

# Remembering to Forget: Collective Memory and Historical Trauma in *The Buried Giant*

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the themes of memory, trauma and cultural history in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*. Through the lenses of cultural memory and trauma studies, this analysis will show how the novel interrogates the ethics of remembering and forgetting in a post-conflict society. Set within a mythical, post-Arthurian Britain, the story centers around a society mired in collective amnesia—shrouded in a "mist" that obscures its painful truths and memories. This paper reveals how the character's gradual reclamation of memory acts as a metaphor for confronting national traumas and dangers of mandated forgetfulness in situations of violence. Finally, The paper concludes by situating Ishiguro's novel within broader discourses on postwar cultural memory, suggesting its relevance to contemporary debates on historical justice and communal healing.

**Keywords:** Amnesia, Cultural History, The Buried Giant, and Trauma

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Buried Giant* (2016) is the last and most controversial novel written by Ishiguro and it is the novel for which he won the Nobel Prize of literature in 2017. Yet, as is the case with the Nobel Prize-winning novels in general and Ishiguro's novels in particular, a lot of clamour and debate is raised about *The Buried Giant*. The story takes place in post-Arthurian Britain and it revolves chiefly around a couple, Axl and Beatrice who takes a journey to visit their son in another village. Yet, as the novel progresses, it gets clearer that Axl and Beatrice can barely remember anything including their son, the reason he left, or the village he currently lives in. Indeed, after reading a few pages, the reader finds out that everyone in this land suffers from unjustifiable amnesia.

Actually, the novel is a richly allegorical novel that intertwines personal trauma and collective history within a post-Arthurian fantasy landscape.

While dragons, knights, and magical mists situate the narrative in the realm of fantasy, Ishiguro employs these tropes not to create escapism but to reflect deeply on the philosophical and psychological dimensions of memory. The novel's world is enveloped in a literal mist that induces widespread amnesia, creating a symbolic framework through which the author explores how forgetting—whether personal or societal—shapes human experience.

The central amnesia created by magical fog in the story maps onto a metaphor for cultural repression and intentional forgetting of the past violence. The mix of post-war allegory and medieval fantasy urges readers to think about the ways societies move out of the pain of the past, through silence, distortion, or all out denial of reality. Thus the article asks:

1. In what way does Ishiguro utilize allegory and fantasy in order to scrutinize the psychology and ethics of memory?
2. Is collective amnesia a path to healing or a cover for unaddressed trauma and/or justice?
3. What are the results of recovering repressed memories - emotionally, morally and socially?

## II. PERSONAL MEMORY: FRAGMENTATION, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY

### A. AXL and BEATRICE: The Amnesic Couple:

As the narrator explains early on: "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 marches. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past—even the recent one" (7)<sup>1</sup>. This mist is both literal and metaphorical, representing the erasure of painful memories to preserve a veneer of peace.

At the heart of the narrative are Axl and Beatrice, an elderly Briton couple who set out on a journey to find their long-lost son. Their quest, however, becomes far more than a physical traversal of land; it is a metaphorical excavation of buried memories and a confrontation with past trauma. Ishiguro constructs a universe where memory is not just unreliable but actively suppressed, raising critical questions about the consequences of both remembering and forgetting. As Axl later reflects: "Prospects have emerged in retrospect"(44) a line that

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<sup>1</sup> Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Buried Giant* (London: Faber&Faber LTD, 2016). Subsequent references to *The Buried Giant* will be cited in the text.

encapsulates the novel's interest in how understanding often arises only after memories begin to resurface.

The cost of remembrance is dramatized most clearly in the revelation of the war between Britons and Saxons. The novel describes a war that used to take place between the Saxons and the Britons long ago. The war, yet, is forgotten by the two adversaries thanks to the breath that Querig spreads all over the country. The mist, therefore, is not simply an ethereal force but a political and ethical instrument that enables the forgetting of mass violence.

