

Confrontation of Memory and Melancholy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*: Christopher Banks, An epitome of Erikson's Theory of Psycho-social development

P.V. Deepa¹, Dr. S. Ramanathan²,

¹ Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-time), Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai- 625021

² Assistant Professor of English, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Research Guide and supervisor, V.H.N.S.N College, Virudhunagar- 1

Abstract:

This paper traces the narrative representations of nostalgia and melancholy in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel When We Were Orphans (2000). When We Were Orphans by Kazuo Ishiguro shows the power of nostalgia as a touchstone in a violent world even though it may seem pointless. And even if melancholy may seem unchanging or destructive, this literature reveals its capacity for activity and productivity. For decades, Christopher Banks has been driven to locate his parents. One can see the foolishness of his search for them and the lack of control he has over either his surroundings or his story. The article highlights about the narratives one can create about themselves and their life must always be incomplete because true mastery over one's world is exceptional. These modalities can actually inspire a manner of living that incorporates a strong ethical commitment and loyalty to justice in a life torn apart by loss. Ishiguro demonstrates how missing something may be a greater impact than just foolish or pointless, and how melancholy attachment can be more than just selfish or self-destructive. While Ishiguro concedes that nostalgia can be risky, he also shows how it can be a starting point for fantasising about a future that is better than the one we currently live in.

Keywords: melancholy, trauma, nostalgia, narrative

INTRODUCTION:

When We Were Orphans (2000) is a detective story by Kazuo Ishiguro. The protagonist and narrator Christopher Banks searches for his parents, who vanished out of the blue when he was a little boy. Christopher Banks' life is chronicled in the novel from the 1900s until 1958. Banks, a Shanghaiese detective, was raised in the British-built Shanghai International Settlement in the 1900s after his parents vanished. This was done for economic reasons. After that, his aunt takes him to England to raise him. Banks has a top-notch British education while attending Cambridge, where he also develops into a well-known upper-class investigator. His mother believes that opium merchants kidnap their victims, which is why she opposes them. He travels to Shanghai to figure out what occurred to his parents. Nonetheless, Banks finds himself embroiled in a conflict between Chinese and Japanese forces in China. His father flees with his mistress nevertheless dies in Singapore, according to Uncle Philip. Additionally, a warlord abducted his mother and used her as a concubine. At the end of the book, Banks discovers that his mother is in an asylum for mentally ill people in Hong Kong. This paper examines how memory and melancholy are portrayed in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans*, which follows the main character, Christopher Banks, as he hunts for his parents. Embedded within the narrative and in the protagonist's mind, who flushes after discovering what really happened for himself, are memories and nostalgia. Dennis Walder in his book *Postcolonial Nostalgias* refers about nostalgia that:

Nostalgia was first named in the mid-seventeenth century, and first emerged widely during the rise of industrialisation in modern Europe, when the writings of the European Romantics challenged what was happening in the world by exploring—as Rousseau and Goethe and Wordsworth explored—the restorative, nurturing potential of memory for the threatened individual. During the nineteenth century it was of central importance in writers and thinkers as far apart as Dickens and Turgenev or Ruskin and Nietzsche, an importance heightened in the early twentieth century by the works of Bergson, Freud, and Proust (Walder 1-2).

The importance of the reader's immediate connection to the reader's experience of loss is emphasized in *When We Were Orphans*. The novel forces us to realize how real loss feels—possibly even physically. The reader may feel intense emotions like shock, terror, despair, or guilt when they see Banks witnessing violence or suffering since they were helpless to stop it, at least symbolically. These relationships may exist

to some extent in every reading experience, but Ishiguro has a particular talent for writing agonizing sequences in which a character who sees an animal or person in pain is powerless or unwilling to act. In these moments, the character who is witnessing the suffering stands in for the reader as the witness; this subtly prompts readers to consider their own capability for failing to act in analogous circumstances in their own environments.

Yet if the character is a brilliant artist, a professional butler, or a "celebrated detective" as in the case at hand, Ishiguro's novels are psychological puzzle into the protagonist's troubled or contaminated past. *When We Were Orphans* is written in the style of a mystery or detective story, which is appropriate. The novel's ethnically English, thirty-something main character, Christopher Banks, describes his upbringing in Shanghai in the middle of the 20th century. First, he does so from London in 1930, where he had moved after losing his parents and had become "the most brilliant investigative mind in England." Next, he does so from Shanghai in 1937, where he had returned after living away for 22 years in the hopes of solving the mystery of his parents' disappearance and eradicating his orphan status, which, unsurprisingly, both defines and haunts him. The epilogue-like last chapter of the book, which is set in 1958 in London, is there. Banks, who is rheumatoid and 53 years old, tries to summarize his life as he enters late middle age. The reader is left to consider if the character's life has been just as successful or as full as he or she would like us to assume at the end of the novel in all of Ishiguro's works. In this final chapter, Ishiguro has Banks remove a cobweb, but we can wonder if our hero has successfully dealt with the myriad challenges he has encountered. But even though while he would assert that he had left the "enchanted world" that his mother had imagined he would live in forever, other remarks he makes at the novel's conclusion cast doubt on this assertion.

