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The Return of the Repressed:

An Analysis of the Uncanniness in the Repetitions of *A Pale View of Hills*

Sun Jinglu

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's debut novel *A Pale View of Hills* has drawn much academic attention since its publication in 1982. It has been considered as "a precocious first novel," which is "subtly ironic, tightly structured, stylistically restrained – yet emotionally and psychologically explosive" (Shaffer 12). It has also been considered as "a macabre and faultlessly worked enigma" (*Sunday Times*). The "macabre-ness" lies not only in the story's death motif, but also in the uncanniness of its narration; and it is an "enigma" not only because the stories are "not told," but also because the characters are incapable of telling them.

Very often Ishiguro's novels may need a second reading. However, as to *A Pale View of Hills*, even a third reading seems not enough to guarantee any irrefutable evidence for a definitive interpretation, as has been warned by the author himself in the novel that the "view" is "pale," and "memory" can be "an unreliable thing" (156).

The story is told by an unreliable first-person narrator – Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman who becomes the widow of an Englishman (Sheringham) in her second marriage and now lives in a country house in England. The outer-plot of the novel is in accordance with the timeline of Etsuko's younger daughter Niki's five-day visit, which is haunted by her elder daughter Keiko's suicide. The inner-plot of the novel travels back to the post-war Nagasaki with Etsuko's remembrance of an old acquaintance – Sachiko and her daughter Mariko. In the outer-plot Etsuko is a guilt-ridden mother who avoids being reminded of the past; but in *her* version of the past – the inner-plot of the novel – Etsuko *is*, or as other characters say, *would be* a good mother (14, 77).

Since the narrator is an unreliable one, and the story is much more "untold" than "told," there should be more than one interpretive possibility. But the possibilities, as Barry Lewis has put it, "keep shifting like the coloured shape in a kaleidoscope" (36). Sachiko could either be a totally made-up person who only exists in Etsuko's memory and carries her guilt, or a real old acquaintance whose story has been borrowed and adapted by Etsuko. Whether Sachiko really exists or not, at least part of her story is Etsuko's own unspeakable past, which, however hard Etsuko tries to avoid it, comes back to her in one way or another. And the more she tries to repress, the more frequently it returns in the forms of nightmares or slip-of-tongues.

Etsuko's slip-of-tongue – "Keiko was happy that day" (182), connects that far-past someone else's story with the here-now insuperable mental suffering of her own. And it makes the story uncanny because readers might come to a sudden realization that what should be hidden is instead quite clearly revealed (Richter 499).

Furthermore, the repetition of the same thing could also be a source of uncanny feelings. And this compellingly unavoidable action of repeating could also find its explanation in "the unconscious," which is a "repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories and instinctual drives" (Rivkin 389). There are many repetitions in the novel: from the characters' doubling identities to their limited but repeated languages; from the dim settings to the "déjà -vu" scenes, through the analysis of which, this paper aims not only at solving the enigma of the story but also at analysing the emotional force hidden in the discourse.

I Ghosting or Doubling: The Repetitions of Identities

The novel consists of many pairs of identifiable characters, among which a major one should be that of Etsuko and Sachiko. Readers may have long suspected that "the Etsuko-version Sachiko story" is indeed "a camouflaged Etsuko story," and this suspicion turns out to be reasonable with the evidence of Etsuko's slip-of-tongue: "Keiko was happy that day" (182). However, with a little careful perusing, some neglected clues can be found previous to that highlight: when Etsuko first mentions Sachiko's arrival, she quotes the neighbours' comment that "<u>the newcomer</u> seemed <u>unfriendly</u>" (12). And in the following paragraph, suddenly the "now" Etsuko tries to defend "<u>herself</u>" by saying,

> It was never <u>my</u> intention to appear <u>unfriendly</u>, but it was probably true that <u>I</u> made

> no special effort to seem otherwise. For at that point in my life, I was still wishing to be left alone. (13)

Here the abruptness of Etsuko's self-defence seems quite unnatural. Why would someone defend himself/herself against a charge of someone else's unless this "someone else" is indeed one's own self? More uncannily, the doubling becomes ghost-like when Etsuko stands there watching Sachiko drowning the kittens.

