INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN KAZUO ISHIKURO’S THE BURIED GIANT

Abstract: Referring to the postulates of several theoreticians in the field of memory studies, predominantly those of Maurice Halbwachs and Aleida Assmann, this paper explores the distinction between individual and collective memory, with the aim of shedding light on the complex relationship of the two contrasting yet mutually complementing mnemonic aspects in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Buried Giant. Interestingly enough, in his latest novel Ishiguro decided to approach memory from the perspective of its inevitable counterpart, i.e. forgetfulness. The objective of this paper is to highlight that forgetfulness, for all its seeming mental salubrity, does not have the same healing effect at the individual and collective level.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, memory, forgetfulness, memory studies, individual memory, collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs, war, trauma, revenge.

1. Introduction

After seven successful novels, including his latest, The Buried Giant, there is no doubt about Kazuo Ishiguro’s fascination with memory. Indeed, Ishiguro’s fiction revolves around the recurrent topics of memory, loss, love, guilt, suffering and war, although he always resorts to a different form, boldly experimenting with genres. This is the concept he applied in When We Were Orphans, where he played with the detective novel; in Never Let Me Go, when he experimented with the dystopian fiction, and now he uses it in The Buried Giant, which features a captivating combination of the Arthurian legend and epic fantasy. Characteristically for Ishiguro, however, the specific genre is employed only to provide a context, i.e. a background for a subtle, yet powerful examination of his preferred topics.
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When *The Buried Giant* was announced, the fans of epic fantasy were eager but doubtful, anticipating a typical novel of that genre. Ishiguro’s fans, on the other hand, were surprised with this unexpected departure. Yet, Ishiguro did not let the latter down: although *The Buried Giant* is set in a land of strange mythological creatures and legendary characters: Sir Gawain (which in Ishiguro’s novel resembles Don Quixote more than a knight of King Arthur), Wistan as a counterpart of Beowulf, boatmen in the style of Charon on the river Styx, ogres and dragons – the point of the novel is, quite typically, much more subtle, not to say buried.

Such a narrative pattern has earned Ishiguro the divided opinions of the literary critics. When it comes to *The Buried Giant*, in particular, some have praised Ishiguro’s boldness and, ready to forgive a few technical weaknesses, understood his desire to focus on the substance having perhaps somewhat neglected the form. According to Tom Holland (Internet) from *The Guardian*, in this novel Ishiguro has “performed his most startling and audacious adaptation of genre yet”; or, as Neil Gaiman (Internet) puts it, “Ishiguro is not afraid to tackle huge, personal themes, nor to use myths, history and the fantastic as the tools to do it”. Moreover, Alex Preston (Internet) perceives *The Buried Giant* as “a beautiful, heartbreaking book about the duty to remember and the urge to forget”. The opposite line of critics, nevertheless, sees Ishiguro’s new novel as “a misbegotten step” (Ulin, Internet), which is by all means too harsh. Though not without structural and narrative flaws, Ishiguro’s latest novel strikes the reader as layered and intriguing, somewhat melancholic and ultimately humbling.

Perhaps inspired by the fact that “modernity has a particular problem with forgetting” (Connerton 2009: 1), this time Ishiguro decided to approach memory from the perspective of its inevitable counterpart, i.e. forgetfulness. Weaving a story about an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, on a quest to find their long-lost son in the post-Arthurian, seventh-century England, Ishiguro focuses on what happens when our dearest memories are no longer within our grasp. As we follow their personal journey laden with pondering about why it is so important to remember, we become aware of another, larger-scale aspect, i.e. memory and forgetfulness of the entire community.

