cole mentions the story of Sanbokojin, or a guardian deity of Buddha, using many onomatopoeic words she heard from her grandmother while cooking rice together with an earthenware cooking-pot (110). Kaneda and Sano explain that “A vivid image of the earthenware cooking-pot, which is a symbol of Japanese lifestyle, not only stays as her childhood memory of listening to the story or phrases, but also strongly connects her with the emotions she received at

the time" (110). So in Ms. Cole's talk, she seems to be re-experiencing the childhood emotions. Mr. Saeki converses about "his experience of sensing danger during World War II. He hid himself from the bombers but furtively glanced at them and counted them" (110). Mr. Aoki "started to weep while discussing the last day at school before leaving Japan" (110). Mr. Aoki said that he knew his family would have to leave for Brazil, but he never actually felt that reality. However, "when his uncle came to school to pick him up to take him to the airport without notice" (110), he realized that he would have to be separated from his friends, and at that time when his classmates noticed his imminent departure from Japan, they all started to cry. Kaneda and Sano state, [during the interview] "Mr. Aoki was at loss for words and started to groan as if he were re-experiencing that moment" (110). Ishiguro also says that he vividly remembers the day he left for England. He says, "I think that possibly they [those days] are so vivid because there was such an enormous change in my life and if there is such a change you have something to anchor your memories to" (Bigsby 15). In other words, because moving overseas was a big change, the memory stayed so clearly. Presumably, this drastic change caused by the separation from Japan that Ishiguro experienced at the age of five is linked to the emotion of sadness, and that remained deeply in his memory.

What became clear from the experiment is that people in general tend to remember locations, and their playing, and moments when they were surrounded with warm feelings. Memory is also strongly linked with sound, smell, texture, and emotion. In addition, the experiment shows that "the you in your childhood days is not a sole past individual but is a you that changes in various scenes. You in your memory may have different aspects in each scene, but they all link together and consist of the present you" (114). Also, Kaneda and Sano say, "A memory from childhood days exist within oneself" (114) and becomes a "memory travelling companion", and "we can see this companion as a living existence as an innocent doer of the past" (115); nevertheless, the scenes we recall are transient and unsubstantial. However, the *you* that you call to mind from the past is there to give meaning to the present you. Memories from childhood days will be the factor to learn "the richness of life that is fostered in your mind and the significance of things [...], and establish your identity" (115). Applying the results of this experiment to Ishiguro, the reason he shows special feelings toward childhood memories is because he might have frequently faced and nestled close to his inner-self who remembers the first five years of his life as a memory travelling companion. The world where the travelling companion exists is Ishiguro's Japan, or Ishiguro's "childhood bubble".

In the later part of NLG, Kathy and Tommy visit Miss Emily who was the chief guardian of Hailsham, only to find out if the rumor (the couples will be given a deferral

of becoming donors if they were truly in love) was true or not. After listening to their story, Miss Emily says "... There's nothing like that" (NLG 261) and tells them as follows:

You see, we were able to give something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn't. [...] But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods (NLG 262-263; Ishiguro's italics).

Miss Emily is saying that because Kathy and Tommy were brought up in Hailsham, a privileged estate for clones, the Hailsham guardians were able to give them their childhoods. In the third year of being a carer, Kathy was asked about Hailsham by one of the clones who wasn't brought up there and had done his third donation and so was not in good condition. He says, "Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place" (NLG 5) and begged Kathy to speak anything about Hailsham. This is a touching scene where a male clone tries to make the memories of Kathy's his own before he "completes".² Kathy reminisces about this scene saying:

What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his (NLG 5).

What message does Ishiguro convey in this clone's act? Ishiguro might want to tell us that when people face death and "feel nostalgia, which is two sides of the same coin to the sense of loneliness" (Isomae 18; my translation), even somebody else's memories will bring peace to their minds. To sum up, childhood memory is that important to every one of us, and it becomes the source of easefulness and the savior from fear of death (or "completion" in NLG).