As such, the novel resists simple categorization: while its setting is mythical, its concerns are existential, ethical, and political. By blending post-war allegory with medieval fantasy, Ishiguro invites readers to consider how societies deal with painful histories—whether through silence, distortion, or forced erasure. The narrative ultimately explores the cost of remembrance and the dangers of forgetting, presenting memory as a double-edged sword that can both heal and destroy.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of Psychoanalysis was mostly concerned with trauma. For Freud, "trauma is a function of interaction" (Cooper, Pervin 95). He said: "When an experience evokes unusual pathological reaction, Freud argues, the reason is that it makes excessive demands on the personality, it does so, he postulates, by exposing the personality to quantities of excitation greater than it can deal with" (95). Thus, when a certain person goes through an experience that is higher than his mind's ability to absorb and analyze, he becomes traumatic, and once he is put in the same circumstances the symptoms of trauma show up. Therefore, trauma is simply a painful memory that's suppressed deeply in the unconscious and neglected.

Among the novel's most compelling threads is the portrayal of personal memory as traumatic, fragmented, elusive, and deeply intertwined with emotional survival. Axl and Beatrice live in a society where memory loss has become normalized, and where individuals are barely aware of how much they have forgotten. This "mist" is not merely a fantastical condition but a profound metaphor for psychological repression. The couple's loving relationship, tender and patient on the surface, is built on a void—on years of forgotten grievances, joys, and betrayals. As Beatrice notes with unease: "We can't even remember those days. Or any of the years between. We don't remember our fierce quarrels or the small moments we enjoyed and treasured. We don't remember our son or why he's away from us" (49). This admission reflects not only confusion but a longing for reconnection with a shared emotional past.

The slow and painful return of their memories becomes a process of self-revelation. As they travel through mist-covered landscapes, they begin to recollect details that had been buried under layers of psychic defense. These memories include not only their child's fate but also Beatrice's infidelity and Axl's role in a violent past. The restoration of these memories challenges their present sense of identity. Axl, once viewed as a gentle and wise elder, must now face the reality of his former self as a participant in a brutal ethnic war: "news of their women, children and elderly, left unprotected after our own 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? Would we not also fight to the last as they do, each fresh wound given a balm?" (232). This

stark and horrific memory illustrates how personal identity can be constructed through denial and suppression, only to be undone when truth resurfaces. Thus the couple seem to suffer from amnesia due to traumatic experiences that they have suppressed.

Moreover, their love, which initially appears timeless and unconditional, becomes precarious when placed against the truth of the past. Memory becomes the test of their bond—will they still love each other now that the illusions have lifted? The journey thus becomes a deeply symbolic one: a passage through forgotten pain, toward either reconciliation or disintegration. Ishiguro does not offer an easy resolution; instead, he presents memory as a force that reshapes the self, often in painful and irreversible ways. The narrative suggests that while forgetting may be protective, true emotional intimacy requires a reckoning with the past.

### III. MEMORY AS TRAUMA AND DISSOCIATION

In *The Buried Giant*, memory loss is not simply a magical device or narrative tool—it functions as a profound commentary on the psychology of trauma. In his book, *Introduction to Psychology*, Alicia S. Bustos defines amnesia as "a loss of memory, either total or partial, for the past events in a person's life. Amnesia caused by repression is psychological ... amnesia may also be caused by cerebral shock such as may occur in a head injury" (162). She adds: "in psychological amnesia, the person suddenly represses almost everything about self ... he uses forgetting as a sort of unconscious defense mechanism against some painful or guilt-producing memory" (162). Axl's amnesia, along with that of others in the novel, can be interpreted through the lens of psychological repression and dissociation, particularly drawing on the theories of Carl Jung and narrative psychologist Mark Freeman. Jung's concept of the "shadow" posits that individuals unconsciously repress aspects of themselves—often those associated with guilt, violence, or shame—because acknowledging them threatens the ego's stability. In this light, Axl's journey becomes not only a geographical quest but a metaphorical descent into the recesses of his unconscious, where he must confront the repressed truths of his past.