Referring to the postulates of several theoreticians, predominantly those of Maurice Halbwachs and Aleida Assmann, this paper will be exploring this very distinction between individual and collective memory, with the aim of shedding light on the complex relationship of the two contrasting yet mutually complementing mnemonic aspects in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Buried Giant*. 
2. Collective Memory Studies

Memory and forgetting seem to be on top of the list of priorities in today’s society, obsessively and endlessly turned towards the past. In the last thirty years or so, in particular, there has been a surge of scientific (and popular) interest in the so-called collective memory. As observed by Tijana Bajović (2012: 93), examination of collective memory is the subject of various scientific disciplines, including history, art history, anthropology, archeology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, politicology, gender studies, cultural and postcolonial studies, etc., while memory itself gets specified by means of different terms, depending on the used approach. Thus, we can discuss cultural, public, counter-, official, unofficial, political, historical memory, etc. For the sake of clarity, in this paper we will be using the following distinction: individual, i.e. personal memory, as a subject of psychology, versus collective memory, as a subject of sociology. The former is quite straightforward, designating the memory of an individual person, i.e. the recollections of his/her past life feelings and experiences, ultimately accounting for his/her identity (a point that we will keep stressing throughout the paper), whereas the latter requires some further elaboration.

Although sociologists were quick to detect that memory is socially conditioned, it was not until the 1980s that the systematic investigation of collective memory commenced (Kuljić 2006: 40). The first to conduct a thorough analysis of collective memory in the contemporary sense of the word was Maurice Halbwachs, a French philosopher and sociologist, who actually developed the whole concept in his work *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, 1925). According to Lewis A. Coser and his Introduction to *On Collective Memory*, the turning point was when Halbwachs decided to switch “from an individualistic Bergsonian stance to a Durkheimian collectivist view”, determined to “demolish Bergson’s stress on subjective time and individualistic consciousness” (Halbwachs 1992: 5, 23). For Halbwachs, collective memory is a socially constructed notion – “it is, of course, individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past” (Halbwachs 1992: 22). In other words, individual memory relies on the existence of frameworks of collective memory (Halbwachs 1992: 174), or, more elaborately:

To be sure, everyone has a capacity for memory [mémoire] that is unlike that of anyone else, given the variety of temperaments and life circumstances. But individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since
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each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over—to the extent that it is connected with the thoughts that come to us from the social milieu. One cannot in fact think about the events of one’s past without discoursing upon them. But to discourse upon something means to connect within a single system of ideas our opinions as well as those of our circle. It means to perceive in what happens to us a particular application of facts concerning which social thought reminds us at every moment of the meaning and impact these facts have for it. In this way, the framework of collective memory confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other. (Halbwachs 1992: 53)

The concept of collective memory as developed by Halbwachs was at first accepted with skepticism and considered too radical, yet since the 1990s it has been increasingly exploited, revised and modified by many theoreticians. Marc Bloch, a French historian and one of the commentators on Halbwachs’s theory, remarked:

The things that we remember may be solely personal; the frameworks of memory, without which memories would not exist as such, are always furnished by society. Individual memory finds a point of reference, without which it would be meaningless, in the collective memory; in a certain sense, one could say that an individual memory is only ‘one part and one aspect of the group memory’. (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 151)

Bloch further elaborates: “How does an individual retain or recover his memories? How does a group retain or recover its memories? Traditional psychology certainly considered the first of these questions to be independent from the second; Halbwachs, on the contrary, clearly shows us that the idea of an individual memory completely separate from the social memory is merely an abstraction, nearly devoid of any meaning.” (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 153). On the other hand, it is of utmost importance to realise that collective memory must not be imagined as a simple analogy to individual memory (Asman 2011: 37).

Regardless of which type of memory we have in mind, its nature is always selective and perspectivistic, which is why forgetting is a constitutive part of both individual and collective memory. As Aleida Assmann further underlines, the continuous process of forgetting is not only part of social normality, it is also the prerequisite of life and survival, which is true both for an individual and a group (Asman 2011: 39, 43). Moreover, as complex as memory undoubtedly is, forgetting is a process by far more complex:
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Forgetfulness, as the functional amnesia, protects us from the threatening abundance of information. The selection of the memorised typically happens without the conscious control, although the forgotten contents may occasionally be restored in a surprising and traumatic manner. Even at the group level, when the selection has been successful, the forgotten contents cannot be deleted permanently (in times of crisis there is a surge of suppressed memories and a mobilisation of mass feelings). (Kuljić 2006: 61, my translation)

Having briefly elaborated on the distinction crucial for our research in this paper, we will now focus into more detail on how individual and collective memory is illustrated in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Buried Giant. In the process, we will be stressing how these two levels of memory mutually compare, contrast, overlap and intertwine, in light of the fact that memories do not exist as closed-end systems, instead mingling, amplifying, interlocking, modifying, and polarising other memories and impulses of forgetfulness in the social reality (Asman 2011: 15-16).

