

Memory of Loss and Amnesia in *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*

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abstract

This research explores the concepts of memory, loss, and identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's works *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*. Utilizing Jan Assmann's theories on collective and cultural memory, it examines how personal and social memories influence, alter, or weaken both individual and collective identities. The study emphasizes the differing representations of memory—one character's pursuit to reclaim broken personal recollections to reform his identity, and the other's path of facing shared amnesia enforced by social influences—to examine how memory serves as both a means of self-awareness and a method of dominance. The study thoroughly examines how Ishiguro's stories illustrate the use of history and memory for political and cultural purposes, highlighting the dual nature of memory and amnesia. The study argues that by examining trauma mechanisms, cultural dislocation, and the engagement with difficult realities, both individual and collective memories are crucial for establishing identity and continuity, but are also vulnerable to distortion and repression. The results indicate that identity is not static but is constantly transformed through processes of remembering, forgetting, and narrating stories. Although personal memories serve as delicate foundations for identity, the manipulation of collective memory illustrates how amnesia can divide communities. Ishiguro ultimately proposes that neither full recall nor absolute amnesia results in stability; instead, it is a careful, continuous balance between facing the past and progressing. This analysis reinterprets Ishiguro's work to show memory not merely as a point of crisis but as a vibrant, influential element in shaping identity.

Keywords: amnesia, collective identity, individual identity, loss, memory

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1. INTRODUCTION

Memory is a vital mechanism in forming both individual and collective identities, serving as a source of personal histories and a malleable construct influenced by cultural, societal, and political forces. In *When We Were Orphans* (2000) and *The Buried Giant* (2015), memory is portrayed as a multifaceted and frequently contentious aspect of human experience—capable of maintaining identity or causing its deterioration through trauma, amnesia, and collective loss of recollection. These pieces investigate the complex relationships between memory and forgetfulness, highlighting how individuals struggle with fragmented recollections and societal amnesia while trying to rebuild or conceal their identities.

When We Were Orphans focuses on the protagonist, Christopher Banks, as he embarks on a quest that represents an internal exploration for missing family and the alignment of personal recollections with disillusionment. His idealized recollections conflict with stark truths, highlighting the intricacies of memory development following trauma, societal turmoil, and displacement during war. Contrariwise, *The Buried Giant* depicts a community enveloped in shared forgetfulness, where both individual and collective recollections are altered and systematically removed. Axl and Beatrice embark on a quest to reclaim their lost memories, emphasizing the destructive impact of enforced amnesia on personal connections and communal unity, illuminating the fragile relationship between memory, identity, and authority. This research thoroughly analyzes how Ishiguro's stories represent and question the processes through which memory shapes both individual and shared identity. Utilizing theories of collective and cultural memory, particularly those posited by Jan and Aleida Assmann, the study investigates how remembrance and forgetfulness function as instruments of power—able to shape, uphold, or deconstruct identities. Additionally, it explores how societal influences, such as authority and policies on cultural memory, impact the mechanisms of either collective erasure or preservation. This investigation encompasses examining how trauma, historical silence, and cultural dislocation are conveyed through memory—either as a means of healing or as a means of domination. The article seeks to address two key questions: In what ways does Ishiguro illustrate the relationship between personal and shared memory in shaping and weakening identity? And second, what role does the act of remembering or forgetting play in shaping characters' personal development and the cohesion or fragmentation of their communities in *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*?

By tackling these inquiries, the study seeks to clarify the significant function of memory in forming human identity in Ishiguro's works and to develop discussions regarding the social consequences of shared memory and amnesia. This analysis emphasizes how Ishiguro's stories reflect the shared human experience of facing the past, showcasing the lasting significance of memory—serving as both an element of identity and a possible source of trauma.

2. METHODOLOGY

The idea of collective memory was initially put forth by Émile Durkheim, who proposed that collective memory encompasses the common beliefs, principles, traditions, and recollections that unite a community. He highlighted the importance of shared memory in fostering a feeling of unity and togetherness among members of a group, along with its influence on forming the group's identity and principles. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) built upon Émile Durkheim's idea of collective memory by highlighting the significance of social groups and their interactions in influencing personal memories. Halbwachs contended that our memories are more than individual reflections; they are also affected and molded by the communities we are part of.