As the narrative progresses, Axl begins to encounter fleeting, unsettling memories that emerge in flashes and half-formed feelings rather than coherent recollections. For example, he is haunted by visions of past violence: "He had a vague recollection of sheep drifting innocently past them, but his memory of the shepherds themselves had become confusingly bound up with that attack on the villagers by the well. What had brought the pair of them to that village that morning? Axl remembered the cries of outrage, children crying, the looks of hatred" (148). These fragments of memory reflect symptoms of dissociative amnesia—a psychological defense mechanism where traumatic memories are not processed but instead locked away from conscious awareness. Ishiguro's portrayal aligns with Freeman's theory of narrative disruption, in which trauma is not merely remembered differently but resists narrative coherence altogether.

Axl's emotional landscape is marked by a persistent sense of unease and sorrow, which suggests that although the content of his trauma is inaccessible, its emotional weight remains. As he

reflects, "A sense of unnamed loss would gnaw at his heart, preventing him from returning to sleep" (5). This unnamed loss is emblematic of psychological fragmentation: the self intuitively senses a rupture but cannot fully identify its cause. Ishiguro's use of fog and mist becomes not only a plot device but a metaphor for this psychological haze—the obscured terrain of memory that shields as much as it imprisons.

Additionally, the symbolic presence of Axl's alter egos—Edwin, Wistan, and Gawain—can be interpreted as manifestations of his psyche at different stages or identities. Edwin represents innocence and suppressed vulnerability; Wistan channels aggression, revenge, and the warlike self; while Gawain embodies the aging, guilt-ridden figure trying to maintain a moral legacy. Their interactions with Axl suggest an internal dialogue between parts of himself long buried beneath layers of trauma. Ishiguro thus presents memory as not only fragile but profoundly entangled with the question of who we believe ourselves to be—and what truths we are willing or able to remember.

#### IV. COLLECTIVE MEMORY: AMNESIA AND HISTORICAL OBLIVION

##### A. *The Mist as a Metaphor for Forgetfulness*

Besides personal trauma, Ishiguro's novel addresses social collective forgetting mechanisms and effects. The magical mist that the she-dragon Querig emits is a metaphorical barrier—the barrier preserves the land by hiding the horror of a bloody past, but it also performs a willful cultural forgetting. The mist keeps the war memories of betrayal, massacres, and ethnic hatred between the Britons and the Saxons at bay. What we are left with is a peace that may superficially ensconce the two groups, and the author reminds us that peace can be unreliable, and, in this case, it is not based upon acceptance and resolution—but silence and not doing anything! Intentional forgetting has constructed a shaky degree of peace—but it rests on uneven foundations of denial. Metaphorizing collective forgetting via a tangible display (e.g. dragon's breath) literally unearths the historical erasure that many societies endure following collective trauma. Ishiguro's offering calls forth comparisons with actual post-conflict cases wherein historical acts of atrocity have been deliberately buried in order to build symbolic nation-building around collective forgetting, or as is often the case for social stability.

The consequences of ending the amnesia—represented by the dragon's death—are depicted as deeply ambiguous. While the mist's lifting allows for a clearer understanding of the past, it also reawakens old grievances and sets the stage for renewed violence. The character Gawain voices this fear explicitly: "Right enough, princess, the warrior's words make me tremble... 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" (323). This moment underscores a central question of the novel: is memory always a path to healing, or can forgetting sometimes be the lesser evil?

In this symbolic landscape, Ishiguro questions the ethics of forgetting. Although forgetting gives a respite from pain, it can also allow societies their own form of peace at a cost of justice and moral processors required for meaningful reconciliation. The novel warns us that forgetting without confronting the state

of historical memory may lead those societies to replicate those cycles of violence. Yet, we mustn't forget that Ishiguro is averse to romanticizing remembrance. The restoration of memory doesn't provide relief, but rather confusion, pain and some moral ambiguity. The conflicting presence of memory in the novel includes an uncertainty that encapsulates the essential ambivalence that accompanies historical memory: it is a paradox of simultaneously enthralling and destabilizing remembrance.

