

Fabricated Reality and Unreliable Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Article Received: 14/03/2026

Article Accepted: 19/04/2026

Published Online: 20/04/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.374

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* presents reality as a fragile and shifting construct shaped by memory, trauma, guilt, and self-protection. The novel centres on Etsuko, a Japanese woman who lives in England and recalls her earlier life in postwar Nagasaki after the suicide of her elder daughter, Keiko. Her narration moves between recollection and evasion, confession and concealment, and gradually reveals a consciousness that revises the past in order to endure it. This paper examines the fabrication of reality in the novel through Etsuko's unreliable memory and her projection of personal experience onto the figure of Sachiko. Sachiko emerges as more than a separate character; she serves as a displaced form of Etsuko's own fear, regret, and buried knowledge. The paper also studies the role of trauma, migration, maternal anxiety, and postwar history in the shaping of Etsuko's narrative voice. Ishiguro's novel thus presents reality as a subjective reconstruction in which memory yields an emotional truth rather than a stable account of events. Through Etsuko's fractured recollections, the novel reveals the strain between lived experience and narrated experience.

Keywords: reality, memory, trauma, distortion, unreliable narration, Kazuo Ishiguro

Introduction

Reality enters literature in many forms. At times it appears as an external order available to common perception. At other times it appears through the private consciousness of an individual who reorganizes events according to fear, desire, memory, and emotional need. In such works, reality acquires a subjective form and becomes inseparable from the mind that narrates it. Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* belongs to this second mode. The novel places its readers within the consciousness of Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman who lives in England and recalls her former life in Nagasaki. Through her recollections, Ishiguro presents a world in which memory yields fragments, substitutions, and silences rather than a stable sequence of facts. Etsuko's narrative takes shape after the death of her elder daughter, Keiko, who dies by suicide in England. This event casts its shadow across the whole novel. The narrative voice returns to Japan, to postwar Nagasaki, to marriage, motherhood, friendship, migration, and loss. Yet the remembered world never settles into full clarity. Etsuko's account carries hesitation, displacement, and emotional concealment. Her memories of Sachiko and Mariko draw particular attention because they bear strong resemblance to Etsuko's own life and to her daughters. This resemblance suggests that the story of Sachiko serves as a mediated form of self-narration through which Etsuko approaches painful material from a position of distance. This paper examines the fabrication of reality in *A Pale View of Hills*. It argues that Ishiguro builds Etsuko's narrative around fractured memory, emotional displacement, and an unstable relation between past event and present recollection. The paper studies Etsuko's unreliable memory, the function of Sachiko as a projected self, the role of trauma in shaping perception, and the significance of Nagasaki and migration in the formation of narrative identity. Through these elements, the novel presents reality as a constructed and deeply personal order.

Memory and the Subjective Nature of Reality

The novel establishes from the outset that memory stands at the centre of Etsuko's narrative. Her recollections do not arise as objective records of the past. They arise as mental returns shaped by present emotion, buried guilt, and unresolved grief. Memory in *A Pale View of Hills* therefore functions as a creative and selective faculty. It retrieves, arranges, suppresses, and redirects material according to inner pressure.

This treatment of memory gives the novel its distinctive atmosphere. Ishiguro does not present memory as a secure archive. He presents it as a site of disturbance where past

and present encounter each other under the influence of emotional strain. Etsuko herself speaks with an awareness of the instability of recollection. Her memories carry uncertainty, and this uncertainty forms part of the novel's method. The narrative voice often offers detail without full explanation and moves toward scenes that suggest more than they declare. This structure gives the reader a sense that memory in the novel serves less as documentary recall and more as a medium through which emotional truth seeks expression.

Etsuko's version of reality therefore bears the marks of subjectivity at every stage. She interprets the world through her own wounds, anxieties, and private justifications. Her mind gives shape to events, and that shaping process creates the tension at the heart of the novel. The reader senses that reality exists beyond Etsuko's narration, yet access to that reality remains filtered through her inward life. Ishiguro uses this method to place the question of truth within the structure of narration itself.