According to Halbwachs: "[n]o memory is possible outside the frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections." (1992, 43). Consequently, a person consistently belongs to various social groups during their lifetime, be it family, politics, religion, nationality, or others. Halbwachs states that these groups provide a framework for individuals to incorporate their memories. Halbwachs argues that people can belong to various groups at the same time, asserting that "it is individuals as group members who remember" (1992, 48).

Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, German Egyptologists and cultural theorists, expanded Maurice Halbwachs' idea of collective memory by examining the notion of cultural memory. They built upon Halbwachs' concepts by highlighting the influence of culture and history in forming collective memory, particularly regarding how societies create and share memories across generations. In "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," Jan Assmann differentiates his concept from Halbwachs' "Communicative Memory" in this way:

Just as the communicative memory is characterized by its proximity to the everyday, cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these 'figures of memory.' (Assmann 2011, 128-129)

Assmann posits that cultural memory is an evolving process that transforms over time and shapes personal and collective identities, along with societal values and convictions (2011,17). He distinguishes between communicative memory, characterized by informal sharing of memories in a society, and cultural memory, which pertains to organized methods of memory transmission such as monuments, rituals, and historical narratives. In "Communicative and Cultural Memory," Jan Assmann describes cultural memory in the following way:

Cultural memory is an institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the appearance of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent. They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. Unlike communicative memory, cultural memory is disembodied. In order to function as memory, however, its symbolic forms must not only be preserved but also circulated and re-embodied in a society. The disembodied status of cultural memory is another reason why it was not recognized as a form of memory until recently. (Assmann 2011, 17)

Memory serves as the basis for forming both personal and cultural identity and significantly impacts social interactions, as individuals draw on past experiences to validate the personas they present. Recognizing the essential role of memories in social interactions, Kenneth Gergen defines memory as a "type of social skill" (1994, 101), whereas Jan Assmann considers memory to be the foundation of identity (Birke 2008, 1). Studying memory encompasses multiple disciplines and promotes teamwork among diverse fields, resulting in an interdisciplinary initiative with wide-ranging implications. This study intends to examine how personal and communal identity shapes through memories of loss and amnesia in *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*, using Jan Assmann's theory as a basis.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nikolina Mikolčić's dissertation, *Memory and Loss in Kazuo Ishiguro's Works* (2024), presents a comprehensive analysis of how themes of memory, trauma, and unreliable narration function

across five of Ishiguro's major works of fiction including *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*. At the core of Mikolčić's argument is the concept that memory in these novels serves not just as a narrative element but as a disruptive influence that molds identity, affects choices, and complicates the journey of recovering from past trauma. Using theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Jan Assmann, Mikolčić places Ishiguro's writing within wider discussions about collective and individual memories, especially in post-war settings. The research highlights that Ishiguro's characters frequently grapple with fragmented or altered memories, mirroring postmodern concerns regarding historical accuracy and individual identity.

Chia-chin Tsai (2024) examines *When We Were Orphans* as a narrative centered on trauma, asserting that the protagonist Christopher Banks's investigative journey embodies a sorrowful attachment to a vanished "homeland" –Shanghai– and an unresolved Oedipal longing for an unblemished completeness. Utilizing insights from LaCapra and Žižek, Tsai illustrates how Banks merges historical loss with existential deficiency, sustaining melancholia. Hayley Angle (2024) examines self-fashioning through memory in *When We Were Orphans*, noting how character's nostalgic reconstruction of past exposes the fragility of identity. She highlights Ishiguro's ambivalence toward nostalgia—both as a destabilizing force and a tool for envisioning alternative futures. Nikolina Mikolčić (2024) compares memory's unreliability in *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant*, demonstrating how collective amnesia in *The Buried Giant*, and personal memory gaps (in *Orphans*) obstruct healing. Both novels, she argues, depict trauma as cyclical, with characters trapped in repetitive, unresolved grief.