#### V. THE ETHICS OF FORGETTING

A key philosophical quandary presented in *The Buried Giant* is whether forgetting can ever be morally justified. Ishiguro presents a dilemma with memory, and forgetting. On one side is the memory of the past, which is thought to constitute justice, responsibility, or healing. Memory codifies the experience of victims, recognizes responsibility on the part of the perpetrator, and facilitates reconciliation through honesty and transparency. In contrast, the novel demonstrates the case made for memory also gives weight to resentment, revenge, and the return to violence.

The duality of experience demonstrated in the text is represented by the characters of Sir Gawain and Wistan. Sir Gawain, the once-honored knight of King Arthur, has become an elderly man in isolation, who has devoted his life to guarding the she-dragon Querig—not to destroy Querig, but to guard the amnesia she creates. Gawain does not guard the mist out of ignorance or cowardice; he believes the truth is unsafe to release. Gawain sees the fog not as a curse but as a safeguard that ensures the nation's fragile unity by suppressing the memory of atrocities committed during war.

In contrast, Wistan, a Saxon warrior and former protégé of Axl, is determined to destroy the dragon and lift the mist, regardless of the consequences. For Wistan, justice demands truth, even if it means exposing the scars of the past and reawakening national divisions. His viewpoint reflects the belief that peace built on silence is hollow and temporary. Wistan warns that unless historical wrongs are confronted, they will eventually resurface with greater force.

Ishiguro does not overtly privilege one position over the other. Rather, he illustrates an ethical arena where both remembering and forgetting entail a kind of cost. Gawain's position may be accessible as pragmatic with its emphasis on stabilizing memories and minimizing suffering, while Wistan's was ethical and sublime but perhaps unsettling. Through Wistan and Gawain's moral paradoxes, the novel provides a framework to understand that ethics of memory is contextual to a larger applies its idea ethics of memory the trade-off justice and survival, truth and peace. While Ishiguro constructs a medieval universe to locate his ethical dialogues, these questions reach much further and engage in contemporary discourses within places recovering from genocide or colonialism or civil wars.

## VI. MYTH, HISTORY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL MEMORY

### A. Mythical Rewriting of British History

*The Buried Giant* does not just utilize myth but instead reconstitutes myth to confront nations' historical constructions. While Ishiguro clearly utilizes Arthurian myth and medieval imagery, he does so to question and overturn it not to glorify. Sir Gawain, for example, when immortalized in traditional tales, represents unwavering chivalric ideals; here, Gawain feels exhausted, morally conflicted, complicit in political maneuvers. The line of Gawain recalling his younger self without thinking is suggestive: "We called him Axelum or Axelus then, but now he goes by Axl" (233). The moment subtly undermines the narrative, reminding readers that even names and identities are changeable; formed by how people recall - willfully remember or forget - the past.

This mythic revisionism reveals the very nature of narrative fiction as it relates to the remembering of history since national histories are constructed by selective remembrance and have to romanticize violence. The Arthurian legends, for most part, focus on chivalric journeys, honorable kingship, and unity. But in Ishiguro's version, Arthur is implicitly revealed to have presided over and orchestrated terrible campaigns and has commanded the repression of memory for political purposes. Gawain confesses: "*King Arthur ordered that the dragon live, so her breath might erase the bloody memories of war and betrayal*" (311). Arthur's legacy, far from heroic, becomes a lesson in how leaders use mythology to control the collective consciousness of a people.

The blurred line between history and fantasy in the novel encourages readers to question the authenticity of all historical narratives. By filtering cultural memory through a mythic lens, Ishiguro challenges the assumption that what is remembered is necessarily what is true. Instead, he shows how history is shaped not just by events, but by the stories societies choose to tell about those events—and by the silences they enforce.

