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Displaced and Misplaced: Migration and Identity in *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract:

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction embodies personal tragedies of human life. This Japanese born British writer is very much attentive to the personal experiences of displacement, cultural uprooting and loss in his novels. Most of the works by this Japanese born British writer are cross cultural and the themes of dislocation and misplacement are inevitable in his stories. Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* Takes the form of a Japanese woman Etsuko's first person narrative about her life in England and her past days spent in Nagasaki. The unfolding of Etsuko's memories reveals the aftermaths of her migration to England with her daughter Keiko, then a small kid. Though elder people can be rational about migration, for children it may not make any sense. They no longer feel a sense of belonging or being loved. For them, relocation becomes dislocation and displacement becomes misplacement. They are estranged not only from the society but also from the family. This paper tries to explore the experience of migration and changes in identity.

Keywords: Displacement, Transnational Marital Migration, Child Migration, Identity, *A Pale View of Hills*.

A Pale View of Hills is Kazuo Ishiguro's debut novel and this novel takes the form of a fragmented memoir by a middle aged Japanese woman named Etsuko who has had a marital migration to England with her Japanese daughter Keiko, many years back. Several works by this Japanese born British writer imparts Japanese characters and culture in it. That is why many critics consider his works as Japanese or belonging to the genre of ethnic novels. What Ishiguro's writings feature is not merely the Japanese spirit but they speak for the whole humanity and seemingly advocate for a global culture. Ma, Sheng Mei argues it is perfectly justifiable to read Ishiguro's works with the knowledge of author's cultural and ethnic background. "Ishiguro's ethnicity is attributed to him on the essentialist premises of the Japanese culture he inherits from his family and the Japanese fictional universe he in turn creates". Ishiguro left Nagasaki for England with his parents when he was just six. Though he

left Japan at an early age, he had a very strong emotional bond with his grandparents. The idea of returning to Japan was always there in the minds of his parents and Ishiguro lived a life with a perpetual feeling of going back but that never did happen. A confused sense of belonging and not belonging can put one's identity into crisis. The experience of migration had a strong effect on Ishiguro. No wonder that the concerns for territoriality and rootedness are the intrinsic emotion of his *A Pale View of Hills*. On a keener introspection, these themes can be found more or less recur in his other novels also

A Pale View of Hills Takes the form of a Japanese woman Etsuko's first person narrative about her life in England and her past days spent in Nagasaki. The unfolding of Etsuko's memories reveals the aftermaths of her migration to England with her daughter Keiko, then a small kid. Keiko's embarrassments for the situation she was in can be deciphered from Etsuko's narratives on the lives of her friend Sachiko and her ten year old daughter Mariko. Though elder people can be rational about migration, for children it may not make any sense. Mariko and Keiko's characters parallels in many ways and both of them are ostracized by migration. They no longer feel a sense of belonging or being loved. For them, relocation is dislocation and displacement is misplacement. This paper explores how the quest for identity results in transnational marital migration and how Child migration in turn put their identity in to crisis.

Marital Migration: A Displacement for Identity

Etsuko does not say much about the facts and motifs behind her marital migration to England, along with her purely Japanese daughter Keiko. The whole novel is a reminiscence of the happenings on a particular summer in Nagasaki when she was pregnant with Keiko, seven years before her leaving for England. The story is of her friendship with a strange woman Sachiko and her ten year old kid Mariko. But that account gives clear clues for Etsuko's post actions in her life. After narrating Sachiko's story so vividly, Etsuko at the end of the novel, utters 'Keiko' instead of Mariko. The duality fades and both the kids become a unified notion of misplaced identities. While Sachiko explicitly tells her agonized life and her plans to go for America with Frank, it seems that Etsuko is happy and content with the life she was having. But still she left Japan. On a close read, Etsuko's sufferings were as equal as Sachiko. So through this narrative on Sachiko, what Etsuko tries to do is a kind of justification for her actions and to make herself assured that she is not guilty of Keiko's ostracized life, existential depression and her eventual suicide.

