



## A Halbwachsian Reading on Collective Memory, Forgetfulness and Remembrance in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*.

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### ABSTRACT:

Memory and forgetfulness have always been a part in a human life, it is the human tendency to forget and trying hard to remember it back. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Buried Giant* (2015) explores the role of memory, trauma and collective forgetfulness throughout the novel. This paper works on Maurice Halbwachs' Collective memory, it is a theory that examines how personal and collective memory function within the novel *The Buried Giant*. Through this theory, Halbwachs says that the mechanism of forgetting acts as a psychological defense and political strategy. His theory on collective memory speaks about the memory suppression and identity formation. In this paper one could analyse how Ishiguro has used the narrative that speaks about forgetting and remembering. As Halbwach's assertion says that memory is socially constructed and politically instrumental, remembering something is hard, that maybe because of harsh realities, but it is vital for healing and reconciliation in the post-conflict societies.

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, Memory Suppression, Psychological defense and Identity Formation.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) created a great impact in his literary career, where he switches from reality to allegory and fantasy to examine the complex structure of memory, Forgetting and Historical trauma. The novel *The Buried Giant* is Set in a post-Arthurian Britain which speaks about the journey of an elderly couple Axl and Beatrice who were ready to set on a long journey to meet their lost son. That journey helped the couple to regain their memories which was trapped by a mysterious fog which responsible for all the people to loose their memories, over their journey they happen to meet many people and hardships, just to find their lost son and regain their collective memories back.

Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory helps to create an interpretation of the novel *The Buried Giant*. Halbwachs, a prominent person in memory studies, focuses that society plays a major role that structures memory and the communal forces which shape recollection. The novels' allegorical elements such as the Mysterious fog, the dragon Querig, and the quest motif which portrays how society remembers or forgets their past. This paper examines how Ishiguro shows the complexity between memory and forgetting, done through the historical narratives, and the urge to remember. Ishiguro's concepts aligns with that of Halbwachs, where both of them feels the importance of memory, however it hard to let out the memory, that becomes the key for reconciliation and moral clarity.

Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist of the early twentieth century, breaks out a theory that memory is not completely an individual phenomenon but it is deeply wrapped within the social contexts. In *On Collective Memory* (1992) and later writings, Halbwachs argues that individuals remember, through the incidents that happened in their families, religious communities, political institutions that shapes structure and provide meaning to recollections. For Halbwachs, memory is selective, reconstructed, and responsive to present concerns. According to the societal space memory is reshaped.

One of the most important fantastical elements used in the novel *The Buried Giant* is the fog, which erases people's memories. This forgetting is not only a simple fantastical element, this becomes the key concept that aligns with Halbwachs' theory of socially constructed memory. In the novel, the fog is caused by the breath of the dragon Querig, which is referred as She – Dragoon, which was once trapped by Merlin and he casted a spell on Querig stating that anyone who breathes Querig will be forgetting their memories, it was the order from King Arthur in order to bring peace between Saxons and Britons and its effect is the suppression of individual and communal memory. Initially this forgetting is not a very big debate, the main problem started when the couple started to regain their memories about certain things which they felt as chaos.

The mysterious fog became the main lead where Axl and Beatrice converse, "But then again, what is this haziness that hangs over our memories? Beatrice adds: We're not like children, Axl. We remember things, even if they're clouded". This statement from the couple echoes Halbwachs' argument that forgetting is not about the absence of memory, but its disconnection from the social frameworks that sustain it. In the novel, the fog becomes the metaphor for the collapse of these framework. Moreover, the fog serves as a political function. As mentioned above, King Arthur and his followers allowed the dragon to live because, her breath ensured peace. Here the concept of forgetting aligns with Halbwachs' insight that collective memory can be manipulated by those in power like King Arthur to serve societal peace.

In the novel *The Buried Giant*, an elderly couple named Axl and Beatrice, who is shown as a lovely couple throughout the novel. Where both of their love is shown very beautifully especially at the time of the hardships and that forms the emotional core of the novel. The idea of starting the journey was given by Beatrice who wanted to see her son whom they missed at his childhood. The most painful moment comes when both of them

admit that they couldn't remember their son's face. "But I can't remember our son, neither his face nor his voice, though sometimes I think I can see him when he was a small boy," (28). This emotional journey becomes their path to self discovery, where they happen to meet different people and also uncover hidden layers of their shared past that create a sense of fear in Beatrice's heart.

Halbwachs focuses on memory which is always connected to the society. Most of the memories created by an individual are from the family and romantic bonds that become the social structure where memories are saved. As Axl and Beatrice's journey is filled with suspense, at the same time it becomes the tool for recovering their love that is mixed with betrayals and losses. The fear of losing her husband was the main tension that always stays in Beatrice's mind which shows her mistake that she committed in the past, that's why often Beatrice pleads Axl, not to leave her at any cost.

Forgetting gave Beatrice the peace, but as soon as they start to remember they were forced to confront the truth whether it brings joy or sadness. This connects with Halbwachs' belief that the social nature of memory means it is always entangled with identity, trust, and ethical responsibility. Remembering is not merely an intellectual act; it is a relational and moral one.

Sir Gawain and the Saxon warrior Wistan represent opposing views on memory and history. Gawain, who served King Arthur, supports the mysterious fog as a necessary means of preserving peace. According to Sir Gawain the Querig is seen as a guardian to protect the social harmony, on the other side Wistan felt that as a dangerous monster that made the people lose their memory. Wistan believes that because of this dragon people couldn't really understand what is reality, they doubt themselves, no way for others to let out their emotions that prevents healing. Wistan wanted to destroy the dragon, stating that only through this, the Saxons reclaim their dignity.