Unreliable Narration and Narrative Distance

Etsuko's voice acquires its power through restraint. She rarely speaks in a direct confessional mode. She prefers recollection, observation, suggestion, and indirection. This composure gives the narrative elegance, yet it also creates suspicion. Her account moves with calm control even when it approaches pain, and this distance indicates the presence of repression and self-protection. The novel's method depends upon this form of unreliability. Etsuko supplies information, yet the information rarely settles into transparent meaning. Her descriptions of people and places often feel precise, but that precision does not always produce certainty. Instead, it often directs attention toward what remains unstated. The gaps in her narration, together with the recurring parallels between characters, give the reader reason to question the literal surface of the story. This narrative distance also helps explain the emotional economy of the novel. Etsuko cannot approach her suffering in a direct line. Her narration moves toward the truth through detour. In this sense, unreliability in Ishiguro does not arise from mere deception. It arises from psychic pressure. Etsuko's voice carries grief, shame, and maternal regret, and these forces shape the way she tells her story. Her fabrication of reality becomes a mode of survival.

Sachiko as Projection and Displaced Selfhood

Sachiko occupies a central place in the novel's structure because she appears as both character and projection. On the surface, she is a woman Etsuko knows in Nagasaki, a mother who lives in uncertainty and pursues the hope of a future elsewhere. Yet the more

the narrative unfolds, the more Sachiko resembles an external form of Etsuko's own past, her own emotional conflicts, and her own burden of responsibility. Through this doubling, Ishiguro turns narration into a field of displacement. Sachiko's life carries striking similarities to Etsuko's. Both women stand at a threshold between Japan and another world. Both have daughters whose lives bear marks of isolation and suffering. Both confront questions of motherhood, choice, and escape. These parallels suggest that Sachiko serves as a narrative mask through which Etsuko approaches material that remains difficult to claim in her own name. The story of Sachiko gives Etsuko a way to speak while preserving a measure of emotional shelter. The relation between Mariko and Keiko strengthens this interpretive pattern. Mariko, like Keiko, appears withdrawn, troubled, and difficult to reach. Her relation to her mother carries tension, distance, and emotional fragility. Through this resemblance, Ishiguro allows the Sachiko narrative to function as a displaced account of maternal failure, anxiety, and loss. Etsuko's recollections of Sachiko thus carry the force of indirect confession. This narrative strategy gives the novel much of its depth. Etsuko does not simply invent Sachiko in a casual or decorative way. She creates a figure through whom memory can rearrange experience and make unbearable knowledge more accessible. Sachiko becomes the medium through which Etsuko can narrate her own life under another name. Fabricated reality in the novel therefore takes shape through substitution, duplication, and projection.

Trauma, Guilt, and the Need for Reconstructed Experience

Trauma provides the emotional ground upon which Etsuko's narrative stands. The novel unfolds in the aftermath of several forms of rupture: war, personal displacement, marital dissatisfaction, migration, maternal loss, and Keiko's death. These experiences leave deep impressions upon Etsuko's consciousness and influence the way she interprets her own history. The postwar setting of Nagasaki gives this trauma a historical dimension. The city carries the memory of devastation, and that atmosphere enters the emotional landscape of the novel. Nagasaki exists as more than a backdrop. It becomes a place marked by ruin, recovery, and lingering psychic disturbance. Etsuko's recollections arise from this historical space, and her private distress acquires further depth through that association. Keiko's suicide deepens the trauma and gives Etsuko's memories their urgency. This death creates the silent centre of the novel. Etsuko's mind returns to the past because the past contains the origins of a loss she continues to bear. Her narrative therefore becomes an attempt to order painful experience and to locate meaning within events that remain morally and emotionally unresolved.

Guilt also shapes her reconstruction of reality. Etsuko carries an awareness of choices that affected her daughter's life. The move from Japan to England, the fracture of family continuity, and the burdens Keiko carried in an unfamiliar cultural world all form part of this history. Etsuko's narrative seeks relief through reconfiguration. The past, once retold through another figure, appears in a form that her mind can endure. Fabricated reality thus emerges as a psychic defence and as a means of partial confession.

