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TRAUMA, NOSTALGIA AND ROOTLESSNESS: A READING OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS*

Nisha Kumari

Research Scholar

University Department of English

Ranchi University, Ranchi

ABSTRACT

When We Were Orphans is a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. Based on the turmoil of civil war in Shanghai, the novel is a perfect example depicting trauma, nostalgia and rootlessness. The protagonist here is a common detective. The story shows how common people are affected by trauma. What appears to be simple migration for a promising future is actually an escape from a traumatic past. The feeling of being rootless in a foreign nation and the nostalgia of childhood never leaves the characters alone. They feel orphaned and the nostalgia of past leaves them shattered and broken. The further readings of the novel disclose how the nostalgia and rootlessness in these characters stem from the trauma that they face in the past.

KEYWORDS:

Trauma, nostalgia, rootlessness, identity, reminiscences

ARTICLE

In the novel, *When We Were Orphans*

“But for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents.” (314)

The lines above are adept in portraying trauma, nostalgia and rootlessness at the same time by depicting the psyche of the narrator. Published in 2000, *When We Were Orphans* is a story of a detective named Christopher Banks. The story is a description of how Banks finds out about his missing parents in Shanghai while being settled in England. The themes of trauma, nostalgia and rootlessness are wonderfully blended in the novel. Ishiguro like previous of his two novels *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, manages to bring the sense of identity using trauma, nostalgia and a sense of being uprooted.

Banks' trauma emanates from his childhood. The sudden disappearance of his parents led him to settle with his aunt in England. Infact, his motive behind being a detective is to find his missing parents. There are several instances where Banks reminisces his childhood, especially his happy days with his childhood friend Akira and with Uncle Philips. He solves several cases as a detective in London but the basic purpose of his being rests on solving the case of his missing parents. As Lucy Bond and Stef Craps present in their book *Trauma*:

So central has the idea of trauma become to questions about identity, inclusion, and belonging that critics have argued that we are living in a trauma culture, defined by a valorization of victimhood. (13)

Ishiguro portrays trauma through a unique narrative style. Initially *When We Were Orphans* may appear as a detective novel but at the closer look of the narrative- technique we find that the narration of the events helps the narrator to resurface the trauma that he faces. There are several characters in the novel which faces trauma. Besides the main character Christopher Banks, his girl -friend Sarah Hemmings and his adopted daughter Jennifer all share the same pain of being orphans. All three share the same nostalgia of their childhood memories. They long for their childhood memories and carry the heavy baggage of it. Their memories are highly selective. Banks uses appropriate gaps, omissions and fragmentation in narration to cope up with his trauma. Although his memory appears to be spontaneous at first, but it is deliberate and arises from perfect calculation of events. He uses his memory adeptly to depict his nostalgia and rootlessness. As Lucy Bond and Stef Craps emphasize what Anne Whitehead speaks in the book *Trauma* about trauma saying: “[t]he rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered” (15). Banks remembers his childhood in the form of flashbacks. What appears to be spontaneous flashback is actually cleverly presented events. Banks is madly in search of his parents. He has a deep desire to find them. He wants to state that he has a such great passion of finding his missing parents that he even decides not to elope with Sarah Hemmings to Macao. Even Sarah gets married because she wanted a husband who would “really contribute... to humanity, to a better world” (47). She sought her marriage as a “trophy” (213). This is why when she tried to persuade Sir Cecil to come out of his retirement voluntarily and contribute towards the society at the time of Shanghai crisis. Sarah always wanted a family with Banks and his adopted Jennifer with whom she could live happily.

Banks’ nostalgia emerges from his longing for his childhood days. He misses his days with Akira and his Chinese servant. In the very beginning of the novel when Banks meets his childhood friend Osbournes in England and he describes him as an “odd bird at school” (3), the readers come to know that he felt alienated from his childhood. Ishiguro has very adeptly shown in his novels how nostalgia and rootlessness are intertwined to bring up trauma. The identity crisis in the beginning of the novel is because of the trauma the characters face. Sarah and Jennifer both long for their childhood days. They consider themselves rootless because of the crisis they face on being displaced. However, Banks displacement is familial. He has preserved his childhood memories in such a way that it appears as a lost paradise to him. In order to come out of this familial displacement, he tries to recreate his past. He abandons his personal life only to find his disappeared parents. His visit to Shanghai, meeting his friend Akira and uncle Philip is a way to relive his childhood moments. He revisits the house he lived in only to find it shattered. As Uncle Philip discloses the truth behind his mother’s disappearance, he is shocked. The childhood utopia which he had framed for himself regarding his parents had vanished. Even his father who seemed him to disappear at once actually fled with a woman. When Banks finds out that his mother was taken as a concubine by a Warlord in Shanghai and all this while his mother had tried to preserve his innocence by keeping this shocking revelation away from him, he is left distraught. Perhaps the allowance he knew he was receiving from his aunt in England for studies was actually sent by

his mother. Diana knew that her sacrifice could atleast save her son's future because she was already abandoned by her husband.