### B. Fantasy as A Lens For Historical Commentary

In her article "Dragons Aside, Ishiguro's 'Buried Giant' Is Not a Fantasy Novel", Laura Miller argues that fantasy is "a contemporary genre that uses the form of the novel to deal with the material of pre-novelistic storytelling" (2). Ishiguro, however, "reverses that formula, using the structure of a medieval romance to explore the moral and psychological themes we're used to seeing addressed by the realistic novel" (2). The novel is about ogres and knights and magical creatures, yet it speaks of things remarkably modern. Ishiguro employs fantasy not as an escape from reality but as a way to understand the real processes by which societies digest histories of violence and oppression. The magical mist that prevents memory is a reference to the various mechanisms—political propaganda, official censorship, social taboos—that can hide unpleasant realities. As the novel suggests, "The past was rarely discussed... It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past—even the recent one" (7). This silence is not accidental; it is cultivated, institutionalized, and internalized, much like the state-sanctioned narratives that dominate collective memory in many societies.

Ishiguro's use of allegory does enable him to treat these subjects with an ironic distance, but the echoes are clear enough. Whether it concerns the effects of a legacy of colonial violence, the outcomes of civil conflict, or the psychosocial issues of genocide, *The Buried Giant* engages with the human need to both remember, and erase. It urges readers to think about the costs of a history of silence and their role when confronting truths. By placing these realities in a fantasy narrative, Ishiguro positions these matters to remain universal, urgent, and deeply human.

Another important question raised in *The Buried Giant* is about collective memory—or the absence of it—and how it creates cultural identity, or shape national history. Ishiguro has created a post-Arthurian Britain, where the war between natives (Britons) and outsiders (Saxons), has been collectively forgotten and thus 'forgotten' historical trauma has been willed from societal memory. This amnesia is created through persistence of supernaturally induced amnesia—caused by mab the she-dragon Querig, and the inhabitants of the village forget about the atrocious acts committed against each other in the course of a violent conflict. The characters exist in a world, where the past has become not only repressed, but also unspeakable. As noted in the text, "The novel describes a war that used to take place between the Saxons and the Britons long ago. The war, yet, is forgotten by the two adversaries thanks to the breath that Querig spreads all over the country." This forgotten war, once defined by violence and hatred, has been buried under a veil of magical forgetfulness, allowing for a precarious peace to persist.

But this peace is entirely forged from historical amnesia - the peace is fragile and artificial. The writing makes this explicit. In fact, there is deep venom and hostility between the Britons and Saxons that produced a horrific war, a war where many a Briton and Saxon villager was brutally killed and tortured. It is actually, the breath of the she-dragon that assuaged the venom and aggression in all corners of the country.

In this way, unless there is memory of the previous harms, there is no way to have forgiveness or justice. Ishiguro characterizes this idea of peace as a stop-gap measure rather than a moral solution. The killing of the dragon is both blatant and suggestive - it breaks the amnesia, wakes the villages and re-opens memories of war and trauma. As the spell of Querig's breath is discharged, character and communities begin to remember the past and the tensions build again. The results are not redemptive but catastrophic. The figurative import of the act are captured in the next line, the buried giant turns out to be weak and slim more like a worm than a dragon, but the effects are still very deadly.

It is, then, a giant not because it is a large mass but because the consequences of killing it are inordinately dire." This statement emphasizes the paradox in the situation—Querig may be a physical weakling, but her girth over peace and memory suggests the gargantuan influence in her legacy. Additionally, the text layers this anxiety onto the character of Sir Gawain, who thinks back, "Right enough, princess, the warrior's words make me tremble... 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" (323). His anxiety is not only about the violence returning, but also about the social unravelling that also returns with a restored memory. In this

case, Ishiguro reveals that when there is a return of collective trauma there is a restoration of memory from a collective forgetting. Once the past has been buried it cannot be dug up without consequences.