3. The Mist of Forgetfulness

Although the reason behind it remains unknown until later, it is already on the first pages of his novel that Ishiguro identifies the strange mist causing forgetfulness: “It’s queer the way the world’s forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all.” (Ishiguro 2015: 17). The reader is given to understand that something is wrong, that this is not just a natural absent-mindedness of elderly age, because this odd “disease” has swept the entire country, as we learn from a character named Ivor in a Saxon village Axl and Beatrice visit on their journey: “I’d be doubting my own senses if such strange forgetfulness didn’t occur so often in this place.” ‘It’s the same in our own country, sir,’ Axl said. ‘My wife and I have witnessed many incidents of such forgetfulness among our own neighbours.’” (Ishiguro 2015: 59). This becomes particularly devastating when the elderly couple tries to remember their son, whose features, and at times his mere existence, are blurred in their memory: “I don’t recall his face now at all,” Axl said. “It must all be the work of this mist. Many things I’ll happily let go to it, but it’s cruel when we can’t remember a precious thing like that.” (Ishiguro 2015: 30, my italics). At the same time, these words perfectly illustrate the importance and essence of individual memory, and Ishiguro’s message in respect of this mnemonic aspect in the novel. Further developing the setting for the story, Ishiguro explains the strange lack of interest for one’s personal and collective past.
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You may wonder why Axl did not turn to his fellow villagers for assistance in recalling the past, but this was not as easy as you might suppose. For in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past – even the recent one. (Ishiguro 2015: 7)

Throughout the novel, not wishing to prematurely reveal the true cause, Ishiguro even offers some theological interpretations and explanations for the characters' inability to remember. Thus, at one point, it is suggested that perhaps God is not pleased with the human race, and consequently does not want to remember their horrendous deeds: “It was just a thought. That perhaps God is angry about something we’ve done. Or maybe he’s not angry, but ashamed.” (Ishiguro 2015: 76). An even more simplistic proposition is that possibly “God himself had forgotten much from our pasts, events far distant, events of the same day. And if a thing is not in God’s mind, then what chance of it remaining in those of mortal men?” (Ishiguro 2015: 64). Such theologically-based justifications, however, remain at the level of a premise which does not get developed further, and, though interesting, seem to be offered only as a narrative device aimed at distracting the readers from guessing the right reason too soon. And the right reason, once it does get revealed in the style of deus ex machina, is somewhat unexpectedly (or not?), the breath of a she-dragon Querig put under a magical spell by Master Merlin. Admittedly, this solution perfectly fits the novel’s framework, and it might even be why Ishiguro resorted to epic fantasy and a mythological setting in the first place – because he thought it a clever tactic for performing a hypothetical experiment in which he could focus on what happens to people completely devoid of memories, both at the individual and collective levels.

First, let us focus on the individual level. All through their journey, Axl and Beatrice remember certain episodes from various points of their lives (walking together from the market, Beatrice wearing a green cloak, the incident with the candle, their first encounter in the forest when they discussed the wild flowers, etc.), trying to rekindle old flames and prove to themselves that they can still remember, or that they will never forget. On the outside they believe that nothing can undermine the strong bond of love they share, not even bad memories that might surge to the surface in the process of remembering the past. However, when Beatrice recalls how Axl left her alone in the darkness of their abode to go to another woman, she changes her attitude towards him. At that point Axl starts to fear that the
resurfaced memories might threaten their relationship and wants her to promise to keep what she feels for him always in her heart, no matter what she sees once the mist is gone (Ishiguro 2015: 258). When they learn from the monk that it is Querig's breath that causes them to forget, and that once the dragon is slain, all their memories will rush back, Axl is stricken with panic at the thought, and seems to be in a trance, whereas on a different occasion "he felt both memory and anger growing firmer, and a fear made him turn away from her." (Ishiguro 2015: 270). Ishiguro uses these little episodes to subtly indicate the ambivalent feelings both of his protagonists experience faced with the hope of all their memories, good and bad alike, being restored.

