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(Story)telling Memories for (Re)Construction of Identity in Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*

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Abstract:

In this paper, the researcher will investigate how art and memory operate in the (re)construction of identity for artist protagonists in Kazuo Ishiguro's An Artist of the Floating World (1986) and Chaim Potok's My Name is Asher Lev (1972) through an examination of the role of language in literary narratives. The researcher will show how art functions as an escape for them in times of political and cultural upheaval, namely the Second World War and the orthodoxy of Hasidic Judaism and how narrating memories and experiences—as Kristeva proposes— gives meaning to life. Instead of focusing on the trope of the 'unreliable' narrator in postmodern fiction to understand the 'reliability' of characters' memories. The study attempts to understand how their unique, subjective experiences and memories have been narrativised through the medium of language. Bakhtin's conception of the "wholeness" of an aesthetic experience which demands the dialogical relation between art, the artist and the reader will be taken up to understand the "polyphony" of meaning that emerge in the creation of art.

Keywords: Memory, Artist, Identity, Desire, Narrativisation.

Introduction

The renowned academician, Andreas Huyssen, pronounced in 2000 that memory has emerged as a key issue in Western societies with a tendency towards revisiting the past instead of the earlier trend of looking into the future and this is characterized by the resurgence of museums, monuments, and memorials as aesthetic forms to understand the culture and politics of the past. (21) Whitehead in her *Memory (The New Critical Idiom)* published in 2009 writes, "Memory, then, is historically conditioned; it is not simply handed down in timeless form from generation to

generation, but bears the impress or stamp of its own time and culture" (4). King describes memory as "the means by which the relationship between the event and its reconstruction is negotiated" (8).

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, which revolve around the leitmotivs of trauma, love, loss, regret, and death can be identified as a precursor to the 'memory boom' of the 90s. Ishiguro uses memory both as a narrative style and as a technique in almost all his novels, where his narrators indulge in the reconstitution of their identities. James asserts that "identities are not discovered, but rather actively constructed by individuals," (qtd. in King 7) where "the 'self' constructs and is constructed by this double process of remembering and representing" (7).

Set in the backdrop of the aftermath of the Second World War, *An Artist of the Floating World* traces the life of a retired Japanese artist, Masuji Ono, who frequently looks back into his guilt-ridden past. The stalwart artist had committed much of his artistic profession to producing World War II propaganda posters and paintings, thereby abetting the Japanese war effort.

Similarly, the Jewish-American writer, Chaim Potok, who grew up in Brooklyn, crafts his novels around the theme of the clash between Jewish tradition and American culture through a focus on themes such as culture, religion, community, and identity. For their assimilation into American society, the Jewish immigrants had to either entirely give up their religion and cultural identity or downplay them so as to fit in with American culture (Hamner 2-3).

Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* depicts the life of a young Hasidic Jew, who struggles against the orthodoxy of his religious sect to pursue his artistic inclinations. But this conflict aggravates when his devout father urges him to relinquish this "foolish" activity of drawing, thereby leading to a separation between the father and son. As he matures, Asher develops a need to express his feelings and emotions through his creations. As the novel progresses, we witness Asher adopting a life that is antithetical to his Ladover sect because his two colliding worlds of art and community cannot coexist, thereby leading him to choose art over everything else in his life.

Understanding *Beingness* and Context

It is vital to bear in mind that the function of literature is not to ascertain or recover facts or figures related to a particular event or to represent an actual reality 'objectively' but rather to understand the *beingness* of life that literature captures through its narratives of particular

experiences of individuals caught up in particular contexts (Sayeed, "Being Seen" 33). As Sayeed argues, Humanities—and by extension literature—as a discipline does not aim to acquire "knowledge" but rather gain an "understanding" ("Note on Understanding" 120) of the *beingness* of life through "an effort to perceive the *being* of reality" ("Being Seen" 34). For him, this is what distinguishes the *telos* in the Sciences and in the Humanities. In literature, we are engaged in a non-thetic reading where things are not understood 'objectively' but rather as being experiential and subjective, lending possibilities for multiple interpretations ("Being Seen" 29).