> Sachiko threw a glance over her shoulder towards her daughter. Instinctively, I followed her glance, and for one brief moment the two of us were both staring back up at Mariko. (167)

With their shadows overlapped and their perspectives unified, it seems that Etsuko and Sachiko have become one person, like a ghostly image in a movie which causes a sudden strike of fear.

Very often in doubling, the subject identifies himself with someone else so that he can divide and interchange himself. Etsuko is so guilt-ridden about Keiko's death that she attempts to divide her past into "the good-mother will" which she bears herself, and the "bad-mother fact" which she assigns to Sachiko. It is a way of letting go the trauma and "rebuilding" the inner peace.

There are also other pairs of doublings, such as those of Keiko and Mariko, Ogata-San and Sachiko's uncle, and even "the kittens" and "the babies." It seems that most of the characters can find his/her own doubling, which also implies that behind the unreliable narrator's deliberately ambiguous narration, there is only one inconvenient truth, which, unfortunately, seems only to be conjectured, but not confirmed.

II Unconsciousness or Clues: The Repetitions of Languages

Many of Ishiguro's works have a distinctive characteristic of reticence: "[f]ew writers dare to say so little of what they mean as Ishiguro" (qtd. in Shaffer 1). However, there are still some beams of lights in this dark and pale "view" of past – the repetition of languages.

Etsuko tries to deny or even correct her mistakes by telling her own story under Sachiko's name. However, her unconscious betrays her in some of the few things she repeats. She remembers "an unmistakable air of transience" about their apartment in Nagasaki "as if [they] were all of [them] waiting for the day [they] could move to something better" (12). This desire of moving to a better place is much more frequently mentioned by Sachiko, who keeps talking about her plan to go to

America with Frank. Sachiko asks repeatedly why Etsuko does not ask about it.

The past-Sachiko's strong desire to be asked may find its answer in the now-Etsuko's willingness to tell. Even though Etsuko has reiterated that she does not desire to be "reminded of the past" (9), indeed she might be willing to tell it because she has also wanted a chance to explain herself and to let go of the burden. As Ishiguro himself puts it in an interview, this novel is more concerned with "emotional upheaval" and "how one uses memory for one's own purposes" (qtd. in Shaffer 17). A little biographical research will help us understand Ishiguro's special attention to "healing by telling a story," since he himself has once worked in a homeless shelter where he listens to stories of homeless people.

Compared with Sachiko, Mariko is a more silent character, who has few chances to tell *her* version of the story. However, in Mariko's very few words she also repeats herself. One of her major repetitions is "the other woman:" first Mariko mentions that "the other woman across the river" would take one of her kittens (18); then a few weeks later, "Mariko mentions again a woman who had approached her" (22), but Sachiko says Mariko just makes it up; later Sachiko explains it with another version that "the other woman" is someone Mariko once saw in Tokyo who committed suicide after drowning her own baby (73-4); then a most uncanny scene comes when Mariko stares at the doorway, saying "a woman had been standing there watching [them]" (75); after that, Mariko keeps repeating that "the woman might come again" (80). Mariko's unnatural obsession of "the other woman" may show the fear in her heart that she herself was afraid of being abandoned, or even worse, killed.

Mariko's unpleasant childhood and unwillingness to leave Nagasaki may help explain Keiko's suicide. Even though Keiko never has a chance to speak for herself, her "unhappiness" is still hinted at with other characters' words. She locks herself up in her own room in England, and there would be a great tension if she "ventured down" into their living room (54). Keiko dies lonely in her rented room and is not discovered for several days, which makes Etsuko's heart ache with guilt.

Keiko is not happy. She does not want to leave Nagasaki for a foreign land. It is a "sacrifice" made by the daughter for her mother's chance to be happy again. Contrastively, Niki is happy, as has been hinted at with a conversation between Niki and her piano teacher,

> "And what are you doing with yourself these days, dear?" she asked Niki.

