

The Influence of Culture in Contemporary Existential Tragedies: A Comparative Reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

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Abstract

Literature is an expression of culture and it's the cultural background that determines the behavioral traits of characters. A Pale View of Hills (1982) by Kazuo Ishiguro is a retreat to one's past and their struggle to cope with their existence after what can be considered as a great event of tragedy in human history until the memories take on a disturbing cast. Kitchen (1988) by Banana Yoshimoto is a modern tragedy about two characters who were united by deaths, choices and the inherent loneliness that marks the contemporary Japanese lifestyle. Kazuo Ishiguro's A Pale View of Hills and Banana Yoshimoto's Kitchen reveals that both the writers' characters were based on Japan from two different time periods. The protagonist of Ishiguro's text is Etsuko whose memories of her Post- Second World War Japanese life got triggered by the suicide of her daughter. The text focus on themes like 'reliability of memory', 'trauma' etc. Yoshimoto's protagonist Mikage and Yuichi, on the other hand tried to escape trauma and pain by finding solace in their 'kitchen'. Other themes from this text includes transsexuality and loneliness. It is observed that in both the novels the choices of the protagonists' determined their ultimate fate. This paper is a humble attempt to show the effects of culture on development of characters, their existential crisis, the effect of memory and the issue of transsexuality in context to Japanese culture.

Keywords: Diaspora, memory, death, transsexuality, culture.

Culture shares a ready-to-hand relationship with existence. It plays an important role in determining the existence of a person because it is culture that serves a defining trait for human behaviour. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) is a story based on two different time periods- the first half of the novel is structured in Japan following the termination of the Second World War while the latter half is set in contemporary England. The protagonist of the novel Etsuko travels through the memory lane into her past which is triggered by a tragedy. The novel deals with the concept of reliability of memory. The protagonist of the novel is threatened

by the change and suffers from an existential crisis imposed by the changing cultural setting. Again, Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* (1988) is set in contemporary urban Japanese life that is marked by exhaustion, loneliness and death. The characters are united by death. The culture in form of food serves as an escape from an eternal existential crisis. Both the texts consist of listless, affectless and alienated characters who are entirely detached from society and struggle to cope up and find some meaning in the vast meaningless universe. They are threatened by the preset cultural norms of society and all they seek is some sort of escape from it.

A Pale View of Hills is an analepsis and a struggle to realise one's existence in society after what can be called as one of the greatest tragedies of human history, the Second World War. The novel begins with the protagonist Etsuko manifesting her "selfish desire not to be reminded of the past." (Ishiguro 1) The nostalgia of her post world war life in Japan is triggered by the suicide of her elder daughter Keiko, who according to Etsuko, was pure Japanese. According to a conversation with Brian W. Shaffer, Ishiguro in his debut novel attempted to exploit the concept of nostalgia as a "quite valuable thing of human existence." (1998) Even though the protagonist Etsuko is reluctant to embrace her past through nostalgia yet she serves as an active narrator, though doubtfully a reliable one. The instability of memory is evident within the novel in Etsuko's own words: "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily colored by the circumstances in which one remembers..." (Ishiguro 156) Thus, even though the writer exploits the socio-psychological condition of his characters and their lives after the World War yet he deliberately provides a feeble base for narration of the story. The readers are meant to face a dilemma while distinguishing between the real and the symbolic. *A Pale View of Hills* consists of two worlds of distinguished cultures which serve as foils to each other. The first part of the story is set in the post-world war Japan. The narrative takes place in Nagasaki of late forties or early fifties when the Japanese culture was changing and American soldiers were yet to retreat completely from Japanese lands. Etsuko lived with her husband, Jiro somewhere in the east of Nagasaki where there was once a small village and a river which were then left in charred ruins after the city was bombed. She was in her third or fourth month of pregnancy with Keiko when she was acquainted with Sachiko, a widow of war, from a once well-to-do family, now experiencing financial difficulties. She struggles to raise her daughter, Mariko, a child who was unlike any other children Etsuko had ever met. It is through Sachiko that Etsuko is acquainted with the knowledge about the western world as Sachiko befriended an American called Frank, a Pinkerton-like figure who disappointed her more than once in his failed promise to rescue her and Mariko. It is Ishiguro's attempt at parody of Puccini's Oriental tale of "Madame Butterfly". Etsuko's recollection of her past is filled with gaps and omissions, for which she condemns the flux of time. She said- "It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things didn't happen quite the way they come back to me today". (41) Etsuko's memory of Japan was the world that had a feeling of change about it. After the Second World War, Japan went through not only a socio-political but also a cultural change. Life as people has known was rapidly changing. This justifies the reason as to why Etsuko finds comfort in the company of her father-in-law, Ogata-San. Ogata-San represents the Japan as it used to be before the war- a symbol of principles and simplicity. Even though Etsuko appreciates every moment of her life with Jiro yet she fails to find a sense of security and freedom in the life with him. The socio-psychological transformation of Japanese lifestyle is often witnessed in the conversations