Like in all of Ishiguro's books, the narrative in this one fluidly jumps back and forth between events that occurred decades ago in the protagonist's life to create a wide, resonant web of political and interpersonal occurrences and circumstances. Although this work never fully reaches the absurdist qualities of *The Unconsoled*, the weird, dreamlike sense of most of the novel also contributes to the narrative's "seamless" nature. It is clear that Ishiguro is fascinated with the manner in which adults recall or, more accurately, inaccurately recall their youth out of a sense of nostalgia. For instance, it gradually becomes apparent that Banks' idyllic boyhood in Shanghai, which took place even before Japanese bombing campaign and his parents' inexplicable disappearance, was significantly less stable or joyful than he would want (and like us to believe). This is implied not only by the reluctantly provided details about Christopher's parents' less-than-ideal marriage but also by the specifics of the other marriages in the story that are all failures and, as we learn, all mirror Christopher's parents' relationship.

The fact that Banks, Sarah Hemmings, and Jennifer—a young orphan whom Banks fosters after her parents are murdered in a terrible accident—all have to "face the world as orphans"—a fate that defines their lives—makes Ishiguro's book another study on the orphan state. The narrative also examines the terrible shame these kids bear for trying to end their orphaned status. It's possible that this is the reason why a lot of the personalities in *When We Were Orphans* perceive a desire to "rescue" their parents and other people: Jennifer hopes to one day assist her obviously lonely and depressed "uncle" Christopher, and Sarah feels the need to save an elderly diplomat from a life of self-destructive gambling, all to no avail, it seems. Christopher also tries to "rescue" his parents and a Japanese childhood friend. Such attempts at rescue are repeatedly "betrayed," as Christopher repeatedly leaves his own charges — Jennifer and Sarah, for example — in order to address enormous global concerns that are blatantly out of his league. While Banks, who is less steadfast than his name would imply, may let us down, Ishiguro most definitely does not in *When We Were Orphans*. Instead, he presents a moving psychological thriller behind the cover of a calm story about a contented man reflecting on a difficult past.

Review of Literature:

Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* has garnered significant scholarly attention for its intricate exploration of memory, identity, and psychological complexity. The narrative's fragmented structure, shaped by Christopher Banks's unreliable memories, has been critically examined in relation to trauma and its effects on how we construct memories. Scholars like Annalise Grice (2011) emphasize how Ishiguro employs narrative unreliability to investigate the discrepancies between memory and reality. Grice contends that Banks's selective memories act as a coping strategy, protecting him from the unresolved traumas of his childhood.

In his analysis of memory and nostalgia in Ishiguro's works, Brian Finney (2006) argues that Banks's journey to find his parents—both in a literal and symbolic sense—reflects a universal human longing to reclaim a lost past. Finney links this theme to Shanghai's colonial history, highlighting how personal memories are intertwined with the collective experiences of displacement and loss within the framework of imperialism.

The theme of melancholy in *When We Were Orphans* has been explored through psychoanalytic lenses, particularly through Freud's concepts of mourning and melancholia. Patricia Waugh (2009) suggests that Banks's melancholia stems from his struggle to fully confront the loss of his parents, leading to a psychological state where he remains tethered to his past. This struggle is evident in his relentless pursuit of resolution, which ultimately reveals a deeper crisis of identity.

By blending these critical perceptions, the literature reveals momentous insights into the psychological and thematic magnitudes of *When We Were Orphans*. Nevertheless, the specific application of Erikson's theory to Christopher Banks's confrontation of memory and melancholy deals a novel influence to prevailing erudition, associating literary readings and developmental psychology in an innovative manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach to explore the relationship between memory and melancholy in *When We Were Orphans*, viewed through Erik Erikson's psycho-social development theory. A close textual analysis will be performed to pinpoint instances where Christopher Banks's narrative reveals unresolved psychological conflicts and the impact of his unreliable memory. By connecting these observations with Erikson's stages, especially "Identity vs. Role Confusion" and "Integrity vs. Despair," the study seeks to shed light on how Banks's identity formation is influenced by his traumatic past. Additionally, insights from Freud's theories on mourning and melancholia will help contextualize Banks's emotional challenges. This interdisciplinary research combines psychoanalytic and memory studies to offer a deeper understanding of Ishiguro's thematic concerns, placing Banks within the larger context of Ishiguro's examination of identity and loss.