2. Ishiguro's "Bubble"

Ishiguro frequently uses the word "bubble" when he mentions his childhood memories. Morikawa, Shinya sees this "bubble" as "[...] this protective bubble is, by

nature, fragile: even with a delicate touch upon the film it bursts open, the boundaries between the inner and the outer space vanishing sometimes in an instant – like Banks's – and sometimes in slow motion – like the clones” (318). It seems that Ishiguro first used “bubble” in the interview with Jaggi, Maya in 1995. He was asked, “You went back to visit Japan in 1989 for the first time since you left Nagasaki at age six. Do you think you'll ever set a novel in Japan again?” and he answered as follows:

I might [...] It was a privileged visit and there was an unreality about it. I was carried around in a bubble.... I was cushioned or distracted from the emotions of going back; I went back and I didn't go back. I always knew if I went back, I'd be going somewhere else (119).

It is interesting to see that when Ishiguro discussed his experience in Japan, he used the expressions as if the trip itself was unreal. He says it was like being carried around in a “bubble”. I wonder why he came up with the word “bubble”? I would presume Ishiguro's metaphoric “bubble” is transparent and a size which a human can enter and from his expression that he was “carried around”, it is floatable in air. It seems that he described his psychological state of unreality; Ishiguro was actually in Japan but felt as he were not even there, feeling as if he were walking on air and whatever he did seemed unreal. In addition, because his lack of Japanese language ability, maybe he experienced some miscommunication with the staff and felt there was a transparent wall between him and Japan. Ishiguro might have wanted to describe this sense of interception.

After the trip to Japan, Ishiguro starts to use “bubble” as a metaphor to describe his novels in interviews. Ishiguro uses the word with Shaffer, Brian in 2001, when he was talking about “nostalgia” after releasing *WFO*.

And in my books, particularly the more recent ones, I feel that the kind of nostalgia I'm trying to get at could actually be a positive thing in that it's kind of emotional equivalent to idealism. It's a remembering of a time in your childhood before you realized that the world was as dark as it was. It's a kind of Eden-like memory of a time when you were in that childhood “bubble”, when adults and parents led you to believe that the world was a better, a nicer place. And then, of course, at some stage you come out of that bubble, and, if you're fortunate, you come out of it gradually, with guidance. If you're unfortunate, like Christopher [Banks], one day you're just thrown out of it (116).

This time Ishiguro is using “bubble” as a metaphor of childhood days. Ishiguro describes that the “childhood bubble” is a period of living in a “kind of Eden-like memory of time”. Further, Ishiguro explains the protagonist Banks in WWO as follows:

Christopher Banks, the main character, lives in this relatively sheltered cocoon or childhood, [...] Suddenly, he is plunged into the big world. It's that question: when we go out into the harsher world do we perhaps carry with us some sense of nostalgia, some sense of memory of that time when we believed the world to be a nicer place? Perhaps we were misled by adults; perhaps quite rightly, we were sheltered from these things (Wong 183).

I assume that when Ishiguro visited the real Japan, he tried to assimilate with people or the atmosphere but failed. He realized that there were walls between him and Japan. It seems that Ishiguro's “bubble” has two meanings: The walls hinder Ishiguro in making himself understood in the harsh outer world [real Japan], but on the other hand, that protect him and let him remain inside to feel the air of intimate childhood days [unreal Japan]. Ishiguro describes himself as “homeless writer” (Oe 70), and that could be the metaphor of being thrown out into the harsh world, just like the orphan Banks who was thrown out into adulthood and feels helplessly alone.

Five years after releasing WWO, Ishiguro published NLG and again, he uses “bubble” as a metaphor. For example, Kathy, the heroine of NLG, admitting that she will be a donor after serving as a carer for another eight months, starts to recall her childhood memories, days in Hailsham. Ishiguro defines Hailsham as follows:

I wanted to make this world a metaphor of childhood. In other words, people inside do not thoroughly understand what's going on in the outer world. The place where children are living is like a bubble, and adults can carefully control the information that comes into the bubble. [...] In order to create a symbol of childhood, I made a facility that is physically separated from the outside world that shows how the children all live (Ono; my translation).

