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Unreliable Memories and Fabricated Truths: Reconstructing Identity in When We Were Orphans

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Abstract: The Relationship between memory and truth, shapes one's personality. Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans is one such novel, with special attention given to the main character, Christopher Banks as an unreliable narrator. In the novel, memory is not depicted as the store of truth but as a biased, frequently distorted re-creation that is conditioned by trauma, lust, and denial. The search of the mystery of the disappearance of his parents by Banks is more of a process that involves the act of detection and rather a journey of the mind full of self-delusion and created worlds. This paper examines how fragmented memories blur the lines between reality and fantasy, resulting in the formation of a shaky and unrealistic identity through a close reading between the narrative. The paper claims that the failure of Banks to face painful truths leads to the selective memory that maintains his sense of self but makes him lose touch to reality. Finally, the novel exposes the influence of unreliable memories in the formation of identity and this means that personal histories are usually fabricated stories but not facts.

Keywords: Unreliable memory, Identity reconstruction, Narrative unreliability, Trauma, Self-deception.



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When We Were Orphans by Kazuo Ishiguro is a novel which holds a niche in the modern world of the literary works which are a blend of detective fiction and the psychological reflection. In the very foundation, the novel is a story of a famous detective called Christopher Banks, who tries to solve the puzzle of his missing parents in Shanghai when he was a boy. But as the story progresses it becomes clear that the novel is not about the solution of a mystery but rather about the unstable nature of memory and identity formation.

Contrary to classic detective plots, which focus on reason, facts, and solutions, Ishiguro disrupts the genre by offering a character that is fundamentally inaccurate in his perception of the world. The memories of Banks about his childhood are quite jumbled and even contrasting, which makes one question their reliability. The fact that his conclusions were implausible is in stark contrast with the fact that he believed that he could find the truth, which is unbelievable. The argument presented in this paper is that Banks constructs his identity using unreliable memories and constructed truths. Through examining his story within the framework of the trauma theory and the memory studies, the paper is able to show how Ishiguro has presented memory as a subjective and dynamic process. By so doing, the novel confronts the concept of objective truth and the importance of narrative as far as creating personal identity is concerned.

In When We Were Orphans, memory is depicted as a dynamic process of rebuilding as opposed to a person remembering. Banks often cycles back to his childhood memories, and these memories are not stable and consistent. On the contrary, they are influenced by his emotional needs and psychological defenses.

Banks himself admits how malleable memory can be as he goes on to say, "I have found myself frequently revising my memories, adjusting them to fit a narrative that seems more coherent" (WWWO 67). This confession shows that memory is not an objective account of what has been but a narrative created and changed over time. Trying to rewrite his memories, Banks tries to bring some order to his life and preserve his sense of control.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of memory supports this interpretation, as he argues that "memory is not a faithful reproduction of the past but a reconstruction shaped by present concerns" (Ricoeur 21). The memories of the events experienced by Banks are affected by his need to portray himself as a good detective and a caring son. Consequently, his recollection turns selective and distorted, focusing on some facts and not considering others.

Such selective memory is especially clear in the way Banks describes his parents. He romanticizes them as moral beings and does not take into account the complexity of their lives. The example of his mother active in fighting the opium trade can be interpreted as a heroic act, which strengthens the idea that Banks sees his family as a victim of injustice. Nevertheless, this idealistic story is revealed as not being complete as the novel progresses, implying that the memory Banks has is not guided by fact more than it is by emotional necessity.

The case of Christopher Banks is a good example of the unreliable narrator, whose vision cannot be trusted completely. His account is described as having inconsistencies, omissions and unrealistic assumptions which all contribute to the lack of credibility. Banks's confidence in his investigative abilities is evident when he declares, "I was convinced that everything would soon fall into place, that the truth had been waiting all along for me to uncover it" (WWWO 154). This assertion is indicative of his faith in a rational and easily attainable truth, a truth that is finally put to question by the story.

Wayne C. Booth defines an unreliable narrator as one "whose values diverge from those of the implied author" (Booth 158). In *When We Were Orphans*, the gap between the perceived reality and the implied reality in the text is brought out more strongly. His explanations of the happenings are not always logical and it is possible to suggest that his account is influenced by personal prejudice and not objective facts. The unreliability of Banks is also emphasized in the way he tends to disregard conflicting information. He continues with his assumptions even in the presence of evidence that contradicts his beliefs. This rejection of other viewpoints is more of a psychological want to maintain his own creation of identity. The pretense of truth which Banks upholds is closely related to his work as a detective. His career offers him a basis on which he perceives his events and strengthens his faith in his capacity to reveal the concealed truths. But this framework proves to be insufficient in the end, as it does not explain the intricacies of memory and trauma. The loss of his parents symbolizes a great psychological break that breaks his identity. Banks is unable to process this trauma in its entirety, so in order to preserve a sense of continuity, the author creates a narrative.

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma provides a useful framework for understanding this process. She argues that trauma "is not fully experienced in the moment but returns later in fragmented and distorted forms" (Caruth 4). The trauma that Banks experienced as a child is reappearing in his memories, but his memories show gaps and inconsistencies.

This disintegration is manifested especially when Banks returns to Shanghai. He believes that his parents are still alive and therefore goes on a mission to save them despite the lapse of time. He asserts, "They must be there still, waiting for me, as though time had stood still" (WWWO 248). This assumption shows that he is not able to come to terms with his past and the present, which leads to the distortion of reality.

The identity of Banks is therefore informed by his unresolved trauma. His detective work is one way of dealing with this trauma, to enable him to make up a story where he is able to bring sanity and have closure. Nevertheless, the story turns out to be a deception in the end and this shows the weakness of memory as a means of interpreting the past.