between Jiro and his father as they debate over every aspect of Japanese culture and changes. While Ogata-San represents stable lifestyle of old beliefs and principles like communism and living together as a joint family; Jiro is representative of a changing mindset of Japanese people after the war like globalization, living in nuclear families and mixing of eastern and western cultures. Etsuko fails to find absolute comfort or voice in either way of life and thus, suffer from an existential crisis.

Ishiguro very tactfully highlights the impact of war on the psychology of people inhibiting the society. This aspect is reflected over and over again in the 'Sachiko-Mariko' episodes. The ugliness of war leaves a deep scar on Mariko, a child who witnessed a woman drowning her own children in the water. This episode never truly leaves Mariko as she fails to find a comforting place in anyone's company. Unknowingly, the image of that incident finds a permanent root in Mariko's subconsciousness and she loses the meaning of her existence. The only occasion that the readers find Mariko truly happy was on her trip to the ropeway with Etsuko and Sachiko. The final blow to her existence comes from her mother who drowns her kittens to death. The death of those kittens represents the symbolic death of Mariko as Sachiko is symbolic of the woman who drowned her own children. A number of critics identified a similarity between Sachiko-Mariko anecdotes and Etsuko's own story. According to Cynthia F. Wong,

In working through the meaning of her dead daughter's life, Etsuko situates her tale in Nagasaki and focuses on a strange and enigmatic friendship with another woman, Sachiko whose own daughter's actions seem to foretell the suicide of Etsuko's daughter years later. (Wong 25)

She further sees in Sachiko's desire to leave Nagasaki as Etsuko's attempt to construct a story which would take place in the future. According to Brian W. Shaffer, Sachiko-Mariko episodes of the novel was a symbolic portrayal of Etsuko's past difficulties with Keiko. In an interview conducted by Gregory Mason, even Ishiguro himself pointed out that Sachiko and Etsuko are not one and the same person. The second half of the novel is cropped up in England, where Etsuko, presently a widow, ponders over the suicide of her elder daughter Keiko, her last connection to her eastern origin. Her recollection of her life in Japan coincides with the visit of her younger daughter Niki (from her British husband). Niki serves as a foil to Keiko as they differ in every aspect of nature and thought. If Keiko is symbolic to Etsuko's existentially confused life in Japan, then Niki is symbolic of Etsuko's more comfortable and stable life in Britain. Throughout the novel, the readers fail to find the exact reason for Keiko's suicide. However, there is a disturbing sense of easy acceptance of her daughter's suicide in Etsuko as her very last tie to her old life is finally cut. The novel ends with Niki's departure for London.

The philosophy of existentialism advocates that human have a power to direct their own lives and pave their own paths. The author, Banana Yoshimoto, in her book *Kitchen* recognises this ideal as her characters struggle in and against the accepted cultural norms to realise their place and meaning in the meaningless universe. It is a story set in urban space with characters struggling with death, alienation and loneliness. While a few of them find comfort in culture, others defy cultural norms to create their own zone of comfort. The novella starts in an absurd

way as the protagonist, Mikage Sakurai talks about the importance of 'Kitchen' in her life while the readers are informed about the death of her grandmother, her only family.