> "Me? Oh, I live in London."
>
> "Oh yes? And what are you doing there? Studying?"
>
> "I'm not doing anything really. I just live there."
>
> "Oh, I see. But you're happy there, are you? That's the main thing, isn't it." (50)

What Keiko fails to say is implied with what Niki says inadvertently: it is about a chance or a choice of being who you are and of being "happy." The mother takes her chance but leaves no choice for her daughter. The discussions on being "happy" are also repeated in other scenes. For example, there is a conversation between Ogata-San and Etsuko,

> "Jiro is a good husband to you, I hope."
>
> "Of course. I couldn't be happier."
>
> "And the child will make you happy."
>
> ...
>
> "So you're happy?"
>
> "Yes, I'm very happy."
>
> "Good. I'm happy for you both." (34)

In accordance with Ishiguro's reticent narrative style, this seemingly-simple conversation also *conceals* more information than it *reveals*. Jiro does not seem to be the "good husband" as Etsuko acclaims: he lacks humour and patience and is not very considerate. Even his colleagues call him "Pharaoh" in the office (61). Thus, Etsuko's statement that she "couldn't be happier" with Jiro is suspicious. Why does she say that?

To answer that question, we may get hints from another conversation between Etsuko and Niki about one of Niki's friends having a baby at the age of nineteen. Niki says that her friend is "really pleased" to have the baby, but Etsuko doubts it: "people always pretend to be delighted" (49). It is possible that by judging Niki's friend, Etsuko is also referring to herself: she *pretends* to be delighted.

But she is not delighted: she wants to leave the post-war Nagasaki and her unpleasant past behind. She borrows Sachiko's words to plead for understanding: "[y]ou should be happy for me And Mariko would be happier there" (170). Even though the mother acclaims that she believes it should bring happiness to them both, she knows that she is not sure – but she still forces her, as she confesses: "I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the

same" (176).

In the Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda's film *Nobody Knows* (2004), a similar question is asked by a mother who abandons her four children and disappears - "can't I be happy too?" (my translation). There are mothers who sacrifice everything for their children's sake, leaving their own lives unfulfilled; there are mothers who walk away from their children to pursue what is best for themselves; and there are also mothers like Etsuko, who, in a unfortunate change of life, struggles with the making of a hard decision and suffers from the guilt. Thus, the novel provokes a rethinking of motherhood, which contains "every kind of misgiving" behind its greatness (17).

III Home or Away: The Repetitions of Settings

In the nature setting of the outer-plot, rain lingers during Niki's five-day visit: the first day is "cold and drizzly" (9); the second day begins with "a grey windy morning" (9); "the third day … the rain had eased to a drizzle (47); "the fourth day … it was still raining steadily" (52); "the fifth day …I could no longer hear the rain as on previous nights and mornings" (88).

The nature setting of the on-and-off rain has covered the story with a foggy "veil," which is in accordance with both the title "a pale view" and the time setting of "some several weeks one summer many years ago" (11). This "veil" functions well not only in creating a misty atmosphere but also in separating "now and past" as well as "truth and lie." Metaphorically, Etsuko's emotional condition is just like the rainy weather: the rain goes through a procedure of drizzling, intermitting, pouring, and clearing up; likewise her self-revealing also goes through a procedure of insinuating, repressing, out-bursting, and letting go.

It seems that Ishiguro has a preference of using hazy images such as "rain," "mist," and "light," etc. to create certain atmospheres. Similarly, in his latest novel *The Buried Giant* (2015), Ishiguro focuses on "the mist" and its relationship with memories. These hazy images, on the one hand, set up a nostalgic aura for the plots; on the other hand, they create a distance where "the familiar" becomes "unfamiliar," and "the home" becomes "the foreign" so that the characters could step back to reconsider and re-memorize. And these images are also uncanny, because etymologically, the German word for uncanny – "unheimlich" refers to something not "homey" or "unfamiliar" (Richter 499).

Another repeated setting is the river near the wasteground. In some prior studies, "the river"

has been associated with the ancient Greek myth of Styx – the river between life and death (Shaffer 27-8). Thus, Mariko's frequent visits to the river could be interpreted as a lingering between life and death. Therefore, Keiko's "suicide" could also be considered as having been hinted at by Mariko's lingering about that river.

Also, from Etsuko's window, Sachiko's cottage, which has survived "both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers," can be seen "standing alone at the end of that expanse of wasteground, practically on the edge of the river" (12). The cottage has "a kind of stark shabbiness" (17). If taken metaphorically, the condition of the wooden house is just like that of Sachiko and many surviving victims of the war: to survive is one thing, to live on is another. Very often, to survive means to suffer, and those who survive turn out to be lingering on the "edge" between life and death.