As Michael Schudson, a contemporary American sociologist, lucidly observes, "the past becomes part of us; and shapes us, it influences our consciousness, whether we like it or not. In the pathological, but familiar, form, people become entrapped by their old wounds" (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 289). This is one of the things about the past and memory that fascinate Ishiguro, and this is what his protagonists, Axl and Beatrice, are given to avoid by having their memory shrouded in magically-induced forgetfulness. On the other hand, their consequent incompleteness is quite natural because "there are some facets of the past we cannot ignore or forget without feeling the loss of some part of ourselves" (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 290). This brings memory in relation to the postmodernist concept of the lost or decentered self, i.e. the loss of personal identity. The importance of memory in this respect is highlighted by Ron Eyerman, another contemporary sociologist: "Memory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going. Memory in other words is central to individual and collective identity." (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 305, my italics). In other words, as Aleida Assmann effectively summarises, we are essentially what we remember and what we forget (Asman 2011: 71).

When we, thus, focus on the individual level of The Buried Giant, we follow Axl and Beatrice, their personal life and memories (each of them having their own memories and those shared as a couple), which makes us ponder the following questions: are we still human without memories or does a lack of memories strips us to the level of machines; is there a meaning to life without memories; given a choice, would we want to remember both the bad and good times or not remember at all? And, perhaps most importantly, is it possible for love to survive without the underlying support of shared memories? As Beatrice puts it: "I'm wondering if without our memories, there's nothing for it but for our love to fade and die."
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(Ishiguro 2015: 45). Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that memories are exactly what the boatman uses to establish how strong the bond between two people is – “when travelers speak of their most cherished memories, it’s impossible for them to disguise the truth” (Ishiguro 2015: 44). Therefore, the crucial question: “How will you and your husband prove your love for each other when you can’t remember the past you’ve shared?” (Ishiguro 2015: 45) upsets Beatrice quite understandably. Yet, despite all the memories and true love that we share with our partners, when the time comes, sadly, we are all by ourselves. As Neil Gaiman (Internet) summarises in his review of the novel, “no matter how well we love, no matter how deeply, we will always be fallible and human, and for every couple who are aging together, one or the other of them – of us – will always have to cross the water, and go on to the island ahead and alone.”

What marks the transition from individual to collective, and highlights the crucial distinction in the novel, the distinction between an individual person and the community, i.e. between personal and collective memories, is the moment Axl announces: “[The rising mist] may bring horrors to this land. Yet for us it fades just in time.” (Ishiguro 2015: 316). As it seems, the restoration of memory is a bitter pleasure, as “Beatrice and Axl recover their intimate past, but historically the mist has enabled a period of peace, wherein Saxons and Britons had productively forgotten their former enmities and grievances” (Wood, Internet). In other words, forgetfulness brought them (personal) peace, which allowed the old wounds to heal and helped their little universe stay compact, yet on the larger scale this will not suffice, and the peace (at the collective level) will be replaced by new wars and new slaughters, fuelled by ruthless revenge:

You and I longed for Querig’s end, thinking only of our own dear memories. Yet who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now? We must hope God yet finds a way to preserve the bonds between our peoples, yet custom and suspicion have always divided us. Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest? (Ishiguro 2015: 297, my italics)