Yang and Zhang (2024) analyze *The Buried Giant* through ethical literary criticism, demonstrating how characters' identity reconstruction requires confronting painful memories rather than escaping through amnesia. Their study reveals that Ishiguro frames forgetting as an ethical failure, with self-reconciliation emerging only through engagement with trauma. Zheng (2024) utilizes Assmann's cultural memory theory to assert that *The Buried Giant* uses mythical and spatial symbols (e.g., the giant's cairn) to critique imposed amnesia. The study highlights how cultural memory reactivates collective identity, enabling historical reckoning and healing. Lacalle (2024) contrasts enforced forgetting with selective memory in *The Buried Giant*, showing how Ishiguro's characters navigate between historical erasure and fragmented recall. The work aligns with Zheng's emphasis on memory's role in resisting oppressive narratives.

Although recent studies thoroughly investigate the destabilizing impacts of memory and ethical obligations in Ishiguro's literature, a significant void persists in methodically exploring how the interplay of memory, loss, and amnesia contributes to the development of individual and collective identities. Current research emphasizes trauma's cyclical characteristics or the unreliability of memories but lacks a cohesive framework that illustrates how disjointed memories actively shape identities on both individual and collective scales. This research tackles this gap by exploring how Ishiguro's protagonists navigate identity development—rather than just its crisis—through active processes of remembering, forgetting, and narrative reconstructing.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Individual and Collective Identity Formation in *When We Were Orphans*

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks's trip to Shanghai represents a profound search to rebuild his shattered identity linked to childhood grief. Plagued by the painful loss of his parents,

Banks's homecoming transforms into both a mental and emotional endeavor to come to terms with his memories and seek a sense of belonging. His recollections from childhood, like the analogy of kids as "the twine that held the slats together," emphasize the significance of family ties in forming individual identity and maintaining social stability. As the passage suggests, "it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together," emphasizing how family and memory serve as vital links in self-understanding (Ishiguro 2000, 44).

Hayley Angle notes that Christopher's struggle to understand his "English identity" is complicated by his detachment from England and the influence of stereotypes, which leaves his sense of self fragmented and constructed from unreliable recollections (Angle 2024, 37). His return to Shanghai signifies an attempt to recover what was lost—his family, his cultural roots, and his sense of self—highlighting the role of memory and loss in shaping identity. Scholars like Hornung and Eakin emphasize that exploring memory through autobiography acts as a means of self-discovery and healing, "as a form of psychotherapy or as an instrument in the process of self-discovery" (Hornung 1997, 222). Eakin further explains that autobiography mediates identity formation, "reaching back into the past not merely to recapture but to repeat the psychological rhythms of identity" and to solidify a "self-made existence" (Eakin 1985, 226). Ultimately, Banks's journey exemplifies how personal loss and memory are integral to understanding and reconstructing one's identity.

Christopher's quest for his parents is, in fact, a quest for his own identity, which has been undermined by the conflicting and contradictory narratives surrounding his past. In his effort to present himself as a renowned and successful detective, he is likely trying to reinterpret his childhood memories to cast them in a more favorable light, in order to move beyond the image of a lonely, desolate orphan. Christopher's search for his parents represents a profound desire for connection and a sense of belonging. The absence of his family has led to a fragmented identity, and locating them serves as a means to regain that feeling of completeness.

In *When We Were Orphans*, memory serves as a crucial mechanism in the quest for identity, profoundly influencing the life and experiences of Christopher Banks. Ishiguro delves deeply into how both treasured and hurtful memories shape people's views of themselves and their surroundings. As the story progresses, Christopher undertakes a journey that goes beyond physical borders and explores his inner self, aiming to uncover the enigmas of his history and comprehend the disjointed identity that has arisen following his childhood sorrow. This section explores how *When We Were Orphans* distinguishes itself from Kazuo Ishiguro's earlier writings by thoroughly analyzing memory's role in forming identity amid trauma caused by loss. In this novel, Christopher starts with an idealized view of his childhood and his parents' absence, holding onto a story that helps him manage his sorrow. Yet, as he investigates further into the enigma of their disappearance, he faces the discord between recollection and actuality. This clash forces him to create and revise his memories, altering his identity in the process. In contrast to other protagonists who simply contemplate their histories, Christopher proactively crafts a new story that reconciles his cherished memories with the difficult realities he discovers. This active involvement with memory underscores a shift from Ishiguro's prior works, accentuating the conflict between treasured memories and difficult truths. Christopher's talent for exploring the complexities of his past through creation, instead of simple reflection, demonstrates a complex relationship with memory as a means for reconstructing identity. This motif profoundly connects with the themes of loss and trauma. Ultimately, this transformation highlights both the vulnerability of memory and its ability to influence our identities, rendering *When We Were Orphans* a distinctive investigation of selfhood in Ishiguro's body of work.