The “bubble” Ishiguro used when describing WWO was an intangible world that was carefully controlled and protected by adults, but this time in NLG, Ishiguro seems to develop the bubble into more of a tangible embodiment, or Hailsham. The clone children live in Hailsham, which protects children from the outside world; they do not know

what is going on in the real world. The people who manage Hailsham control information so as not to let the children know the truth, and maneuver nurturing the children in the Eden like place so they can obtain well-conditioned organs later on. Children were made, protected, cultivated, and brainwashed by adults; therefore, they never suspect or fight against them, but wait to be killed. The point of this novel is that the clone yearns to have a memory of the ideal childhood days in Hailsham from his/her heart before completing his/her life.

3. Enclosed Space and "Bubble"

Hailsham of NLG stands in a place as follows:

Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides. That meant that from almost any of the classroom windows in the main house – and even from the pavilion – you had a good view of the long narrow road that come down across the fields and arrived at the main gate (NLG 34).

In other words, the structure of Hailsham obstructs children's vision and contact with the outer world. From the window, children can only see the woods, and they whisper rumors that once a boy was found with his limb cut off or many have seen a ghost of a little girl. In fact, Ishiguro's birthplace, Shin Nakagawa-machi in Nagasaki, is at the foot of a mountain, located in a hollow area. Near it is a tram street; there is a famous temple called Kogenji, better known as a grave for Amaya no Yurei, or ghost of Amaya. According to the folklore, a mother ghost appears every night and visits Amaya, or a candy store, to feed her baby sleeping in the tomb. Ishiguro may not have remembered this exact ghost story, but stories have been handed down orally that rivers, ponds, or any water sources near bomb sites were filled with A-bomb victims. Folklores of ghosts in a deep well or a will-o'-the-wisp seen over the river bank are still popular among people living in Nagasaki. If any of these ghost stories remained in Ishiguro's memory and if we could feel the ghostly atmosphere or motif in his novels, it is the evidence of Ishiguro's memory of childhood days peeking out.

Everybody has their own landscape in mind when they talk about their childhood days. I would like to consider what a "childhood bubble" is like through Ishiguro's work since Ishiguro mentions it in interviews repeatedly.

From Ishiguro's remarks, a "childhood bubble" seems to be an enclosed space; it completely divides the inner world from the outer. We can confirm different types of enclosed spaces in Ishiguro's novels. Barry Lewis mentions that all the "homes" in

which protagonists live in Ishiguro's novels are not originally their homes, and he says that it might relate to Ishiguro's migrating experience when he was five years old (7). Kyoko Hirai argues that Ishiguro has a strong obsession of longing to construct a happy and peaceful space in an imaginary world, and adds that the Japanese traditional house that appears in AFW clearly reminds us of Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki that became shabby and ruined after his grandparents died and was passed into someone else's possession and demolished (*Kazuo Ishiguro* 126; my translation). With these issues in mind, the metaphor of a "childhood bubble" which Ishiguro repeatedly mentions might have something to do with his house in Nagasaki. To put it concretely, it can be a play ground; such as, a garden and rooms of his house in Nagasaki, an enclosed space which the little boy Ishiguro, whose radius of action was limited, played in, and was protected by his grandparents and from the outside world. Why is Ishiguro so persistent about the enclosed space, including gardens and rooms? There should be a reason behind this. Ishiguro talks about Japan as, "I was building an imaginary world in my head, a mixture of imagination and memory and speculation [...]" (Swain 96). In other words, the Japan about which Ishiguro writes in his novels is not realistic, but imaginary. In the imaginary Japan lives a five year old Ishiguro (inner-self) and when Ishiguro reminisces about the memory, the little Ishiguro pops up along with the space; such as, rooms and gardens where he used to play in Nagasaki. These enclosed spaces might have reminded Ishiguro of the words "childhood bubble". All his memories from childhood days are stored in this ideal country, the imaginary Japan. Each memory is confined in a bubble-type capsule. When the protagonist in Ishiguro's novel talks about the past, he/she draws the bubble (memory) from the past and unfolds it. Therefore, whenever the characters talk about the past of their childhood days, even when the locations are different; such as, in Japan (SAW, FS, PV, AFW), Shanghai (WWO), England (RD, NLG), or an imaginary country (TU), the roots seem to link with the house, garden, and rooms in Nagasaki.