In this novel too, as in the case of his other novels such as *A Pale View of Hills, The Remains of the Day,* and *When We Were Orphans,* where Ishiguro focuses on the victims of the Hiroshima Nagasaki disasters, the Holocaust and the Sino-Japanese Wars, respectively, he attempts to perceive the impact of the war on both British and Japanese subjects. His neutral stance across his novels—often read as a manifestation of his own ambivalent identity—highlight his primary preoccupation with the havocs of war on the people rather than focusing on the politics behind it. However, it cannot be denied that his novels, each dealing with an individual character have a universal appeal because of their contextualization within a historical, social, cultural, and political setting imploring readers to understand and interpret accordingly.

Through Ono's individualized or personal memory of events, Ishiguro through his novel is also able to portray the larger context of Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War. Although the idea of equating this context with the actual historical facts and 'reality' must be avoided owing to the narrative being a fictional one, an understanding of what Bakhtin terms as "chronotope" or the spatio-temporal aspect must also be taken up in our attempt to understand the characters' experiences and memories. In literature, it is language that makes particular contexts visible to the readers. The emphasis here is on the experiential aspect of language rather than the linguistic one. The idea of fiction is not to render an account of real-world 'events' but to offer an insight into particular experiences of characters caught up in particular situations and to understand the existential condition or *beingness* through an understanding of "intersubjective" experiences.

Art vs Politics/Art vs Religion

The title of Ishiguro's novel can be understood in relation to Japanese art and history. The "floating world" of his novel refers to ephemeral moments and pleasurable things such as drink and entertainments of night life that disappear with the morning light. It is also a literal translation

of the Japanese word *Ukiyo-e*, which signifies the Japanese art of painting and wood-block printing. According to the renowned scholar David Waterhouse, *Ukiyo* could either mean "floating world" or "sad troublesome world" while the *–e* refers to the picture[s]. The subjects of the *Ukiyo-e* are generally beautiful women such as courtesans and geisha, kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers, scenes from legends and folk tales, flora and fauna, travel scenes and landscapes, and *Shunga* (literally, "spring picture") and they were produced for around 250 years during a period of peace and stability in Japan from the Edo period (1603) to the Meiji period (1912) (Waldman and Frazer). The term "floating world" referred to the new and changing economy and social aspirations of the ordinary folk of the Edo period.

In Ishiguro's novel, the retired Ono looks back on his long career that he spent as a traditional *Ukiyo-e* painter. Though he was trained as a decadent artist who captures the "floating world" of night-time, he breaks free from this traditional form of art during the "China crisis" in the 30s to develop a more patriotic and propaganda art form, thereby tracing Ono's shift from changing tradition to modernity in terms of his vocation too (McCrum).

In Potok's novel, Asher's identity as a Jew and as an artist are conflicting in nature as creating art in Jewish tradition is considered as "making a graven image" as a consequence of which an artist is believed to be violating one of the Ten Commandments (3). For the Jews, the idea of image making—and thereby art—was considered blasphemous. However, Asher paints various images such as those of Stalin, crucifixion of his mother and nudes of females, all of which violate the Jewish belief system, thereby making him an apostate of his community, which is how he describes himself, "My name is Asher Lev... I am a traitor, an apostate, a self-hater, an inflictor of shame upon my family, my friends, my people; also, I am a mocker of ideas sacred to Christians, a blasphemous manipulator of modes and forms revered by Gentiles for two thousand years" (9).

Throughout the novel, the father, Mr Aryeh Lev is portrayed as an antagonist figure, who curbs the artistic freedom of his son. However, it must be noted that Aryeh's reprimand is a result of his religious fervor. Aryeh believes that Asher's paintings of Jesus are a betrayal of the Jewish community as for them Jesus is an important factor behind the destruction of their community by others. Asher understands his father's religiosity and depicts this in the portraits he creates of his father. Asher writes:

> I drew my memory of him praying in our synagogue on Shabbos, garbed in his prayer shawl, only his red beard visible. I drew my memory of him weeping on Yom Kippur as he chanted the prayer describing the slaughter of the ten great sages by the Romans. I would stand close to him in the white sanctity beneath the prayer shawl and I would see him cry as if the killing were taking place before his eyes (113).