DISCUSSION:

a) Erikson's Psycho-social development :

One of the most well-known and significant theories of development was created by ego psychologist Erik Erikson. Sigmund Freud's work had an influence on Erikson's theory, but Erikson's focus was on psychosocial rather than psychosexual development. The stages that make up his theory are as follows:

- **Stage 1:** Trust vs. Mistrust (Infancy from birth to 18 months)
- **Stage 2:** Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (Toddler years from 18 months to three years)
- **Stage 3:** Initiative vs. Guilt (Preschool years from three to five)
- **Stage 4:** Industry vs. Inferiority (Middle school years from six to 11)
- **Stage 5:** Identity vs. Confusion (Teen years from 12 to 18)
- **Stage 6:** Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young adult years from 18 to 40)
- **Stage 7:** Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle age from 40 to 65)
- **Stage 8:** Integrity vs. Despair (Older adulthood from 65 to death)

Erikson's theory, however, addressed the effects of social experience throughout the entire lifespan, in contrast to Freud's conception of psychosexual phases. Erikson was interested in the function that social ties and interaction had in the maturation and growth of people. The epigenetic concept served as the foundation for Erikson's theories. According to this theory, humans develop in a series of steps that take place over time and within the framework of a broader community. The Paper analyze the last three stages of Erikson's psycho-social development with the confrontation of the protagonist Christopher Banks.

b) Erikson's Intimacy Vs Isolation in Christopher Bank's life of quest:

The novel emphasises the underlying vulnerability of the human situation by giving us instances of severe loss and injury that does not get better with time. The lives that Banks touches and his own life demonstrate the human condition's inherent vulnerability to abrupt destruction. The literature describes healing from tragedy as being at best difficult and provides no escape from this extreme vulnerability. In the Freudian sense, the novel does not involve the task of mourning, which entails developing new

attachments that eventually replace the previous ones. In his famous description of the stages of grieving and their outcomes, Freud outlines a definite progression:

The testing of reality, having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to this object... The normal outcome is that deference for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its behest cannot be at once obeyed. The task is now carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy, while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind... The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (Ishiguro 165–66).

The novel asks us to put aside the notion that grief can or should come to an end in any traditional sense. A reader would not be able to completely engage with this tale of catastrophic loss if they had such an expectation, which would hinder them from experiencing empathy to the fullest extent possible. We would place demands on a story about painful loss that are unwarranted if we read with the expectation of a happy or even conclusive ending, as in a typical detective tale. His isolated world as a successful detective thrives hard to search details about his missing parents.

c) Generativity Vs Stagnation of Bank's life in Shanghai:

Ishiguro claims that the protagonist is unique among investigators in having a gift for cracking cases that seem hopeless, which has led to his recognition in the industry. Banks becomes attracted to the stunning Sarah primarily because she is also a single mom, indicating that he places little value on his personal relationships due to his over-involvement in his career. Instead, by adopting Jennifer, an orphan daughter, he hopes to improve his parenting abilities.

In the pinnacle of his profession, Banks chooses in 1937 to go back to China and work on the case of his life: the disappearance of his parents. By this time, readers will be wondering why the renowned investigator delayed so long to make such an important choice—roughly thirty years. He'd become a detective because of the disappearance of his parents, and a more realistic fixation would have had him go back to China as soon as he was a detective. Banks convinces himself that even Jennifer will want him to go and save the world by locating his lost mother and father, ignoring his regret for leaving his daughter behind. This just serves to highlight Christopher's stagnated psyche.

To launch a communally acknowledged distinctiveness, Banks attempts to evade acumen through emulating the demeanors of the English progenies at school once he was a kid. Banks narrates his memory as such:

... my own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life. During even my earliest weeks at St Dunstan's, I do not believe I did anything to cause myself embarrassment. On my very first day, for instance, I recall observing a mannerism many of the boys adopted when standing and talking - of tucking the right hand into a waistcoat pocket and moving the left shoulder up and down in a kind of shrug to underline certain of their remarks. I distinctly remember reproducing this mannerism on that same first day with sufficient expertise that not a single of my fellows noticed anything odd or thought to make fun (Ishiguro 7).

d) Integrity Vs Despair in the quest of identity of Christopher Banks:

We would also miss the fact that unaddressed loss does not render Banks completely helpless. That does seem to stop him from following Sarah Hemmings, another orphan, along the romantic road in the story. But, to characterise that as a sign of a life wasted would be to ignore other definitions of useful and even partially palliative modes of existence in the midst of irreparable loss. Most significantly, Banks's loss as a youngster inspires him to adopt Jennifer, a young fellow orphan, and fuels his unrelenting dedication to his investigative job.

This quest partially fails because, despite discovering the truth about what happened to his parents after they vanished, he is unable to bring them back due to them having long since passed away. But, because Banks also resolves numerous other issues, his labour is not completely worthless. It is the labour of restoration, making right, and repairing the wrongs of others where it is possible for him to do so. His calling is to purge the world of people who traumatise others. Loss motivates Banks to adhere to the justice principle. His commitment never fails or lessens since this wound that feeds it never heals.