For example, in *The Summer After the War* (hereafter referred to as SAW) there is a garden where grandfather practices Judo and his grandson Ichiro observes him every morning. Hirai says, "This could be the reproduction of Ishiguro's memory of a garden at the house in Nagasaki" ("Meiro he", 63; my translation).

There, each morning before the sun had fully risen, my grandfather would lay out his straw mat and exercise. I would awake to the sounds coming from the garden, dress quickly, and go out onto the veranda. I would then see my grandfather's figure, clad in a loose kimono, moving in the early light (SAW 18).

In *Family Supper* (hereafter referred to as FS), the protagonist talks about a ghost of an old woman in an old well in the garden with his sister, Kikuko (“Then quite suddenly she decided we should walk in the garden and went striding out onto the veranda. We put on some straw sandals that had been left along the veranda rail and stepped out into the garden” (FS 5)). This also reminds us of Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki which also had a well. In PV, there is a garden where Niki goes to feed goldfish. There was no pond in Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki, but Hirai states that “there was a small area [handmade fish tank] made by Shizuo³ to observe aquatic insects in the garden, so there is a possibility that from little Ishiguro's eyes, it appeared as a pond” (“Meiro he”, 63; my translation). (“Niki walked to the far end of the garden, to the fish-pond amidst the rockery. She poured in the feed, and for several seconds remained standing there, gazing into the pond” (PV 92)). In AFW, there is a big house which Akira Sugimura kindly transferred to Ono. “[This] three-story house which has a western style room at the top” (Agawa 44; my translation) further reminds us of Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki. Moreover, there is a scene when a little boy from Matsuda's (who is Ono's old friend) neighborhood peeks into Matsuda's garden where Matsuda feeds his carps. Sakaguchi, Akinori states “the little boy could be Ishiguro himself” (35).

Matsuda rose to his feet, and putting on some straw sandals left out on the veranda, we stepped down into the garden. The pond lay amidst sunshine at the far end of the garden and we proceeded with care along the stepping stones that ran across the smooth mounds of moss. [...] at a point not far from us, a small boy of about four or five was peering over the top of the garden fence, clinging with both arms to the branch of a tree (AFW 200-201).

In TU, many rooms appear; such as, a room of a hotel, an acquaintance's house, and a concert hall, etcetera. In particular, it is interesting to read the scene, where Ryder stays in a hotel room and is gazing at the ceiling. He thinks it used to be his old room from his childhood days which he used to play in. “Nevertheless, the realization that after all this time I was once more back in my old childhood sanctuary caused a profound feeling of peace to come over me” (TU 17; my emphasis). Ryder calls his childhood memory “sanctuary”. This brings him peace in his heart. In a different scene, when Ryder feels that he could never go back to his old room, he gets so emotional, “—perhaps it was to do with my old room and the thought that I might now have left it behind forever—a powerful sense of loss welled up inside me and I was obliged to pause

a moment" (TU 157).

In WWO, the house in which the protagonist, Banks used to live in Shanghai, is described as follows:

At the rear of our garden in Shanghai, there was a grass mound with a single maple tree rising out of its summit. From the time Akira and I were around six years old, we enjoyed playing on and around that mound, and whenever I now think of my boyhood companion, I tend to remember the two of us running up and down its slopes, sometimes jumping right off where the sides were at their steepest (WWO 53).

Just like Banks reminisces about the garden with a single maple tree rising out of its summit, Hirai says that Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki also had "a big summit" ("Bungaku Kukan", 63; my translation) in the garden. Banks recalls the scene in later part of the story and says, "I suspect this memory of the house is very much a child's vision, and that in reality, it was nothing so grand." (WWO 53), and it is a similar comment made by Ishiguro, "The house as I remember it is a rather grand and beautiful thing and if I went back to the reality it would be rather shabby and horrible..." (Sexton 34). In addition, as we confirmed in the novel TU, Banks also calls the room in childhood days "sanctuary"(WWO 74, 140), and shows special feeling towards childhood memories, houses and rooms ("I found an old memory coming back to me, of a period in my childhood when [...]") (WWO 198).