After we dwelled on the shared memories of Axl and Beatrice as the major paradigm of individual memory in the novel, it might be interesting to mention two other examples of memories slowly pushing through the veil of forgetfulness. The first one is related to Wistan remembering Axl as the admirable man from his
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childhood (he is often looking at him intently, scrutinising his features), and the country through which he is currently travelling as the place he has already visited before. The second example concerns Axl remembering his past career as a warrior and maybe even a knight of King Arthur (this remains unclear) – he observes the movements of Wistan and other soldiers recognising familiar military skills and feeling he himself experienced almost identical things somewhere before: “For some time – in fact, ever since Arthur’s name had first been mentioned – a nagging, uneasy feeling had been troubling Axl. Now at last, as he listened to Wistan and the old knight talk, a fragment of memory came to him. It was not much, but it nevertheless brought him relief to have something to hold and examine.” (Ishiguro 2015: 111). As he struggles to examine these fragments, Axl realises that his role in the past events related to the antagonism between the Britons and the Saxons was bigger than he had been aware of: “‘The mist hangs heavily across my past,’ Axl said. ‘Yet lately I find myself reminded of some task, and one of gravity, with which I was once entrusted. Was it a law, a great law to bring all men closer to God? Your presence, and your talk of Arthur, stirs long-faded thoughts, Sir Gawain.’” (Ishiguro 2015: 180). Through these resurfacing memories of war and slaughter: “Axl remembered the cries of outrage, children crying, the looks of hatred, and his own fury...” (Ishiguro 2015: 136), Ishiguro announces the collective aspect of memory and redirects the reader’s attention towards the war as a major collective trauma.

4. War in Collective Memory

War is another topic characteristic for Ishiguro’s fiction, dealt with, directly or indirectly, in all his novels. So far, his writings on this topic have been logically oriented towards the Second World War and its consequences, yet Ishiguro uses a much older historical period as the narrative setting for The Buried Giant, i.e. the beginnings of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain. Scientifically speaking, there is still an ongoing debate about the Anglo-Saxon settlement, supported by historical, archaeological, molecular and linguistic evidence, alongside several migration and acculturation theories. There are three main sources in the form of mediaeval histories. According to Gildas and his De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae (6th century), the Saxons were “enemies originally from overseas who brought well-deserved judgment upon the local kings or ‘tyrants’”. For Gildas the Saxons represented God’s scourge, and he saw the horrors of the Saxons as “God’s

1 As a matter of fact, Sir Gawain also recognizes Axl but does not admit it until the end of the novel.
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retribution for the sins of his people” (Wikipedia, Internet). This view is particularly relevant for our analysis of The Buried Giant, because a similar idea seems to have inspired Ishiguro’s background story. Anyhow, there is an underlying indication of a genocide committed in the past by the Britons: “You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is always possible the giant’s cairn was erected to mark the site of some such tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in war.” (Ishiguro 2015: 267, my italics).

The second source is Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum (8th century). The view of the Britons he expressed there is partly responsible for the picture of them as the downtrodden subjects of Anglo-Saxon oppression (Wikipedia, Internet). Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae (12th century) is the third relevant source because it depicted Arthur as a king of Britain who defeated the Saxons and established an empire over Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Norway and Gaul (Wikipedia, Internet). King Arthur, a legendary British leader who, according to mediaeval histories and romances, led the defense of Britain against the Saxon invaders in the late 5th and early 6th centuries AD, managed to secure peace in a major, decisive battle (this might have been the Battle of Badon, historical records about which are scant). It turned out, however, that the advent of the Saxons was only temporarily postponed, because civil wars started to break out soon enough.

One of the main theories, advocated by Edward Augustus Freeman, claims that “the Anglo-Saxons and the Britons were competing cultures, and that through invasion, slavery and genocide the Anglo-Saxons defeated the Britons and consequently their culture and language prevailed” (Wikipedia, Internet). Although this theory, like the others, has been contested, it seems that Kazuo Ishiguro had it in mind when shaping the framework for his novel, which is perhaps best proven by Wistan’s premonition of the upcoming wars and future bloodshed:

The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours’ houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance. For you Britons, it’ll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You’ll flee or perish. And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people’s time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended. (Ishiguro 2015: 297, my italics)
In any case, the historical vagueness of this period and lack of conclusive evidence entirely suited Ishiguro's purpose of constructing a fictional framework loosely based on historical facts.