The novel examines the delicate and restorative qualities of memory, demonstrating how loss disrupts and reshapes individual identity. The protagonist, Christopher Banks deals with reconciling his disjointed childhood memories with the harsh truths of adulthood, highlighting memory as a dynamic, frequently unreliable process of shaping oneself. Jan Assmann's memory theory offers an essential framework for grasping this dynamic. He contends that memory is not a static store of history but an evolving creation that shapes both individual and communal identity: "memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood or identity, both on a personal and collective level" (Assmann 2011, 109). Time and space further mediate this process, as identity can only be understood in relation to temporal and spatial markers (Assmann 2011, 109). Christopher's evolving memories illustrate this conflict, as his recollections—blurred and conflicting—embody both his desire for clarity and the unsettling effects of loss.

A pivotal point in Christopher's journey arises when he faces the reality of his parents' vanishing, an insight that shatters his romanticized version of childhood. At first, he holds onto the conviction that his parents were abducted by opium traffickers, a story that coincides with his mother's ethical opposition to the opium traffic (Ishiguro 2000, 44). However, as Kaya Özçelik notes, this belief is ultimately shattered when Uncle Philip discloses the harsh reality: Christopher's father left the family for another woman and passed away in Singapore, while his mother became a concubine to a warlord (Özçelik 2019, 1152). This discovery compels Christopher to reevaluate his history, highlighting the gap between recollection and truth. His perfect image of Uncle Philip—previously a source of admiration and a possible father figure—shatters when confronted with reality (Ishiguro 2000, 71). This disenchantment highlights a wider theme in Ishiguro's writings: the unavoidable conflict between nostalgic childhood memories and the intricate realities of adult comprehension. Christopher's repeated description of his memories as "hazy" further illustrates the instability of recollection. He reflects: "[...] a memory which even then, when I was nine years old, had already grown hazy in my mind" (Ishiguro 2000, 51). Later, he laments the gradual erosion of his past: "I have been obliged to accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images" (Ishiguro 2000, 41). Özçelik interprets this haziness as emblematic of memory's subjectivity, arguing that "the memories that Banks remembers and tells are questionable regarding their reliability" (Özçelik 2019, 1154). This unreliability does not merely reflect forgetfulness but an active renegotiation of identity in response to loss.

Ultimately, *When We Were Orphans* suggests that memory is not a fixed record but a narrative continually rewritten to make sense of absence and trauma. Christopher's attempts to reconstruct his past reveal memory's dual role: as a refuge from loss and as a tool for self-reinvention. The novel thus aligns with Assmann's assertion that memory is foundational to identity, even as it remains vulnerable to distortion. In the face of irreparable loss, individuals reshape their memories not merely to recover the past but to forge a bearable present.

While Christopher Banks's journey primarily revolves around his personal struggle with memory and identity, his experiences also reflect broader themes of collective memory and cultural belonging. His fragmented recollections of Shanghai are not merely individual but are deeply intertwined with the historical and social narratives of colonialism, war, and displacement. As Jan Assmann argues, cultural memory functions as a binding force, shaping both personal and communal identities through shared symbols and obligations (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 131). Christopher's quest to reconcile his past mirrors the collective

need to preserve and reinterpret history, suggesting that individual identity formation cannot be fully understood without considering its relationship to larger cultural frameworks.