Nagasaki, History, and the Weight of Place

Place carries immense significance in *A Pale View of Hills*. Nagasaki appears as a city of memory, ruin, and reconstruction. It also carries personal significance for Ishiguro, whose imaginative relation to Japan informs the novel's atmosphere and detail. In Etsuko's recollection, Nagasaki exists as a place of ordinary life shaped by the long shadow of historical catastrophe. The domestic and the historical remain in close contact throughout the narrative. This relation between place and memory contributes to the novel's treatment of reality. Nagasaki is remembered through fragments, impressions, routines, and emotional associations. The city appears at once concrete and elusive. Etsuko recalls its people, its houses, its social codes, and its emerging postwar order, yet the city also carries the instability of remembered space. Her narrative yields a Nagasaki shaped as much by inward burden as by outward fact. The weight of history intensifies this effect. A city marked by war and destruction becomes an apt location for a narrative built upon fracture and reconstruction. Etsuko's private life unfolds within a collective history of loss.

Through this structure, Ishiguro draws a subtle relation between personal trauma and historical trauma. The damaged city and the damaged self reflect each other within the narrative frame.

Migration, Motherhood, and Divided Identity

Etsuko's movement from Japan to England introduces another major dimension to the novel: divided identity. Migration alters her relation to place, language, memory, and family. England offers a new life, yet it also deepens the distance between past and present. Etsuko occupies a position between cultural worlds, and this position influences the way she remembers herself. Her daughters embody different responses to this divided condition. Keiko remains closely tied to Japanese sensibility and suffers intensely within the unfamiliar social world of England. Her isolation and eventual death suggest the human cost of displacement and cultural dislocation. Niki, by contrast, appears more attuned to

English life and carries a more direct and questioning attitude. Through the contrast between the daughters, Ishiguro presents two generational responses to migration and identity.

Motherhood becomes the point at which these tensions gather their full emotional force. Etsuko's recollections continually return to the question of what she chose, what she permitted, and what followed from those decisions. Her position as mother carries affection, regret, defensiveness, and grief. The fabrication of reality emerges here as a maternal strategy of survival. By narrating her past through another woman, Etsuko creates distance from the accusation that her own memory seems to direct toward her. This dimension of the novel gives the Sachiko-Etsuko parallel its deepest significance. The figure of the mother who leaves, hopes, chooses, and fails to protect becomes central to the novel's emotional structure. Ishiguro uses maternal memory to examine the burden of choice and the long reach of regret.

Imagination and the Rewriting of the Past

Imagination plays a decisive role in Etsuko's narrative. It allows her to return to the past, to alter emphasis, to construct narrative counterparts, and to approach painful material through symbolic substitution. Imagination here does not function as fantasy in the ordinary sense. It functions as a narrative faculty that reorganizes lived experience into a more bearable form. This rewriting of the past reveals one of Ishiguro's central concerns: the relation between memory and self-preservation. Etsuko's mind arranges events in a pattern that permits endurance. Through Sachiko, Mariko, and the remembered scenes of Nagasaki, she creates a version of reality that carries emotional truth even when factual certainty remains unstable. The novel therefore places great value on the difference between literal truth and psychological truth. Etsuko may alter the narrative surface, yet the deeper emotional burden remains legible. The fabricated reality of the novel thus acquires both ethical and aesthetic significance. It reveals the lengths to which human consciousness may go in order to live with grief. At the same time, it gives Ishiguro a refined narrative form through which ambiguity, silence, and displacement can carry interpretive force. The reader receives the novel as an act of recollection shaped by a divided self.

Conclusion

A Pale View of Hills presents reality as a subjective reconstruction shaped by memory, trauma, guilt, and emotional need. Through Etsuko's narration, Kazuo Ishiguro

creates a fictional world in which the past survives through fragments, substitutions, and displaced forms of confession. The figure of Sachiko serves as the clearest expression of this method. She stands as an external form of Etsuko's buried experience and allows the narrative to approach painful truth through indirection. The novel's power lies in its treatment of memory as a creative and unstable force. Etsuko's recollections of Nagasaki, her daughters, her marriage, and her migration to England reveal a consciousness under pressure. Keiko's suicide gives urgency to this return to the past, and the entire narrative acquires the force of a mind seeking order within grief. Fabricated reality in the novel therefore arises from the need to endure experience that exceeds ordinary confession. Ishiguro's achievement in this novel rests in his ability to present emotional truth through ambiguity. He builds a narrative voice that remains calm, restrained, and elusive, yet full of hidden intensity. Through that voice, *A Pale View of Hills* becomes a profound study of memory, identity, and the fragile boundary between lived reality and narrated reality.

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