The colour red is symbolic of the Jewish tradition, which considers the Torah as the "blood" of the cosmic world, thereby leading to their adoption of the red colour for the *kabbalah* bracelets (red string worn for protection against the "evil eye"). Similarly, the Jewish custom of sporting beards is rooted in the Biblical passage from the book of Leviticus that prohibits shaving or "destroying" beards— "You shall not round off the side-growth on your head, or destroy the side-growth of your beard." In the novel, Jacob Kahn frequently remarks on Asher's side locks and earlocks (*payos*), which function as a symbol of Asher's feelings towards his religion and art. Asher is aware of this as he creates a self-portrait and observes, "One afternoon, I painted a portrait of myself in my fisherman's cap, with my long red earlocks and tufts of red hair on my cheeks and chin and eyes dark but flecked with tiny spots of light. I looked at the portrait and I tucked my earlocks behind my ears" (255), with the tucking of his earlocks behind the ears suggesting his attempt to separate himself from his community through an assertion of his identity.

In the novel, Asher also describes the Jewish sentiment of a shared identity that takes precedence over their individual personal identities— "All the Jewish people are one body and one soul, he believed. If one part of the body hurts, the entire body hurts— and the entire body must come to the help of the part that hurts" (132). Later, he realizes that "Every great artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a 'universal' without patriotism, without home, who has found his people everywhere" (203).

Asher is often haunted by dreams of his mythic ancestor, who remains a constant reminder of past and he keeps revisiting Asher in his dreams at various significant stages when he feels Asher is not honouring his family tradition or conforming to the societal expectations. However, in the end, we find Asher coming to terms with the reality that his actions (art) will "unbalance the world" and this reconciliation is depicted in his dream as well– "I saw my mythic ancestor. Come with me, my precious Asher. You and I will walk together through the centuries, each of us for

our separate deeds that unbalanced the world" (302). Thus, he identifies with the mythic character whom he imagines to have also "unbalance[d] the world" through his actions. Like his ancestor, he also wishes to "walk through the centuries" through his art as he seems to suggest that this imbalance is good in a way.

Art as Reconstituting Identity

The inevitable risks involved in an artist's life is depicted in the often-open-ended *Kunstlerromane* such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* where young Stephen Dedalus leaves Dublin for London to accomplish his artistic quests. Ishiguro stresses this on multiple occasions in the novel, *An Artist of the Floating World,* such as when Ono says, "A man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than the ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions (...) if one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, there is consolation -- indeed, deep satisfaction - to be gained from his observation when looking back over one's life" (Ishiguro 134) Similarly, in the scene where his master Mori-san tells Ono:

> 'It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity…But I've long since lost all such doubts, Ono,' he continued. 'When I am an old man, when I look back over my life and see I have devoted it to the task of capturing the unique beauty of that world, I believe I will be well satisfied. And no man will make me believe I've wasted my time' (150)

and yet again when Ono admits:

> We have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in the best of faith. Of course, we took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness; but this is surely preferable to never putting one's convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage (201-02).

In Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* too, we witness an ending that suggests Asher's exile from his land and community in order to execute his artistic goals, which the novel overtly divulges through Asher's reading of *The Art of Spirit,* a book his mother gives him that says "Every artist is a man who has freed himself from his family, his nation, his race. Every man who has shown the world the way to beauty, to true culture, has been a rebel, a 'universal' without patriotism,

without home, who has found his people everywhere" (Potok 203). The perseverance of an artist to succeed is what makes him different from others, something that Asher learns as he comes across Robert Henri's works, where he says, "You can do anything you want to do. What is rare is this actual wanting to do a specific thing: wanting it so much that you are practically blind to all other things, that nothing else will satisfy you" (178). During his confinement within the apartment in Paris, he discloses, "Away from my world, alone in an apartment that offered me neither memories nor roots, I began to find old and distant memories of my own, long buried by pain and time and slowly brought to the surface now…Now I would have to paint the street that could not be seen" (281). Artists throughout history have produced their artwork only after a careful distance from the place or event. The paintings that surface out of these reflections in solitude are the crucifixions, which become both his artistic masterpieces as well as the catalysts in the foreseeable detachment from parents and community.