It is because of the memory of Banks that the readers understand why he adopts Jennifer. He narrates his childhood memories to her because he understands that both of them share the same pain which he had always suppressed. When Jennifer tries to commit suicide because of her loneliness at one point in the novel, the readers realise how Banks must have also felt growing up alone without his parents. Her suicide presents the trauma she must have gone through on being an orphan.

Banks presents his identity as a myth of a great detective. There is certainly trauma behind his representation of such an image. Banks wants to show himself highly professional but he is unable to leave his childhood utopia behind. When he meets his mother at the end of the novel, he is shocked to see how old has she turned. He keeps himself distant from her and does not try to take her back realizing that she has a world of her own. Even the narration of the events is often unreliable. There is continuous use of the word "remembering" in his narration. He also confesses his unreliability when he says: "Even tonight, when I sat down here and tried to gather in some sort of order these things, I still remember I have been struck anew by how hazy so much has grown" (59). The reason behind this unreliability is definitely trauma.

Trauma forces the narrator to live a secluded life. He finds no peace. He knew he loved Sarah and could never imagine his life with anyone else. The narration of the memory loses its credibility. It definitely distorts the identity of Banks. He bears the sufferings of his childhood trauma. Trauma perhaps turns into the lens through which he views his entire life. He is traumatized by the incidents of his childhood and his parents' disappearance leaves an indelible mark on his personality that he sacrifices his family life goals for it. Banks never senses that his father and mother's disappearance could ever have so dark truths. He wants his adapted daughter Jennifer to get married so that she could relish the family goals he could never. Rootlessness is the reason he could never feel the hearth of home. He was always secluded from the people around him. Though he acted as if he was strong but the truth behind his parents' disappearance broke him. He wanted to come out of the shackles of his past and that was only possible once he came at par with his past but then it was too late because Sarah had passed away due to some ailment and Jennifer was big enough to get married. Banks is surely left alone at the end.

As Banks narrates his past, he frees himself from the traumatic clutches of his past. He is free of the burden he has been carrying all this while. He accepts that he has been chasing the shadows of his "vanished parents" (314). He finds no solace until he meets his mother Diana Roberts and finds the reason behind his parents' disappearance. He understands that this exhausted him not only physically but also mentally. Now he definitely looks forward in life. Although Sarah remains no more alive but Banks wishes Jennifer to get married and live her life. He ends the novel with an optimistic note, accepting present and realizing that it is futile looking back now and regretting. As in the book *Trauma* by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps,

For LaCapra, the key to surviving trauma is not to surrender oneself to its endless repetitions but to find a way of reconnecting knowledge and feeling, so that the survivor can re-engage with the present and begin to look towards the future. (83)

Banks' optimism at the end of the novel shows his attempt of accepting his past and moving ahead in life. Ishiguro intertwines trauma, nostalgia and rootlessness to bring up all the themes in this novel. This is evident in his other novels especially *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*. All the narrators in these novels such as Etsuko from *A Pale View of Hills*, Ono from *An Artist of the Floating World* and Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* suffer from trauma because of the rootlessness they face. This feeling of rootlessness comes because of being displaced from their homeland. They are always nostalgic of their past and their reminiscences are a way to escape them. This happens with Banks as well who reminisces his past because he fails to accept his present. As events unfold, the readers come to know the reason for his living with his aunt in London, his decision to become a detective and why he couldn't marry his lady-love Sarah.

Ishiguro's all the novels carry a sense of nostalgia, rootlessness and trauma in their characters. Perhaps there are autobiographical elements in his novels. Ishiguro is a Japanese born British writer. Though he never witnessed World War II but his mother was much traumatized by its experience. Ishiguro's father went to England for the job of an oceanographer but economic prospects lured him to be there. The rootlessness, trauma, nostalgia that he talks about in his novels is something which he carries within himself. All the protagonists that he paints in his novels face identity crisis. They suffer from rootlessness because they find themselves displaced just like the novelist himself who finds himself dislocated from his roots. Ishiguro accepts that his novels find echoes of his heart. His first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) shows the life of Etsuko and her daughter Keiko. Etsuko is a Japanese and suffers the aftermaths of bomb-blast in Nagasaki. She shifts from Japan to England for the better future of her daughter but years after settling in England, Keiko finds it difficult to adjust there and eventually commits suicide. His other novels such as *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* also picture the rootlessness that these protagonists face. Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* find himself uprooted in the new Japan after bomb-blast. The American system of lifestyle and education baffles him. He finds himself struggling with the mindset of the new generation who label them as a traitor rather than a patriot for supporting the War which according to them took the lives of so many people.

CONCLUSION

Banks suffers from the trauma that emanates from nostalgia and rootlessness. Nostalgia of the childhood and rootlessness because of moving from Shanghai to England. The narration of the events from the part of Banks is an attempt to break the vicious circle of trauma in which he had been intertwined. The revelation of the truth makes him come out of the childhood utopia he had always lived in. The narrative memory is unreliable because Banks weaves it as per his convenience. He wants the readers to know the reason behind his socially secluded life. There are several incidents when Banks' narration seems unreliable. He seems to justify his actions and decisions. Banks story is a perfect example of how Ishiguro paints the trauma of Shanghai civil

war in the lives of common people. It also shows how trauma, nostalgia and rootlessness form the important themes in his *When We Were Orphans*.

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