The novel presents memory as unsteady yet indispensable force in shaping identity. The protagonist, Christopher Banks, grapples with the disintegration of his childhood recollections, revealing how personal and collective histories intertwine in the process of self-definition. His journey—marked by nostalgia, disillusionment, and a quest for truth—exemplifies Jan Assmann's assertion that memory is "the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood or identity" (Assmann 2011, 109). Through Christopher's fragmented recollections of Shanghai, Ishiguro interrogates the reliability of memory and its role in mediating cultural belonging.

Christopher's idealized vision of his childhood home underscores the malleability of memory. He describes the house in the International Settlement with childlike grandeur: "The carefully tended 'English' lawn, the afternoon shadows cast by the row of elms separating my garden and Akira's; and the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies." (Ishiguro 2000, 31). Yet he immediately undercuts this image: "I suspect this memory of the house is very much a child's vision, and that in reality, it was nothing so grand" (31). This tension mirrors Birgit Neumann's argument that memories are "imaginative (re)constructions of the past in response to current needs" (Neumann 2008, 334). For Christopher, the "Englishness" of his childhood home serves as a psychological anchor, compensating for his later displacement. The lawn, elms, and balconies symbolize not just a physical place but a constructed identity—one that privileges colonial order over the chaotic realities of Shanghai.

Christopher's struggle to reconcile his English heritage with his Shanghai upbringing manifests in his fraught relationship with Uncle Philip. His question—"How do you suppose one might become more English?" (Ishiguro 2000, 45)—reveals an acute awareness of his hybrid identity. Philip's response—"It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel. But that's no bad thing" (46)—highlights the paradox of colonial identity: while cultural mixing is inevitable, it destabilizes the hierarchies of "Englishness" Christopher associates with belonging. This duality intensifies when Christopher leaves Shanghai, a moment rendered with poignant dissonance: "I had cast my gaze towards the shore one last time, wondering if even now I might catch sight of my mother ... But I was conscious even then that such a hope was no more than a childish indulgence." (Ishiguro 2000, 18). Here, the "shore" symbolizes the threshold between his lost past and an uncertain future. His suppressed grief "my tears were more of anger than sorrow" and performative cheerfulness "We should be reaching the sea fairly soon, don't you think so, sir?" reflect Charlotte Linde's claim that identity requires "continuity through time" (Linde 2009, 222). By severing his physical ties to Shanghai, Christopher fractures his sense of self, forcing him to reconstruct identity through unreliable memories.

Christopher's return to Shanghai reframes his personal loss as part of a collective trauma. His detective work—piecing together his parents' disappearance amid war and colonialism—mirrors notions on cultural memory where individual and communal histories intersect (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 131). The revelation that his father abandoned the family and his mother became a warlord's concubine (Özcelik 2019, 1152) shatters his nostalgic narrative, forcing him to confront the violence embedded in his childhood idyll.

The novel's closing scenes, where Christopher reunites with his institutionalized mother, underscore memory's role in reconciliation. Her fragmented recollections parallel his own, suggesting that identity is not fixed but perpetually reconstructed. As Silvia

Caporale Bizzini notes, memories “connect past and present” (Bizzini 2012, 70), and for Christopher, this connection hinges on accepting the contradictions of his history.

4.2. Construction of Individual and Collective Identity in *The Buried Giant*

This section examines how *The Buried Giant* explores individual identity formation through the lens of memory and forgetting. Focusing on Axl and Beatrice’s fragmented recollections, the analysis demonstrates how enforced amnesia disrupts personal identity while the act of remembrance becomes a means of self-reconstruction. Utilizing Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, the discussion emphasizes the conflict between personal memory loss and the underlying desire to recover one’s history as a basis for construction of identity.

