



Unveiling Echoes: Memory Activism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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ABSTRACT

This study is to examine the idea of Alterego events experienced by character Christopher Bank, from *when we were orphans*. This novel deals with the combination of memory and activism. The characters in the novel undergo the strange holocaust due to war in Shanghai. Bank faced a lonely childhood after his attainment of adulthood, he is deliberately pushed to shift in an alterego that is been very visibly exposed. This paper concentrates on two typical contrasting points in regards with memory. One, is explained by the combination of substantive memory with that of alterego. Second, activism is being analysed in antithetical conditions. The main purpose of this memory studies is to reconfiguration ambivalent thoughts that protagonist's and Ishiguro's reminisce with their individual understanding.

Keywords: Alterego, Substantive memory, Activism, Antithetical, commemoration and remembrance.

Introduction

Renowned for his literary fiction, British author Kazuo Ishiguro is descended from Japan. Though he migrated to England at an early age, he was born in Nagasaki, Japan on November 8, 1954. Many of Ishiguro's novels, which tackle themes of memory, identity, and the human condition, are well known for being intelligent and exquisitely written. His book *When We Were Orphans* was initially released in 2000. This piece delves into the subjects of recollection, selfhood, and the influence of past occurrences on personal experiences. Ishiguro's writing is characterized by its subtlety, introspection, and deep exploration of his character inner lives. He has received numerous awards and honours for his contributions to literature and is considered one of the most respected contemporary authors. The narrative, which takes place in Shanghai, China in the early 20th century, centres on the life of English detective Christopher Banks, who returns to the city as an adult to unravel a personal mystery.

The novel is structured as a first-person narrative, with Christopher Banks reflecting on his childhood in the International Settlement of Shanghai and his experiences growing up in a society marked by British colonialism and the complex relationships between East and West. He becomes obsessed with solving the mystery of his parents' disappearance, which occurred when he was a child, and his memories of that event are hazy and fragmented. As Christopher delves into his past and the mysteries surrounding his parents, the novel explores themes of memory, the unreliability of recollection, and the subjective nature of truth. It also delves into the consequences of individual quests for truth and the broader historical backdrop of the early 20th century, including the Sino-Japanese War and the impact of colonialism. *When We Were Orphans* is known for its complex narrative structure and the way it blurs the boundaries between reality, memory, and fiction. It's a thought-provoking and intricate work that invites readers to ponder the intricacies of human memory and the mysteries of the past. Like much of Ishiguro's work, it has been praised for its literary depth and its ability to delve into the psychological and emotional lives of its characters.

"It was indeed a concept that fascinated me, this notion that he was in some mysterious way connected to various of the higher walks of life, even though he looked and behaved no differently from the rest of us. However, I cannot imagine I 'mercilessly interrogated' him as he had claimed. It is true the subject was something I thought about a lot when I was fourteen or fifteen, but Osbourne and I had not been especially close at school and, as far as I remember, I only once brought it up with him personally" (WWWO 5).

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An alter ego with substantive memory, in a literary or psychological context, typically refers to a character or persona within an individual that possesses a distinct set of memories and experiences from the individual's primary self. This concept is often explored in literature and psychology to delve into the complexities of identity, memory, and the human psyche. Ishiguro sometimes create characters or alter egos that embody different aspects of the protagonist's personality or represent suppressed desires, fears, or experiences. These alter egos may have their own distinct memories and may even engage in dialogue or interaction with the primary character. This technique is often used to explore the duality of human nature and to delve into the subconscious mind.

"For gradually, from behind his cheerful anecdotes, there was emerging a picture of myself on that voyage to which I took exception. His repeated insinuation was that I had gone about the ship withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing. No doubt the colonel had an investment in giving himself the role of an heroic guardian, and after all this time, I saw it was as pointless as it was unkind to contradict him. But as I say, I began to grow steadily more irritated" (*WWWO* 27).

The protagonist, Christopher Banks, does not have a traditional alter ego with substantive memory as one might find in a conventional sense of a doppelganger or split personality. However, the novel does explore the concept of fragmented memory and the way Christopher's own understanding of his past and identity is shaped by the memories he has, or lacks. The novel is known for its complex narrative structure and the blurred boundaries between memory, reality, and fiction. Christopher Bank's memories of his childhood, particularly his parents' disappearance when he was a child in Shanghai, are central to the story. However, these memories are often incomplete, elusive, and unreliable. Christopher's quest to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance is also a quest to understand his own past and identity.

As the story unfolds, Christopher's understanding of his own memories and the events of his childhood are constantly challenged, and he grapples with the idea that his recollections might not be entirely accurate. This internal struggle with memory and identity is a key aspect of the novel. It's not so much that Christopher has a separate alter ego with substantive memory, but rather, his own character represents the complexity of memory, self-discovery, and the elusive nature of the past. The novel invites readers to question the reliability of their own memories and the stories they construct about their own lives. Information that is rehearsed and encoded in short-term memory can be transferred to long-term memory, where it can be stored for an extended period, potentially indefinitely. Long-term memory has a virtually unlimited capacity and can store a wide range of information, including facts, experiences, and skills.

Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin are prominent American psychologists known for their significant contributions to the field of cognitive psychology, particularly their development of the Multi-Store Model of Memory. Atkinson and Shiffrin collaborated on the development of the Multi-Store Model of Memory in the late 1960s, which is one of their most well-known contributions to psychology. Their model provided a theoretical framework for understanding the different stages and processes of memory, including sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. Atkinson and Shiffrin proposed a widely recognized model of human memory known as the "Multi-Store Model of Memory". This model was introduced in 1968 by Richard Atkinson and Richard Shiffrin and has been influential in the field of cognitive psychology. According to them "The purpose of a long-term store is to provide knowledge and experience at an individualized level. If you spent time memorizing your multiplication tables as a child, then recalling that information is evidence of long-term storage and "data copying" to short-term storage to "display" that data when needed".

Christopher Banks doesn't have a traditional alter ego in the way we might see in other works of fiction, he undergoes a complex psychological journey that raises questions about his true self and his understanding of the world. The novel's narrative style and Christopher's introspective musings contribute to the sense of ambiguity and self-reflection. The novel can be seen as a meditation on memory, perception, and the construction of one's own identity, which are themes that often intersect with the concept of an alter ego in literature. While the term "alter ego" may not be explicitly used, the novel's exploration of these themes provides a rich and thought-provoking reading experience. When it comes to Antithetical conditions the novel explores the stark contrast between Christopher Banks' childhood memories and his life as an adult. His experiences as a child in Shanghai are filled with mystery and innocence, whereas his adulthood as a detective is characterized by rationality and a relentless pursuit of truth. Christopher Banks grapples with the boundary between reality and his imaginative constructs. His memories and perceptions of the past become blurred, making it difficult for him to distinguish between what truly happened and what he has constructed in his mind. It delves into the unreliability of memory and the struggle to remember the past accurately. Christopher's quest to uncover his childhood memories is juxtaposed with the difficulty of retaining them over time.

Individual activism is very visible where the novel doesn't directly deal with social or political activism, it does explore themes related to the act of seeking truth, uncovering secrets, and the pursuit of justice.

“The term ‘active memory’ in the title of this book highlights the dynamic, open character of Holocaust memories, as opposed to a reference to a past that slowly slides out of people’s minds, and that may remain a static element of history and culture without many people caring-or worrying-too much about it. The proliferation of Holocaust-related activities may even contribute to defining the events as belonging to a different place or era” (Seeberg, Levin, Lenz 2013).

The dichotomy between reality and imagination is a central theme, as Christopher grapples with the blurred lines between his memories and his constructed narratives. The reader is challenged to question what is real and what is imagined. The East and West cultural contrast reflects the complex dynamics of colonial Shanghai and the clash of cultures, which plays a role in shaping the characters’ identities and behaviour. Solitude and connection are explored through Christopher’s isolation as he pursues the truth about his parents. His quest for connection is at odds with his tendency to distance himself from others. Truth and deception are pervasive throughout the novel, highlighting the challenge of seeking truth in a world filled with ambiguity and misinformation. The unreliability of memory is a recurring theme, illustrating the difficulty of preserving the past and the impact of memory on one’s sense of self. These antithetical conditions create a tapestry of contrasting elements that contribute to the novel’s depth and complexity, ultimately challenging the reader to contemplate the malleable nature of memory and the intricate interplay of identity and perception in a world marked by contradiction. Ishiguro’s narrative invites readers to engage with the enigma of memory and the elusive quest for the truth in a thought-provoking and compelling manner.

Memory, in the novel, is not just a passive repository of the past but an active tool for activism. Christopher’s memories are the key to solving the mystery, and his ability to recall and reinterpret them is essential for his investigative work. “Memories of the Holocaust have strong bearings on contemporary settings. For instance, contesting the Holocaust is at least as much a way of engaging with present identities, events, and conditions as it is of engaging with the past (Seeberg 2016)”.

It highlights the fallibility of memory and the extent to which it can be manipulated or shaped by one’s desires and imagination. This complexity raises questions about the reliability and accuracy of one’s memories, which is particularly relevant to Christopher’s activism. He can be seen as an intellectual and moral detective who is dedicated to resolving the mystery that haunts him, and his determination can be seen as a form of personal activism in the context of the novel. His pursuit of the truth and justice drives the narrative and reflects his deep commitment to understanding and resolving the past.

Conclusion

When We Were Orphans is known for its complex narrative structure and the way it blurs the boundaries between reality, memory, and fiction. It’s a thought-provoking and intricate work that invites readers to ponder the intricacies of human memory and the mysteries of the past. Like much of Ishiguro’s work, it has been praised for its literary depth and its ability to delve into the psychological and emotional lives of its characters. The novel can be seen as a meditation on memory, perception, and the construction of one’s own identity, which are themes that often intersect with the concept of an alter ego in literature. While the term “alter ego” may not be explicitly used, the novel’s exploration of these themes provides a rich and thought-provoking reading experience. Antithetical conditions and themes contribute to the complexity and depth of the narrative, inviting readers to contemplate the nature of memory, identity, and truth in a world marked by contrasting elements. In this sense, the novel explores a form of individual activism through Christopher’s quest for answers, even though it may not align with more traditional forms of social or political activism. In future this paper can be concentrated under Individual activism, traumatic memory studies. As the story delves into the complexities of memory, identity, and the search for truth, all of which are central to Christopher’s personal journey and “activism” in solving the mystery of his parents’ disappearance.

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