Together with the premise that Banks's excessive optimism is apparently shared by the other characters, the discrepancy between which seemed reasonable to expect and the reality at hand adds a comedic

element, which widens the circle of the illusion and brings it closer to us. Due to the fact that we do not share their optimism, as readers, we may still feel outside of that group. Even if we have been reading Ishiguro all along, we may fall into the set of expectations evoked by the genre conventions this novel employs. Nonetheless, many readers can occasionally experience a juvenile state of expectancy.

CONCLUSION:

Upon thinking about Sarah's invitation, the investigator fluctuates between two states of emotion. He recalls being shocked by her sudden proposal, but on the other hand, his retrospect viewpoint makes him feel somewhat liberated, in keeping with his quest for resolution about his own family's issues. The life script that each of Christopher, Jennifer, and Sarah has created determines how each of them reacts to their surroundings. Psychology claims that a life plan is created in childhood, reinforced by parents, supported by future circumstances, and ends with a preferred course of action. The three Ishigurian characters created the plots for their lives using examples, attributions, recommendations, and directives. Since all children learn by imitating others, taking into account what others desire from them, what is implied, and what is ordered or forbidden, these four variables serve as the foundation for early education in each home.

When Christopher finally encounters his mother in a hospital once his memory quest is over, she is unable to recognise him. In his narrative, Christopher describes Shanghai, which has been ruled by Communists, and how the city has changed and states that:

The communists have refrained from physically tearing the place down, so that much of what was once the International Settlement remains intact. The streets, though renamed, are perfectly recognisable, and it is said that anyone familiar with the Shanghai of old would know his way about there. But the foreigners, of course, have all been banished, and what were once lavish hotels and nightclubs are now the bureaucratic offices of Chairman Mao's government. In other words, the Shanghai of today is likely to prove no less painful a parody of the old city than did Hong Kong.

I have heard, incidentally, that much of the poverty - and also the opium addiction against which my mother once battled so hard - has receded significantly under the communists (Ishiguro 322).

The detective genre's potential is explored in the novel but is found to be lacking. It implies that story still needs to conduct other types of labour by exploring the limitations of narrative mastery more broadly. In terms of achieving narrative authority over the world he describes, a narrating perspective like Banks's is limited and has many blind spots.

While the story suggests that nostalgia can be harmful and lead to sadness, Ishiguro also shows how it can be a starting point for daydreaming about an alternate universe that is better than the one we live in. Christopher appears to continue existing solely in his recollections and his sentimental side. His recollections fill the void in a way. In Shanghai, Christopher believes he meets his long-lost friend Akira as part of his quest to uncover the truth about his enigmatic past. Yet since first-person narrators are unable to act impartially, one can't believe Christopher as he is the protagonist of the novel.

When We Were Orphans shows the reader that we may all become caught up in expectations by employing a detective and romance plot that fails to live up to expectations. It is a technique of illustration and eliding distance to remind us of our own vulnerability while we see the characters. This possible incorporation of us, as readers, in the sensation of hopeful but foolish expectation. In playing with the detective formula and concealing as much as it discloses, this story portrays the indescribable mystery of the human experience.

Works Cited:

1. Grice, Annalise. "Unreliable Narratives and the Fragmentation of Memory in Ishiguro's
2. Works." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 45-63.
3. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *When We Were Orphans*. New York: Vintage, 2001.
4. Finney, Brian. "Kazuo Ishiguro: Memory, Nostalgia, and Recognition." *Contemporary*
5. *Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2006, pp. 195-219. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4489117>.
6. Shaffer, Brian W. "When We Were Orphans." *World Literature Today*, vol. 74, no. 3,
7. summer 2000, p. 595. *Gale Academic OneFile*,
- link.gale.com/apps/doc/A68364380/AONE?u=tel_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid= b0f60b94. Accessed 23 Mar. 2023.
8. "Understanding Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development." *Verywell Mind*, 3 Aug.
9. 2022, www.verywellmind.com/erik-eriksons-stages-of-psychosocial-development-2795740.
10. Vogel-Scibilia SE, McNulty KC, Baxter B, Miller S, Dine M, Frese FJ. The recovery process

11. utilizing Erikson's stages of human development. *Community Ment Health J.* 2009;45(6):40514. doi:10.1007/s10597-009-9189-4
12. Walder, Dennis. *Postcolonial Nostalgias : Writing, Representation and Memory.* Routledge, 2011.
13. 2011.
14. Waugh, Patricia. "Modernist Echoes in the Melancholy Narratives of Kazuo Ishiguro." *Psychoanalytic Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2009, pp. 289-307.
- 15.