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro presents memory as both a destabilizing and restorative force in shaping individual identity. Elderly couple sets out on an adventure to trace their son—a quest spurred by vague, mist-obscured recollections—exemplifies the fragility of selfhood when memory is eroded. As Gürova observes, the novel investigates memory’s role on two levels: “the collective memory in which the unity and harmony of the group [are] affected, and the individual memory in which the impact is mostly on the integrity of one’s self and one’s relation to others” (Gürova 2021, 57). For the couple, the “mist” symbolizes not just communal forgetting but a personal crisis of identity. Their dialogue reveals this dissonance:

“You’ve long forgotten, princess, but our son’s waiting for us. [...] He may be grown with children of his own by now, but he waits for us even so.” (Ishiguro 2015, 32). Here, Beatrice’s insistence on their son’s existence contrasts with Axl’s uncertainty, illustrating how memory constructs—and distorts—personal narratives. Their belief in the son’s survival, later revealed as a repressed memory of his death, underscores Assmann’s argument that identity relies on “the continuity of memory” (Assmann 2011, 109). The mist, as a magical metaphor for trauma, severs this continuity, leaving the couple adrift in a liminal state of half-remembered grief.

The physical journey mirrors their psychological struggle to reclaim identity. Lupack notes that their quest is “to reach the village of their son” (Lupack 2015, 118), but the deeper impetus is the need to reconcile with the past. When Beatrice confesses, “I fear the mist more than any monster” (Ishiguro 2015, 56), she articulates the terror of irrevocable forgetting—a fear tied to the loss of self. Kaiissar elaborates that the couple’s journey is ultimately “to recover their lost memories” (Kaiissar 2022, 6), suggesting that remembrance is an act of self-preservation.

The novel’s climax, where the dragon Querig’s death lifts the mist, forces Axl and Beatrice to confront their son’s death. This moment of reckoning aligns with Assmann’s claim that “identity is founded on the ability to recall the past selectively” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 130). Beatrice’s plea to the ferryman—“You won’t allow years to separate us?” (Ishiguro 2015, 317)—reveals her desperation to retain their shared memories, now the bedrock of her identity. Yet Axl’s reluctant acquiescence to her crossing alone underscores the incompleteness of their reconstruction.

In *The Buried Giant*, Kazuo Ishiguro explores how forced forgetting disrupts individual identity formation, a process deeply tied to memory. Utilizing Aleida Assmann’s theories of cultural memory, this section analyzes how the novel portrays the deterioration of individual and collective memory as a means of control, ultimately undermining the self. Assmann differentiates communicative

memory—casual, everyday memories exchanged among people— from cultural memory, which is formalized and maintained through rituals, texts, and monuments (Assmann 2011, 6). When these memory systems are altered or wiped, identity itself becomes disjointed.

The novel's central metaphor—the mist of forgetfulness—embodies this rupture. Beatrice's lament, "It's queer the way the world's forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all" (Ishiguro 2015, 36), underscores the pervasive loss of communicative memory. Without the ability to recall even recent experiences, individuals like Axl and Beatrice struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self. Their fragmented recollections of their son—"When they were pushing me just now, it was our son I remembered...Let's go to our son's village" (Ishiguro 2015, 48)—highlight the destabilizing effect of memory loss on familial and personal identity. Assmann argues that memory is not merely retrospective but *constitutive*: it shapes how individuals understand their place in the world (Assmann 2008, 200). Thus, the mist does not merely obscure the past; it actively dismantles the foundations of identity.

The novel further illustrates how institutionalized forgetting, a form of repressive erasure (Teo 2019, 508), severs individuals from cultural memory. King Arthur's decision to bury the massacre of Saxon civilians under a spell of collective amnesia exemplifies this. As Yugin Teo notes, the enchantment ensures that "individual recollections spontaneously fade and die with their former owners," while communal memory is "reconstructed within a transgenerational framework" (Teo 2019, 508). This deliberate erasure prevents the Saxons and Britons from forming identities rooted in historical truth, leaving them susceptible to manipulation. The villagers' reluctance to discuss the past—"in this community the past was rarely discussed...it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes" (Ishiguro 2015, 7-8)—reflects the success of this repression. Without access to shared narratives, identity becomes atomized and precarious.