As we can see, when the protagonists in Ishiguro's novels reminisce about their childhood days, the surroundings or places correlate with Ishiguro's house in Nagasaki. The "bubble" Ishiguro uses as a metaphor seems to be a warm and peaceful space, and it is reified and inlaid in his novels as a house, garden, and room. Ishiguro's imaginary country is deeply rooted in his house in Nagasaki. It consists of memories and is protected within Ishiguro's "childhood bubble" that will not be transfigured or encroached by time. To use Kathy's words in NLG, it is "safely in my [Ishiguro's] head, and that'll be something no one can take away" (NLG 281).

4. Conclusion

Levy Hideo, who is Jewish American but writes novels in Japanese, mentioned Mizumura Minae who is a writer, whose family moved to the United States of America at the age of 12, in a round-table discussion. He said, "She wrote an article recently and said she realized that there was this "imaginary Japan" inside her. She remembered

this when she visited Stanford. She says the “Japan” she created was a wonderful place. She was away from Japan for a long time, so she had this imaginary Japan in her head until she actually returned to real Japan” (*Gunzo* 226; my translation). Just like many of us yearn for our hometown after leaving the place, many Japanese living abroad yearn for Japan that remain in their memories. It seems that they recall, reminisce and create an ideal country in their heads. Ishiguro succeeded as a writer and visited Japan after publishing *RD*. After coming back to England, he said in an interview:

For a long time, I have always thought that I was Japanese, but when I visited Japan after thirty years when I was thirty-five years old, I realized how wrong I was. It became very clear that I was completely severed from Japan or from the people who live there. My childhood is a far off country where I can never go back to (*Elle Japon*, 69; my translation).

However, Ishiguro still calls Japan, “a country that has deep ties with me” (Ikezawa 12; my translation), and it exists in his head. Ishiguro explains that “Because, in my head, all these people are still alive, against all rational knowledge, somewhere I believe that everything is running smoothly there, much the same way as it always did. The world of my childhood is still intact” (Mackenzie). Definitely as Ishiguro admits, there is an imaginary Japan in Ishiguro's head, and it is filled with “childhood bubbles”. Little Ishiguro, who is Ishiguro's inner-self, freely travels there whenever he feels nostalgic or yearns for home. When Ishiguro writes his stories, this imaginary world, or a “childhood bubble”, plays an important role. For Ishiguro, having memories is essential to give meaning to one's life.

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¹ I used six participants' experiment notes out of seven participants: Mr. Naohisa Aoki moved to Brazil with his family when he was ten years old. He now resides in Sao Paulo. Mr. Yoshiharu Sunaoka was born in the U.S.A. in 1930. He grew up there until six years old when he moved to Osaka, Japan and spent his childhood days there. Soon after the war, he moved back to the U.S.A. and became an instructor at a university. Ms. Miwa Kosaka was also born in 1930. She was exposed to the A-bomb when she was fifteen years old. After getting married, she moved to California. She is currently working as a volunteer staff. Ms. Sawako Thomas was born in Hankou, China in 1934. She grew up in Shanghai. She moved to Oita, Japan when she was ten years old and studied English at university. She got married with an American and moved to the U.S.A. in 1967. She is now working in a day-care center for old people. Ms. Anna Cole was born in 1925. She spent a half year when she was twelve

years old and from fourteen to twenty-two years old in Japan, and is now living in California. She got her MA degree at a university in California. After that she was working as a social worker and got married. She is currently working as a volunteer staff once a week at a care center for old people. Mr. Rei Saeki was born in 1933. He was raised on a farm in Salinas, and spent from eight to twelve years old in Aichi, Japan. He graduated from California State University, San Jose. He worked for Arm Research, Navy Forces and after retirement, he started to work as a volunteer staff.

² "Complete" means death for clones in NLG.

³ Ishiguro's father.