Thus, according to Ishiguro's fictional story, the peace between the Britons and Saxons came as the result of a magical spell cast on Querig, although Sir Gawain loyally claims it was due to Arthur's just treatment of the conquered lands: "More, sir, he commanded us to rescue and give sanctuary when we could to all women, children and elderly, be they Briton or Saxon. On such actions were bonds of trust built, even as battles raged." (Ishiguro 2015: 112). Consequently, the Britons and the Saxons are living in peace simply because they do not remember the past slaughters, enveloped in the same mist of forgetfulness that robs Axl and Beatrice of their dearest memories. Despite Sir Gawain's plead to Wistan: "Leave this country to rest in forgetfulness." (Ishiguro 2015: 286), the achieved peace is artificial, and the memories have to be restored, even at the high cost of another war. Although Sir Gawain optimistically hopes that the spell still might be effective, Axl is realistic: "How can only wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery?" (Ishiguro 2015: 286). This is where collective memory comes to play and Ishiguro focuses on how nations remember and forget events like wars, thereby raising the questions like: Is there peace without forgetfulness? Is it possible to have a long-lasting peace after such savage slaughters? How do communities forget and forgive (if ever) wars as collective traumas? In the wise words of Sir Gawain: "Where once we fought for land and God, we now fought to avenge the fallen comrades, themselves slaughtered in vengeance. Where could it end? Babes growing to men knowing only days of war." (Ishiguro 2015: 273-274).

Sir Gawain is upset and defensive when the past slaughters are mentioned, possibly guilt-ridden because so many people had to die before peace was finally restored: "So many skulls we trod upon before coming out to this sweet dawn. So many. No need to look down, one hears their cackle with each tread." (Ishiguro 2015: 180). He is undoubtedly tortured by the memories of those days: "For a time I wished the same of the mist..." (Ishiguro 2015: 274), and wishes to forget. Nevertheless, Gawain's loyalty to Arthur knows no boundaries and he keeps defending him until the end: "We can only watch and wonder. A great king, like God himself, must perform deeds mortals flinch from!" (Ishiguro 2015: 275). Another way to comfort himself is a reference to the old maxim that the end justified the means: "I heard the same [cries of children], sir, yet were they not like the cries from the surgeon's tent when a man's life is spared even as the cure brings agonies?" (Ishiguro 2015: 271). Nevertheless, Axl does not believe that the peace will last:
“This circle of hate is hardly broken, sir, but forged instead in iron by what’s done today.” (Ishiguro 2015: 214), although at another point he expresses his hope that the wars are just a part of the “barbarous past hopefully gone for ever” (Ishiguro 2015: 142).

Even though, technically, Gawain’s reveries feature his own individual memories of the war, they only serve Ishiguro as a means for highlighting the collective aspect of memory, and focusing on war and revenge as significant topics in the novel. In one of these reveries, Gawain remembers talking about war with Axl during one of the raging battles. Axl was upset that the so-called Law of the Innocents⁴, which he himself allegedly helped institute thereby earning the nickname Knight of Peace, was breached:

...their women, children and elderly, left unprotected after our solemn agreement not to harm them, now all slaughtered by our hands, even the smallest babes. 
If this were lately done to us, would our hatred exhaust itself? [...] Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken. Look how deep runs the lust for vengeance! (Ishiguro 2015: 212-213, my italics)

Yet, the episode best illustrating the strength and inescapability of hateful revenge is the one in which Wistan instructs young Edwin to make a promise to loathe all Britons: “It was Britons under Arthur slaughtered our kind. It was Britons took your mother and mine. We’ve a duty to hate every man, woman and child of their blood. [...] promise me you’ll tend well this hatred in your heart. And should it ever flicker or threaten to die, shield it with care till the flame takes hold again.” (Ishiguro 2015: 242). According to Aleida Assmann, the memories of experienced suffering and injustice are kept awake so that, under external pressure, the cohesion of the community could be strengthened and resistance mobilised. Thereby, the defeat does not always destroy the collective self-perception (Asman, 2011: 77).

In light of the above, the buried giant from the title of Ishiguro’s novel can be interpreted as a manifold metaphor, potentially signifying revenge, hatred, personal disappointment with a beloved person, guilty conscience, and in general

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⁴ Some resources mention the actual existence of such a law in the territory of old Ireland and Scotland: “In AD 697 the Abbot of Iona, Adomnán, introduced the Law of the Innocents; known as the ‘CáinAdomnán’ – the Law of Adomnán. The Law of the Innocents was an attempt to protect non-combatants: women, children and the clergy — to give rights to civilians.” (Available at: http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/britonsgaelsvikings/lawoftheinnocents/index.asp, accessed on: 03.02.2016).
all undesirable and destructive feelings that an individual or a community may wish to suppress. The giant can, thus, be buried at both individual and collective levels.