The novel is, on the one hand, a typical detective story, which focuses on the disappearance of the parents of Christopher Banks, a mystery long ago. But as the story is revealed it is clear that Ishiguro is intentionally manipulating the detective fiction genre by making it a tool to explore the ideas of memory, identity and mental instability instead of objective truth and rational conclusion.

The traditional detective fiction is based on reason, coherence and resolution. The detective is usually depicted as an authority figure who employs reasoning and facts in order to discover concealed truths. However, Christopher Banks does not possess these qualities. Despite the fact that he is a heroic detective, his case involving the disappearance of his parents is characterized by conjectures, emotional prejudice, and dependence on scattered recollections instead of solid facts. His claim that, all will shortly all come into place (Ishiguro 154) represents a blind trust which is more of a wanton than a logical investigation.

The idea of truth is one of the most important aspects through which Ishiguro subverts the genre. The truth in traditional detective stories is objective and accessible; the enigma is solved with the help of thorough investigation and rational conclusions. But in *When We Were Orphans*, the truth is elusive and unclear. The conclusions made by Banks are not always credible and the narrative does not give black and white answers. The alleged resolution of the mystery does not provide closure but, on the contrary, reveals the insufficiency of the knowledge of Banks. This intentional ambiguity is a way to shock the reader with his expectations and reinforce the subjectivity of truth.

Moreover, the time frame of the novel *Shanghai*, which was also characterized by the political tensions, contributes to the novel leaving the classical detective fiction. Instead of being a setting where orderly investigation can occur, the disorganized environment is a reflection of the internal confusion that Banks is undergoing. His bid to go through war torn streets to find his parents is becoming more and more surreal, it is difficult to distinguish between the reality and imagination.

Ishiguro also weakens the role of the detective character when he reveals the psychological fragility of Banks. In contrast to the cold and unemotional investigators of classical fiction, Banks is strongly affected by his childhood trauma. His research is not only a professional one, but a personal one, a search of emotional reconciliation. This personalization and professionalization of his motives undermines his objectivity and underlines the weaknesses of the rational inquiry in the face of unresolved trauma. It has been observed by critics that Ishiguro tends to trouble story reliability and reader expectations in his work. Brian W. Shaffer notes that “Ishiguro’s fiction often destabilizes narrative authority, forcing readers to question the reliability of memory and perception” (Shaffer 89). The voice of the detective, which is traditionally a place of clarity, is turned into a place of doubts and uncertainties in this novel. This makes the reader critically appraise the story told by Banks and see the gaps and inconsistencies that make him unreliable.

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The other significant feature of this subversion is the lack of final closure. Detective fiction normally ends with the discovery of the truth that restores order and brings satisfaction to the reader. In contrast, *When We Were Orphans* provides an unsatisfactory and even disturbing resolution. The reality of his parents does not go well with the expectations of Banks and his search does not provide him with the closure he desires. This unresolved problem supports the main idea of the novel that the truth is not always available, and human need to have something definite usually leads to self-delusion.

Breaking down the traditions of a detective story, Ishiguro changes the emphasis on the outer to the inner. The novel is not so much about solving a mystery but rather about comprehending how people make meaning out of their experiences. The inability of Banks to be an investigator finally shows the weakness of reason and strength of memory in creating perception.

When *We Were Orphans* breaks the classical pattern of detective genre by denying its focus on rationality, objectivity, and resolution. Ishiguro reveals how fragile the truth can be and how memory and trauma can affect human cognition through the character of Christopher Banks. The novel turns the detective story into a study of the human mind and makes the readers rethink the meaning of the truth and the role of a narrative when it comes to building identity. At its core, the novel suggests that identity is not something fixed or naturally given, but something we gradually build for ourselves through memory and storytelling. Christopher Banks's sense of who he is is deeply connected to how he remembers his past. He does not simply recall events; he reshapes them, organizes them, and gives them meaning in a way that helps him understand himself.

However, the problem lies in the fact that these memories are not entirely reliable. Because his recollections are shaped by trauma, longing, and emotional need, the identity he builds from them becomes unstable. Banks sees himself as a successful detective and a loyal son on a mission to rescue his parents, but this self-image is based on a version of reality that is, at times, distorted and incomplete.

In this context, Paul Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity becomes especially meaningful. Ricoeur suggests that "people come to understand themselves through the stories they tell about their own lives" (Ricoeur 246). This idea fits Banks perfectly. His narrative is his way of holding himself together, of making sense of loss and confusion. Yet, because the story he tells himself is built on uncertain memories, it cannot fully support a stable sense of self.

What Ishiguro ultimately shows is that identity does not come from objective truth alone. Instead, it emerges from the personal narratives we create stories that may comfort us, protect us, or even mislead us. In this way, identity becomes something fluid and fragile, shaped as much by imagination and emotion as by reality.

When We Were Orphans offers a deeply moving exploration of how memory, truth, and identity are intertwined. Through Christopher Banks, Kazuo Ishiguro shows that memory is not a clear and reliable record of the past, but something shaped by emotions, trauma, and the need to make sense of difficult experiences. Banks's story reveals how people often construct their own versions of reality in order to cope with loss and uncertainty. His fragmented memories and unreliable narration highlight the complexity of human thinking, showing how easily the mind can blur the line between truth and imagination. The identity he builds for himself rooted in these uncertain memories ultimately reflects how fragile and changeable the sense of self can be.

By moving away from the traditional structure of detective fiction, Ishiguro also challenges the idea that truth is always clear and discoverable. Instead, the novel suggests that understanding ourselves is a much more complicated process, shaped by the stories we tell and the memories we choose to hold on to. In the end, When We Were Orphans reminds us that identity is not something we simply find it is something we create, revise, and sometimes struggle to hold together.

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