This conflict shows Halbwachs' claim that collective memory is shaped by present concerns and political interests. To analyse Gawain's nature, he completely believes in Quireg and he was in favor of that mystical unity but Wistan claims fighting in order to bring back the dignity of Saxons. As Wistan's anger is shown, where he says, who is responsible for our future children, what kind of world they are going to live in, to answer all these, only solution will be Quireg's death. His words echo Halbwachs' assertion that memory serves to affirm group identity, and that suppressed memories often resurface in more destructive forms if not acknowledged. On the other hand the political stakes of memory are clear, peace is coming through and forgetting, but that is for a short period of time. Wistan's decision is most important because only then the role of collective memories will be let out. Where Ishiguro also in the novel felt that when these are let out that may turn out to be venience too, Halbwachs would recognize this dilemma as it is never neutral and always contested.

When one comes across the term Memories, one particular thing that strikes on is the place or the location where the incidents took place, in the novel *The Buried Giant* physical locations hold significant memories which was confirmed by Halbwachs, he says physical locations serve as triggers for memory. As Axl and Beatrice started their journey, too much of hardships were there, right from getting permission from their pastor till reaching their son's grave, every step they took has a memory that is described in the novel, The ruined monastery, ancient battlefields, the dragon's cave and Giant's carin, all become symbolic landscapes, where memory flashes.

The monastery holds a significance in the novel, where we find the couple were directed by a medicine woman to the monastery to meet a monk named Jonus, as one knows monks are very silent and known for spreading peace, but the very first incident happened there created a negative thought in Axl's mind, where we find one of the monks hitting a bird hardly telling that it is the sign of devil, "'Demons! Demons!' he shouted, glaring up the rafters. 'I'll see them soak in blood!'" (148). As the novel proceeds one can understand that the monastery has got a violent history which was actually a correct guess of Saxon warrior Wistan. The couple felt a sense of discomfort which Halbwachs says physical settings will help one to remember their collective memories across generations.

Another place that created fear in the couple's life is the tunnel which is actually a trap for the couple, the young boy and the warrior Wistan. The innocent people believed the words of the monk that a group of soldiers are in search of Wistan and Edwin to be killed, so the monk showed a trapped tunnel door, as each got down they understood that it was a trap by the monks, down the tunnel laid many dead bodies without any identity, full of skulls and other stuffs which created a horror in Beatrice's mind. As she walks inside the dark she happened to touch the remains with her foot which she identifies as a baby, "'Axl, I thought it a child! My foot touched it and I saw it before your light passed. Oh, I believe it's a small child long dead!'" (191).

The Quireg's cave is the place where the fight between Gawain and Wistan grew harder, according to Gawain the breath of the dragon makes a peace treaty between Saxons and Britons but Wistan says there is no need for a peace, he wanted the entire world and the future children to know the real history, who is the real warrior through their actions and deeds. The Querig is laid in a state where she cannot fight anymore, this is the time where Wistan uses his strength to kill Quireg, meanwhile he killed Gawain and Wistan finally attacked the She-dragon.

Giant's carin is a place where stones are erected to show the innocent slaughtered in the war, towards the end all gathered in this place and Wistan kills the dragon and sense of remembrance lingers in the air where the old couple understood that their son is really dead from Plague which was revealed by Beatrice says the boatman in a Island, "'This part your wife told me. And how soon after came news of your good son taken by the plague swept the country.'" (356). The couple's journey across the landscape becomes a journey through Britain's buried past. This journey is not only in search of their son rather an opportunity to remember the past which is a collective memory. Ishiguro and Halbwachs' idea says not only society, material and spatial actions can also hold a significant place in the structure of collective memory.

The most important theme in the novel *The Buried Giant* is the relationship between memory and reconciliation. The novel suggests a difficult question: can a society forget the violence done to them and heal without letting out the truth or the truth has to be confronted however it is painful? Halbwachs' work offers insight into this dilemma. He recognized that memory is not only an act of preservation but also one of reconstruction. The act of forgetting is dramatized in the novel where we find peace to the couple, whereas when the mist is destroyed and the true self came out that becomes a path for old grievances.

The final scenes of the novel, where the test of love comes in front of the couple, Axl and Beatrice face separation at the river crossing, shows the fear of recovering memories in the mind of Beatrice. At the beginning of the novel the couple heard an incident happened in an unknown Island where a couple went to cross the island with the help of a boatman, but they were questioned about their depth of love, only if they answer they can cross it, but they failed to answer the questions of the boatman that shows the lack of love, this fears Beatrice, but she wanted to be in that Island for a day and prove her love for Axl and the day has come where Ishiguro didn't give a clear comment on their separation.

The ferryman explains, The memories have returned to them and that is a blessing, though a heavy one. This moment elevates the novel where it says remembering is painful, but it is necessary. Halbwachs would agree to this core idea that the collective memory is shaped by social needs, also it is necessary to let out the truth for moral purpose. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* brings out a powerful allegory for the workings of collective memory as seen in the theory of Maurice Halbwachs. Through the portrayal of amnesia, recovery, and remembrance, the novel shows the social construction of memory and the historical narrative.

Connecting with Halbwachsian theory into Ishiguro's narrative, the novel shows how memory is shaped by social networks and political needs. It elaborates the dangers of forgetting in an individual and in the communities and the urge to remember for healing and reconciliation. The novel *The Buried Giant* serves as an exploration on how societies grapple with the legacy of violence and the ethics of memory. In a world marked by historical trauma and ongoing conflict, Ishiguro's novel urges readers to confront the past with honesty and courage. Like Halbwachs, Ishiguro voices out that to live in peace, the answer does not lie in forgetting, but in understanding the difficulty and letting out the truth though it is painful to remember.

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