The love for the first world was a common trend amongst the Japanese youngsters after the post war era. With the decline in their faith in their own country, instead of hating the oppressor, Japanese youth tended to love the west for its refined spirit. Spivak's idea on the culture of migration is that "The interest of the migrant...is in dominant global capital. The migrant is in First World Space"(382). Kelsky (2001), observes in her book about the genealogy of Japanese women's marital transnational migrations and traces out how the "feeling of intimacy with the broadly conceived entity called the 'west'" has emerged out of "a feudalistic and oppressive patriarchal Japanese family system". West becomes a promised land. Sachiko or Etsuko decide to leave Japan not out of love for their west lovers but because of their hate for Japan. That hate is evident throughout the novel; the place where they live is near a health hazarding waste ground. The constructions are unscientific and not proper. Sachiko, once a wealthy woman, and who has lost her family during the war, is forced to live in such appalling conditions. Despite the fact that she had a comparatively good shelter at her uncle's home, she left there. It could be assumed that she was not treated with dignity and there was nothing there for her to do other than just sitting and getting old. Despite knowing the fact that Frank is a drunkard who regularly breaks promises he made and spoils money with the beach girls, Sachiko is hopeful and ready to wait for their journey. She confesses Etsuko "I realize we may never see America" and she adds "and even if we did, I know how difficult things will be"(53). But the idea of leaving Japan makes life sensible for her. On the picnic day, the way she behaves and talks with the American woman is more English than the English. The reverence is for their land. Etsuko's dreams about England are not directly revealed. Sachiko openly expresses her contempt for the shabbiness of the place they live while Etsuko claims that she is happy and optimistic. But Ogata-san's remarks on how Etsuko insisted on planting ornamental plants in their yard clearly states Etsuko's aesthetic sense and love for beauty. Etsuko finds Sachiko's tea pot and her special Kimona as things of great beauty. Etsuko also must have had a long cherished dream of West packed to her chest. Etsuko's reiterating of phrases to Niki, like "So truly like England out here", "how so truly like England everything looked", "I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased"(182). So she had visualised England even before going there. Mori, kyoko (1997), a Japanese American poet said in her memoir "In a noisy American city, I feel safe from the oppressive silence of my past".

Traditionalist Japanese believed it is not good to have foreign connection or affinity with them. Sachiko's marriage proposal was withdrawn because of her father's foreign

connection. She says “When I was young, I used to dream I’d go to America one day, that I’d go there and become a film actress. My mother used to laugh at me. But my father told me if I learnt my English well enough, I could easily become a business girl” (109). Later she got married to a very strict and very patriotic man and he threw away her books. She did not protest because “there seemed little point anyway” (109). That is the reason why she wishes to bring her daughter to America. “Japan is no place for a girl, “What can she look forward to here”. If we consider Sachiko as the alter ego of Etsuko, their what-if questions are not answered but they are being blindly optimistic. Sachiko asks Etsuko “What do I have to lose?. There is nothing for me at my uncle’s house. Just a few empty rooms, that’s all. I could sit there in a room and grow old...just empty rooms, that’s all. *You know that yourself, Etsuko*”(emphasis added)(171). Now in England, Etsuko has nothing left for her other than the big house and empty rooms. The west husband’s love is not driven by any real love for these Japanese women but they had the fantasy of being the saviours of such poor woman. At their own land, they would be glorified for being great humanists and upholding nonracist ideologies. The west always has affection with the tokenized minorities. This can be seen in the scene where Niki, Etsuko’s English daughter, reassures Etsuko that what she did was right. Niki then goes on explaining how one of her friend got really impressed and appreciated Etsuko’s brave act of leaving Japan, when she told about her dad and his heroic marriage to her Japanese mother (90).

The Child Migrants and Misplaced Identities

Mariko and Keiko are around seven years old when their mothers were planning for migration. The child migration anxiety is mainly portrayed through Mariko’s unfriendly and strange character. She is considered as a trouble child by everyone and she can’t find home at any place other than her maternal uncle’s home. It is because that there she could keep her pet cats. The major concern she has for her moving is the cats-her only family. The idea of leaving her kittens for America suffocates her. Sachiko and Mariko travelled all the way from Tokyo which is nearly thousand kilometres away from Nagasaki. This internal migration is so painful to Mariko. Even children of her age are not welcoming her. This is why the tube boy at the hills commented on her drawings: “lacking perspective”. Mariko’s fear of moving away could be understood with the ‘other woman’ character, who is a child murderess Mariko witness. She claims to see the woman many times and Mariko believes she lives there in the woods past the river. Though the woman invites Mariko, She does not follow her. That woman could be a fictional embodiment of her fear. Mariko only sees darkness for her future

in America and even after her mother's constant persuading, she is not ready to go. The haunting past cannot leave Mariko and she can't be at calm with the thought of moving America with Frank, who is Sachiko's boyfriend. Mariko considers him to be a pig. That is why the upset Mariko always runs away from home to the river or woods. Mariko's disruptive ways and her self-absorbed thoughts along with Sachiko's negligence towards her daughter concern the pregnant new mother Etsuko well. Mariko was once smart and a bright girl but now is detached to her mother and she always keeps missing when she is upset and dares to wander in the dark. Etsuko's friendship with Mariko- that only stayed for several months- takes toll on Etsuko's future life and it shapes her perspectives on child rearing. Through her narration Etsuko tries to take the side of Sachiko's intention for leaving but at the same time admits Mariko's disrupted character is out of the negligence of her mother.