The place I like best in this world is the kitchen...I often think that when it comes time to die, I want to breathe my last in a kitchen. Whether it's cold and I am all alone, or somebody's there and it's warm, I'll stare death fearlessly in the eye. If it's a kitchen, I'll think, 'How good'. (Yoshimoto 2)

Kitchen almost plays an unnatural role throughout the novel so much that kitchen becomes a defining trait for Mikage to understand the nature of other characters. In one of the episodes in the text, she said – "I trusted their kitchen". (14) The novella proceeds as Mikage meets Yuichi Tanabe, a boy who was well-acquainted with her grandmother prior to her death and Mikage moves in with him and his mother Eriko. What strikes most at this point of the novels is that Mikage is scared of loneliness. The author highlights the primitive character trait of human as a social animal and Yuichi plays almost a role of a messiah in Mikage's escape from an eternal loneliness. This is evident when she said – "I saw a straight road leading from me to him. He seemed to glow with white light. That was the effect he had on me". (7) Again, death plays an integral part in the formation of the plot of the story. While it is the sorrow of parting with the dead that forms an almost unending source of existential crisis for Yoshimoto's characters, however, it is death that unites the characters over and again throughout the novella and determines their decisions. The characters reside in a universe in which the future is filled with the possibilities of death and the past, by the memories of the dead.

For some reason there's always death around us. My parents, my grandmother, your real mother and Eriko. My god- in this gigantic universe, there can't be a pair like us. The fact that we are friends is amazing. All this death... all this death. (Yoshimoto 50)

They are stuck in a loop of tragedy dominated by the fear of being left alone and there isn't only one sad thing to cry for, in fact, there were many. While Mikage and Yuichi are at first united by the death of her grandmother, in the second half of the story, it is the death of Yuichi's mother, Eriko, that re-unites them. However, it is the fear of transiency that delays their final union – "... the place we are in now is just too dreadful. It is not a place where two people can create a life together".(66) Similarly, even in Eriko's case, it is the death of his wife that triggers his decision to go through a sexual metamorphosis from a man to that of a woman. The novella deals not only with the sexual transformation but also with the psychological transformation of Eriko from a man to a transsexual woman. She not only looks like a woman; she also embraces all aspects of transsexual womanhood. Eriko's exclamation to Mikage, "it's not easy being a woman" (41) stands true as it is her decision of embracing womanhood that, in the long run leads to her fatal end. While Eriko's transformed sexuality is a defy against cultural norms to find one's meaning and comfort in the meaningless universe, on the other hand, in the form of food plays a huge role in uniting Mikage and Yuichi. Mikage, at her worst days, finds the meaning of her life in cooking. She becomes obsessed with creating something meaningful. Similarly, it is Mikage's cooking that provides an ultimate sense of comfort to Yuichi after the death of Eriko. It is the medium of food that brings Mikage and Yuichi closer and it is food that finally brings them together at the end. Thus, the culture in the medium of food provides a sense of hope to the

characters struggling from existential crisis, thus inspiring them to “begin another day” in the otherwise hopeless universe.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills* is a narration of Japanese culture and its effect on the existential crisis of characters from a diasporic point of view. Ishiguro’s protagonist is entrapped in the cultural change that leads to an insecurity and loneliness as she can neither get over her past completely nor embrace the new future. As a result, she is trapped in an eternal loop of sadness that not only affects her but also finds a root in her daughter. Her existential crisis ascends to a point that her physical escape from her original cultural background is not enough. She desperately struggles to escape all the memories of her past so much that she finds a sense of relief when her final tie to her origin is cut in the form of her daughter’s suicide. The text *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto on the other hand is a narrative original from the land of Japan by an author who has grown up in the midst of Japanese culture. Even though the characters in this novella also suffer from a sense of eternal loneliness and existential crisis yet, they find the meaning of their lives in the midst of culture. Although they struggle against the preset cultural norms yet they don’t escape from it. They accept the harsh realities of life and try to find meaning in the otherwise meaningless universe. Other than the theme of existentialism, another distinctive trait that both the texts share is that it is the decisions of the characters and not some external force in the universe that determines their ultimate fate.

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