Asher's mentor, Jacob Kahn who becomes a father figure explains to him, "This is a tradition, it is a religion, Asher Lev" and goes on to state, "In the entire history of European art, there has not been a single religious Jew who was a great painter" (212). The tension between religion or faith and art that Asher is confronted with is reminiscent of Stephen's dilemma in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Art can be identified as a means for *catharsis* and religion consists of a suppression of one's pleasures and urges, thereby suggesting art to be antithetical to religious beliefs.

The idea of aesthetic "wholeness" with regard to the relation between the artist and his art can be understood in relation to Bakhtin's essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" where he rejects the traditional view of equating the author—generally considered the sole creator of a literary work—with his hero or protagonist. He proposes a more nuanced understanding of the relation by stressing on the dialogical interplay between all active participants, that is, the author, his hero—that is, the protagonist—and the reader in the aesthetic process of creating or giving "wholeness" to a text (139). Like Barthes emphasizes textuality in his "From Work to Text" and "S/Z," Bakhtin too rejects the conventional notion of an authoritarian interpretation based on the author's life that limits the "polyphony" or multiplicity of meanings that literature offers in the 'event' of reading as an encounter between a text and its reader. For Bakhtin, the hero has an independent consciousness that is separate from its author's life and thoughts and thereby a mere

psychoanalytical reading of the work of art being an extension of the artists' feelings is to be rejected in understanding the "wholeness" of an aesthetic experience (243).

While at one level, the paintings of Ono and Asher can be seen as the artist protagonists' aesthetic creations, which are not mere reflections of their thoughts and feelings but include aspects that are created in the aesthetic process, the two first-person narratives can also be read as being aesthetic creations at another level where language becomes a medium of expression for the two *Kunstlerromane* protagonists. At both the levels—that of the paintings and narratives—there are dialogical relations between the author, his hero/creation and the viewer/reader that enriches the aesthetic experience of both the art of painting and writing to create new and distinct voices in the process of interpretation. It is ultimately these dialogical relations that provide "wholeness" to an aesthetic object.

Desire to Tell Stories

Ono's paintings function as attempts of *catharsis* to some extent by showing the ability of art as a medium of expression. His shift from Takeda's art for commercial purpose to the motto of 'art for art's sake' encouraged by Moriyami to finally producing art for propaganda reflects his own internal feelings regarding the function of art. The age-old tradition of storytelling can be traced back to the ancient myths, which consist of recurring mythic figures and idioms, as identified by Claude Levi-Strauss (Kearney 54). Subsequently, the historic evolution of ancient myths and its split into historical and fiction, with the former claiming to present things 'as' they actually happened (*historia rerum gestarum)* while the latter presented things 'as if' they had happened (57).

Silvia Caporale Bizzini notes that Ishiguro's employment of narrators as storytellers in both Benjaminian and Arendtian sense links the construction of identity by the narrator to a fragmented memory route as a channel for the characters to recover from a phantasmal past (66). Eva De Valk notes, "Arendt and Benjamin tried to do justice to the past, as well as to connect the past to the present in meaningful ways…but while Benjamin's emphasis is on redressing wrongs and (ultimately) hopes for Messianic redemption, Arendt sees the past as 'a network of possibilities'" (qtd in Bizzini 66). Thus, while the German philosopher, Walter Benjamin stresses on the origin of storytelling in death, suffering, feelings of homelessness and displacement, and the simultaneous function of it as a solution to overcome such feelings, the political philosopher,

Hannah Arendt in her book, *The Human Condition* (1958), posits storytelling as the juncture of personal life and public performance. Ishiguro himself in an interview declares his storytelling as a technique used by a community or an individual to bridge the past and present so as to move forward (Matthews 117).

As Kelly Oliver notes in her reading of Kristeva's *Tales of Love*, love becomes the nexus in the relationship human beings have with finding meaning in life and constructing narratives through language:

> Our lives have meaning for us, we have a sense of ourselves, through the narratives we prepare to tell others about our experience. Even if we do not tell our stories, we live our experience through the stories that we construct in order to "tell ourselves" to another, a loved one. As we wander through our days, an event takes on its significance in the narrative that we construct for an imaginary conversation with a loved one as we are living it. The living body is a loving body, and the loving body is a speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking corpses. Love is essential to the living body, and it is essential in bringing the living body to life in language (32).