Axl's journey exemplifies the struggle to reclaim identity through memory. As Ayaka Nakajima observes, his gradual recovery of "*poignant memories*" allows him to "*recognize his past life*" (Nakajima 2018, 54). Yet this process is fraught. Beatrice's instinctual connection to Axl—"I can feel things about him" (Ishiguro 2015, 27)—suggests that emotional residues persist even when explicit memories fade. However, unresolved grievances resurface as fragments, such as when Beatrice's posture stirs in Axl "distinct shadows of anger and bitterness" (Ishiguro 2015, 294). These moments reveal Assmann's assertion that repressed memories do not vanish but linger as "*latent*" knowledge, shaping behavior unconsciously (Assmann 2011, 145). The novel thus portrays memory not as a static archive but as a dynamic force that, when suppressed, distorts identity.

The climax of Axl and Beatrice's journey—realizing their son's death—forces a reckoning with the costs of forgetting. Axl's reflection that the mist "*allowed old wounds to heal*" (Ishiguro 2015, 361) suggests a tension between memory and self-preservation. Yet his question to Beatrice—"Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did?" (Ishiguro 2015, 361)— suggests the contradiction of identity development through suppression: the self evolves, yet sacrifices genuineness. Catherine Charlwood argues that Ishiguro's characters often exist in a state of "incomplete remembering," where unresolved memories perpetuate crisis (Charlwood 2019, 1050). For Axl and Beatrice, identity remains provisional, shaped by absences as much as by recollections.

In Assmann's terms, *The Buried Giant* depicts a society where the collapse of cultural memory—orchestrated by power—precipitates a crisis of individual identity. The novel's characters, severed from both personal and collective pasts, embody the fragility of the self in the face of enforced forgetting. Their struggle to remember becomes, ultimately, a struggle to exist.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* interrogates how forced amnesia disrupts the formation of collective identity based on the cultural memory studies. The novel's central metaphor—the mist—embodies a deliberate erasure of history, revealing how communal forgetting destabilizes social cohesion. As Aleida Assmann argues, cultural memory is not passive recollection but an active "reconstruction" that binds communities through shared narratives (2011, 6). When this process is manipulated, identity fractures. The Saxon and Briton villages, stripped of their pasts, descend into mutual suspicion and violence, illustrating Halbwachs's claim that collective memory is the "body of shared concerns" that sustains group identity (1992, 128–29).

The mist, engineered by King Arthur's regime, enforces a peace built on oblivion. Beatrice's observation—"It's queer the way the world's forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all" (Ishiguro 2015, 36)—captures the erosion of communicative memory, the everyday recollections that anchor personal and communal ties. Without these, communities lose their moral compass. The Saxon villagers' hostility toward outsiders—"in this community the past was rarely discussed...it had somehow faded into a mist" (7–8)—demonstrates how amnesia breeds paranoia. Jan Assmann notes that forgetting "severs the thread of time," leaving groups adrift in a perpetual present (2008, 200).

Wistan's quest to kill the dragon Querig symbolizes a revolt against state-sanctioned forgetting. His defiance—"Let the mist vanish so Saxon and Briton alike can face the past!"—reflects the Assmannian view that confronting traumatic memory is necessary for justice (Ishiguro 2015, 314). Yet the novel resists simplistic resolutions. Axl's dread—"Who knows what old hatreds will loosen now?" (340)—acknowledges the paradox: while amnesia perpetuates injustice, remembrance risks cyclical violence. This tension mirrors Aleida Assmann's warning that cultural memory is both "a resource and a burden" (2011, 145).

The climax underscores the impossibility of sustaining identity through oblivion. Gawain's dying words—"We meant to heal wounds, not reopen them!"—betray the fragility of Arthur's peace (Ishiguro 2015, 314). His selective memory, glorifying British heroism while burying Saxon suffering, exemplifies what Yugin Teo calls "repressive erasure" (2019, 508). In contrast, Wistan's vow to "carry the memory of our people even if the land forgets" (Ishiguro 2015, 357) asserts memory as resistance. Yet his victory is ambiguous; as Borowska-Szerszun notes, he seeks not reconciliation but a "new victor's narrative" (2019, 38), repeating the cycle of exclusion.

Ultimately, Ishiguro suggests that collective identity cannot thrive in the shadow of amnesia. The ferryman's demand—"What can you tell me of your shared past?" (Ishiguro 2015, 350)—reduces Axl and Beatrice to silence, symbolizing the cost of erasure. The novel aligns with Jan Assmann's insistence that memory, however painful, is the "thread that stitches communities across time" (2008, 200). To forget is to surrender not just the past, but the future.

5. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* and *The Buried Giant* offer a profound lens through which to examine the interplay of memory, loss and amnesia in individual and collective identity formation. Both novels interrogate how memory—whether eroded by trauma, manipulated by power, or reconstructed through narrative—shapes and destabilizes the self and the community.

While *When We Were Orphans* explores the psychological fragmentation of an individual contending with unreliable recollections, *The Buried Giant* depicts the societal consequences of enforced forgetting. Collectively, they uncover Ishiguro's main argument: identity is not a stable essence but an evolving process, constantly shaped through acts of recollection and oblivion.

Christopher Banks's journey in *When We Were Orphans* illustrates the fragility of personal identity when established on unreliable memories. His romanticized memories of Shanghai and his parents act as psychological anchors, but their slow deterioration compels him to face harsh realities. According to Jan Assmann, memory is the capacity that enables us to create a sense of identity, and Christopher's journey underscores this. His story transitions from wistful recollection to hesitant acceptance, demonstrating how memory shapes identity—not by maintaining factual accuracy, but by allowing people to cope with loss. Likewise, in *The Buried Giant*, the disjointed memories of Axl and Beatrice's son highlight the essential function of memory in maintaining connections. Their effort to harmonize their history with the mist's obliteration reflects Assmann's assertion that identity depends on the stability of memory; when this connection is broken, the self disintegrates into uncertainty.

While *When We Were Orphans* highlights the unreliability of personal memory, *The Buried Giant* broadens the exploration to encompass communal identity. The fog-induced forgetfulness undermines personal relationships and the essence of community, causing Saxons and Britons to be lost in shared distrust. This supports Assmann's claim that collective memory comprises the shared interests that unify communities. The tension in the novel—between Wistan's call for historical accountability and Gawain's advocacy of forgetting as a way to maintain peace—underscores memory's dual functions: a driver of justice and a possible trigger for violence. Ishiguro complicates the moral obligation to remember, indicating that although forgetting maintains injustice, recalling risks triggering ongoing revenge.

This research fills an essential void in Ishiguro studies by showing how his main characters actively shape their identities through memory, instead of simply yielding to its disintegration. Christopher Banks's narrative transformation and Axl and Beatrice's reluctant reconciliation with their history illustrate identity formation as a flexible process. While previous research highlights the destabilizing impacts of trauma, this examination reveals how characters navigate their broken identities through narrative, selective memory, and, ironically, the embrace of forgetting. The novels collectively suggest that identity is not purely individual or fully collective but arises at the conjunction of personal memory and collective history.

Addressing the research inquiries, Ishiguro illustrates memory as a two-sided blade—crucial for identity but susceptible to distortion. In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher's individual recollections are intertwined with colonial stories, whereas in *The Buried Giant*, shared forgetfulness undermines both personal and collective identity. Remembering fosters healing but can also reopen

old wounds—Axl’s fear of past grievances—while forgetting provides fleeting tranquility but leads to ongoing historical erasure (Arthur’s mist). The novels propose that a balance—avoiding complete recollection and total forgetfulness—might be essential for enduring identity.

In conclusion, Ishiguro’s works suggests that identity is a narrative process, constantly redefined through interaction with memory and loss. Through Christopher's reimagined youth or Axl and Beatrice's poignant acceptance of their child's demise, the stories assert that remembrance is a form of regaining agency—yet it also entails facing the weight of history. For both communities and individuals, the challenge is to create identities that recognize the past without being bound by it. Through this approach, Ishiguro not only charts the delicacy of memory but also highlights its lasting strength in influencing our identity and our potential future selves. Ultimately, this study reinterprets Ishiguro’s memory narratives as dynamic processes of identity development rather than simply instances of crisis by integrating Assmann’s cultural memory theory with in-depth textual analysis. It promotes academic understanding by illustrating how his characters—through forgetting, inventing, and reshaping—represent the complicated yet robust essence of identity amid loss.

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