The aura of isolation of Sachiko's room echoes that of the haunted room of Keiko's in England. Etsuko has been reluctant to confront it, but eventually she opens that door: "Keiko's room looked stark in the greyish light . . . it did not appear to be raining" (88). It is when Etsuko "eventually" opens that door that the rain stops. Therefore, even though the novel is covered with a hazy and gloomy atmosphere, it is not all pessimistic: it takes time to clear up, but eventually the rain will stop and life has to go on.

IV Remembrance or Recovery: The Repetitions of Scenes

Freud argues in his essay "Creative Writers and Day Dreaming" that "a happy person never fantasises, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of fantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single fantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality" (511). In *A Pale View of Hills* a most repeated "fantasy" of Etsuko is her dream of a little girl she and Niki watched playing on the swing in a park the other day. At first the dream seems to be "perfectly innocent," but after several times of "returning" (47), it becomes uncanny: it has to do not so much with the little girl, but with her memory of Sachiko's story (55). Gradually, the dream awakens: the little girl is not that little girl, and the swing is not a swing at all.

> I dreamt about that little girl again. . . . The one we saw playing on the swing the other day. When we were in the village having coffee. . . . Well, actually, it isn't that little girl at all. That's what I realized this morning. It seemed to be that little girl, but it wasn't. . . . It was just a little girl I knew once, . . . 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. (95-6)

With the awakening of the dream, the enigma of the story is coming to light. Niki asks if the little girl in Etsuko's dream is Keiko, which Etsuko tries to deny (95). But now it has become too revealing that "that little girl" is indeed Keiko; and she is not on a swing, but on a rope with which she hangs herself.

Freud puts forward the term of "the work of displacement" by arguing that "[t]he dream is . . . differently centred from the dream-thoughts – its content has different elements as its central point" (503). Here Etsuko's "dream" of "a little-girl-on-a-swing" is indeed a "dream-thought" of "Keiko-on-a-rope" concealed by "the censorship of endopsychic defence" (505). It is in her dreams that Etsuko's repressed wish comes back to her: she wishes that Keiko is not hanging on a rope, dead, but playing on a swing, pleasant and happy. And it is in her dreams that the wrong is corrected and she finds power to live on.

There are also other scenes when Etsuko is with Mariko, by themselves, where the image of the "rope" occurs. For example, the night when Etsuko is searching for Mariko, a piece of rope tangles itself around her ankle. When Mariko sees this, "signs of fear were appearing on her face" and she keeps asking, "[w]hy have you got the rope?" (83-4). This scene is repeated another time when Etsuko tries to persuade Mariko to go with Sachiko to America. Mariko only asks, "[w]hy are you holding [the rope]?" Etsuko replies that "[i]t just caught around my sandal, that's all. . . . Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not going to hurt you" (173).

If we compare the repeated scenes of Etsuko holding a rope in her hand with the scene of Keiko hanging on the rope, dead in her rented room, the uncanniness rises again: metaphorically, isn't this rope in Etsuko's hands the "same" rope that kills Keiko?

The answer is not given. But what has been hinted at is that Etsuko has been so guilt-ridden because she believes that it is she herself who leads to Keiko's death. Other scenes of "killing" have also been repeated, such as the other woman's drowning the baby and Sachiko's drowning the kittens. With the understanding from Part One, The Repetitions of the Identities, it could be assumed that "the other woman" could also be "this woman" and Mariko could also be the kitten. It is only one story but under different names.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's pen is more like a microscope than a telescope, which observes and presents human hearts to an unprecedented depth. Etsuko tries to relive her past through Sachiko and to correct her fault as a guilt-ridden mother. However, no matter how hard she tries to avoid the truth, she betrays herself unconsciously or consciously.

The repetitions of identities, languages, settings and scenes have brought an uncanny feeling, which not only "frightens" the reader, but also draws empathy. After many repetitions "the repressed" has finally returned. Therefore, the uncanniness in *A Pale View of Hills* not only functions as a narrative style but also as an emotional force, which contains great aesthetic value and resonating power.

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