5. Conclusion

For the readers expecting a majestic epic fantasy tale abounding with battles, grandiose affairs, mighty castles and fire-breathing dragons, Ishiguro’s latest novel will, understandably, be somewhat of a disappointment. *The Buried Giant* was never intended to be just another fantasy in line, its mythical elements only adding up to the framework for a profound and heart-rending tale about fading memory and enduring love. Whether this framework is flawlessly built or sufficiently believable remains to be debated. Yet, even if we concede that Ishiguro’s language and narrative technique in this novel do not live up to his mastery in, say, *The Remains of the Day* or *Never Let Me Go*, the message he conveys remains just as overwhelming and cautionary as ever. In other words, “*The Buried Giant* does what important books do: It remains in the mind long after it has been read, refusing to leave, forcing one to turn it over and over.” (Gaiman, Internet).

In *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro might have deviated from his typical style, in terms of genre and his signature narrative technique, yet he remained truthful to at least one significant aspect, i.e. the treatment of history. He establishes a general historical framework loosely based on historical facts, without aspiring to tell a historically accurate story. His tale aims to teach us things other than history. His tale is universal. And no matter how interesting the post-Arthurian setting may be, Ishiguro’s story of memory and loss can be placed in any other historical context and remain equally grand and meaningful.

All Ishiguro’s characters are, to the varying and variously manifested degrees, haunted by the past and their guilty conscience. Axl is no exception in this respect, and it is not unfounded to imagine that even if there were no mist, he would have probably suppressed his guilt and memories of how he hurt his wife. How we deal with regret is another distinguishing topic for Ishiguro, except that in *The Buried Giant* it is blended with other larger-scale issues (similar tendencies are present in other Ishiguro’s novels as well, most prominently in *The Unconsoled*, where the unnamed community is trying to forget and dismiss its own past), which makes us follow two parallel threads of individual and collective reconciliation with one’s past mistakes. Yet, forgetfulness, for all its seeming mental salubrity, does not have the same healing effect at the individual and collective level, i.e. “the memory loss that may serve a troubled people as a blessing cannot help but
threaten the individual with the dissolution of his or her self.” (Holland, Internet). To put it differently, Ishiguro’s protagonists in *The Buried Giant* are exposed to a potential loss of their personal identity due to a trauma. Quite relevantly, however, Ron Eyerman underlines that “like memory, the notion of trauma, or deeply felt emotional response to some occurrence, has both individual and collective connotation” (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 304, my italics). And in Ishiguro’s novel the trauma really is present at both levels – the individual (death of Axl and Beatrice’s son, fight over the visit to their son’s grave); and the collective (the war and oncoming slaughters between the Saxons and the Britons). At either level, the forfeit of memory brings no completeness, while memory brings no peace. In the words of Richard Sennett: “Truthful memory opens wounds which forgetting cannot heal; the traces of conflict, failure and disaster are never erasable in time. There is no solace in the truths of memory.” (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011: 283).

References


ИНДИВИДУАЛНО НАСПРАМ КОЛЕКТИВНОГ СЕЂАЊА У РОМАНУ ЗАКОПАНИ ЦИН КАЗУА ИШИГУРА

Резиме

Позивајући се на постулате неколико теоретичара у области студија сеђања, првенствено Мориса Албакса и Алиде Асман, у овом раду истражујемо разлику између индивидуалног и колективног сеђања, са циљем да осветлимо сложени однос ова два супротстављена а међусобно допуњујућа мемоничка аспекта у роману Закопани цин Казуа Ишигура. Занимљиво, у свом најновијем роману Ишигуру приступа теми сеђања из перспективе његовог неизбежног антипода – заборава. Циљ овог рада јесте да нагласи да заборав, међутим, иако наизглед лековит, нема исти исцелитељски учинак на индивидуалном и колективном плану.

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