Thus, both paintings and narratives serve as outlets for the expression of their inner thoughts and feelings through the mediums of art and language.

For Ono, storytelling becomes not only a technique of coping with the loss and trauma of past but also as the manifestation of a desire to articulate the feelings of a nostalgic past. He constantly consoles himself regarding his past actions with statements such as "In any case, there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them" (125), "…there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one's life" (124-25), and "A man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than the ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions (...) if one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, there is consolation— indeed, deep satisfaction—to be gained from his observation when looking back over one's life" (134).

Ishiguro deftly handles the issues of people who "have done what they later regret" and also the question of "how they come to terms with it" (qtd. in Dalrymple 5). Dalrymple observes that in his novels, *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World,* which are rendered in the style of diary entries, "the two narrators find themselves searching their past for consolation from –and explanation for– a present world which has rendered them obsolete" (2). Ono attempts to maintain his dignity to the reader as well as himself through his version of his past. Unable to seek a sympathizer around him, his narratives give him the sense that someone—anyone—who understands him is listening to him. This desire of the human being, who is also a "speaking body"—as Kristeva notes—is what urges him to indulge in narrating his feelings (193). Here, the emphasis does not lie on *what* the memories are and whether they are true or reliable but rather on Ono's desire to both express and be heard by someone outside of himself.

In Potok's novel, too, Asher relies on his paintings at one level and his first-person account of his life—the novel—at another level as mediums for the articulation of his feelings. It can be observed that the act of painting is most often an unconscious and natural activity for Asher. For example, when Asher recalls, "Once I woke in the morning and found I had drawn on the wall near my bed a picture in red crayon of my mythic ancestor. To this day I do not know how I did that picture" (141) and yet again when he is at school, "I watched my fingers trembling on top of the notebook. I put my hands under my thighs. I could feel them trembling. A while later, I opened the notebook and looked again at the page. I had drawn a picture of Stalin dead in his coffin (90). Later, when he is summoned to the mashpia's office, he "continues to draw until he no longer knew what [he] was drawing" (122). Asher observes again his unawareness while drawing when he says, "in an unguarded moment at the Shabbos table, I had without thinking begun to use the fork again as a drawing instrument" (154).

Similarly, the realization of the quandary of his mother to reconcile the opposing interests of her husband and son makes her the subject of Asher's crucifixion painting and he says, "For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you. For the unspeakable mystery that brings good fathers and sons into the world and lets a mother watch them tear at each other's throats" (287). In the novel, we find Asher's internal dilemmas manifested in his paintings with art or his paintings becoming a medium of expression or articulation of his feelings and memories.

Likewise, the title—*My Name is Asher Lev*—is also the opening words of the book, wherein Asher, the narrator makes an "emphatic statement about identity—and, considering the name, of specifically Jewish identity" (Uffen 174). The title also becomes a leitmotif throughout the novel as Asher establishes an identity for himself beyond that which is defined by his community by creating a niche in the artistic world as "the notorious and legendary Lev of the *Brooklyn Crucifixion*" (174). He undertakes a journey to understand and resolve the contradictory aspects of his identity (as a son, a yeshiva student, and an artist). Thus, both art—or paintings—and language become mediums of expression for Asher as well.

Conclusion

Memory and art function to (re)create and assert the identity of the artist protagonists of both the *Kunstlerromane* in different ways. While Ono resorts to reconstructing a positive identity for himself in the light of external political factors such as the Japanese role in the Second World War through diary writing, Asher's artistic practice is an attempt to construct an identity that is separate and distinct from that of the members of his orthodox community and his narrative is hence a justification of this self-constructed image. However, we must realise that fiction does not attempt to understand the reliability of facts or knowledge but explores *how* a particular event is narrativised through language. Thus, both are narratives constructed out of a desire to narrate and act as a medium of expression for both the artist protagonists.

The art of storytelling or narrativizing events and memories—with art and language functioning as mediums of expression— has been employed by the artist protagonists of both the novels to attempt to constitute and reconstitute identities for themselves both in the art circles as well as in their respective communities. Thus, both first-person narratives are woven through construction of memories, recalled and expressed in the process of storytelling.

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