While Keiko's old days before migration is not directly told, Etsuko hints that she was a good girl who loved and was loved back by her father. But after the migration, she could not confront the society and imbibe its culture. Keiko squeezed her life into a single room and spent her days behind the closed doors. She rarely went outside her room other than for food. Mariko too is so estranged from everyone and prefers to spend her time with animals and the wild nature. Just like Sachiko did for Mariko, Etsuko does not address the issue, and subtly neglected the idea.

The stereotyping of Keiko could be seen in the newspaper account of Keiko's suicide. The news only had two ideas, a woman hung herself and she was Japanese "as if further explanations were unnecessary"(10). The same stereotyping could be found in Niki's father's view on Keiko: "Keiko was a difficult person by nature and there was little we could do for her". He believes that Keiko had inherited her rude personality from her father. Etsuko admits that she herself did little to contradict this for it was the easy explanation that "Jiro was to blame, not us"(109).

Though daughters of the same mother, they were never sisters by heart. For Keiko's funeral also, Niki didn't come. This time she came to Etsuko-as Etsuko deciphers-is to reassure Etsuko that she was not responsible for Keiko's death. Niki was loved by her father and she returned the love. Paradoxically it is Etsuko who rejected the idea of naming her English born daughter a Japanese name. But Niki's father loved to have a Japanese name for his daughter. This may be because, that he loved the idea of engraving his benevolent past deeds and acts

Niki's mind is also unstable. She thinks herself as an English person and even still, an untold hesitation towards her ethnic identity is always there. Until later in her life, she did not like it personally to say a child of a Japanese mother. But now, there is a chance of some glorification always associated with her parent's history. Niki's father considered Jiro, Etsuko's former husband, as an arrogant and self-centred person and he put always Jiro to blame for Keiko's bad conduct. While Niki grown up and became a happy confident young woman, Keiko had a reverse growth and went increasingly miserable. She did not get affection or concern from her family including her own mother. Niki always counted Keiko as an outsider. She says : "she was never a part of our lives-not mine or dad's anyway"(109). Niki considers her father as a super hero who saved her mother from the mouth of a patriarchal husband and oppressing society. But for Etsuko, it may not be true. She had a great hope for Keiko, and she never thought that Keiko would wither like this.

Though it may seem that Niki is of the London's young generation, a close reading suggests deeply hidden feelings of Niki as a half Japanese descent. She does not have any feeling for Japan. She is immersed in the legacy of her father's benevolent act of marrying her mother. What she goes through during the visit is mainly her father's published articles on newspaper. She says she hates to have children because she considers children and motherhood as a baggage. Her life in London is not made known to her mother. Whenever she talks with her mother, she mindfully insulates her London life. Niki goes with the same tight suit that she wore when she came from London. Her visit can be seen as a ritualistic one and she seems hesitant to acknowledge her past life with Keiko. She leaves just as the same person who came in. This image implies that she is in a certain form of disguise or camouflaging to make herself included in the society. Fear of isolation or abandonment is there in the mind of Niki too.

Conclusion

In A Pale View of Hills, Migration is a two headed thing. While both Sachiko and Etsuko wished for progress for them and their daughters, what they get in the end is the other. At one stage Sachiko and Mariko leaves the story and becomes Etsuko and Keiko respectively. Etsuko, middle aged, widowed, left by her daughters; one by death and other by relocation is destined to live all alone and there is nothing left for her to do other than just sitting and getting old. Etsuko, is hundred per cent aware of the misdeed she had done once. But what she does is beating around the bush. There is no power left in her psyche to

confront her situation. She tells her story setting aside the disturbing thoughts as a part of history. The more she tries to forget, the more comes out. ‘The girl on the swing’ who appeared many times in Etsuko’s dreams, is an example for the tormented mind. The girl is on the swing. Swing between the two ends, migrating from one place to other, not staying anywhere and finding nowhere to rest.

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