The origin of this amnesia is also historically engineered. King Arthur, portrayed not just as a noble hero but as a ruler willing to manipulate memory, is said to have ordered the spell upon Querig. Gawain reveals: "Gawain told Axl and Beatrice that it's King Arthur who put a spell on the dragon for her breath to cause amnesia... 'I rode out with four good comrades to tame this same creature, in those days both mighty and angry, so Merlin could place this great spell on her breath'" (311). The intentional suppression of historical memory by a revered leader serves as a commentary on how national myths are constructed—often through the silencing of inconvenient truths.

Thus, Ishiguro framed cultural and historical memory not simply as a record of the past but as a construction, and often a tool of construction. Forgetting might provide a temporary reprieve from the effects of violence, but it also disguises the impacts of violence and prevents healing in genuine fashion. The novel asks whether genuine reconciliation is possible without memory - and if remembering, at whatever costs to the subjects, might be the only path to achieve justice and honesty.

#### VII. LOVE, LOSS, AND THE LOSS OF MEMORY

However, woven within the greater themes of warfare and collective oblivion, is one of the novel's most heartbreaking and human themes: the fragility of love, in the face of memory. The journey of Axl and Beatrice, though characterised as a quest for their son, is also a trial of their love for each other. Their love appears tender and everlasting, but is dependent on a shared history now shrouded in fog. As memories surface, memories restored, this also means that doubts, suspicions, and unaddressed unspoken histories and pain return. Beatrice herself understands fully how memory can inform love and identity. In one of the novel's most moving contemplations, she asks, "I'm wondering if without our memories, there's nothing for it but for our love to fade and die" (49). This question summarizes the novel's key emotional contradiction: is love dependent on present emotional intensity or collective experiences? The story ultimately suggests that love, like identity, is based off memory. Without memory to stabilize the emotional experience, even the strongest bond begins to feel tenuous and ephemeral.

As their journey unfolds, Axl remembers that Beatrice had once betrayed him—a revelation that challenges his image of their bond. He confesses, "It may be, boatman, I did something to drive her to the arms of another man" (339). This recollection exposes a fracture in their relationship that had previously lain dormant beneath the comforting fog of forgetting. However, while the return of this painful reality does not immediately destroy their love, it does complicate it, making it more human and vulnerable. Axl now has to reconcile the man he once was - a man capable of rage, grief, and jealousy - with the faithful spouse he now is.

Their final journey to the island across the river is a rich metaphor for love's final test. The boatman, who brings people to the afterlife, insists that each pair must be asked if their love

is true and sufficient to allow them to accompany one another into death. If not, he separates the pair, sending one or both tragically into eternal separation. When they arrive at their final destination, Axl and Beatrice's love is tested in the full light - not of passion or devotion but of memory. Will they truly choose each other, now that they remember everything? The novel ends ambiguously, with Beatrice going first, and Axl left behind, perhaps forever. This ambivalence emphasizes the novel's final meditation - can love, perhaps the deepest and longest lasting love, withstand the memories from a full and unfiltered awakening?

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, from the outset, forms an intricate and multi-layered meditation on the role of memory--personal, collective, and cultural. While the novel does not overly simplify memory as a good, it does, however, allow for a relentless exploration of the moral, psychological, and political ramifications of memory. In the novel, bearing witness to memory entails not just a reckoning, but a painful return. Memory facilitates truth, justice, and emotional clarity, but it can also accompany mourning, violence and disintegration. Memory re-emerging in the novel implicates both personal suffering and the spectre of renewed war. And while forgetting, in the novel, creates peace, forgetting entails the loss of self-knowledge, loss of historical accountability, and loss of authentic relationships. Ishiguro seamlessly blends allegory, psychological elaboration, and mythical motifs to grapple with how memory defines us--individually and nationally. The mist that takes away the past is a source of both alienation and comfort. Characters such as Axl and Beatrice; Wistan and Gawain embody and enact different types of interactions that exist within the past. Some seek to defend it, some seek to unveil it, but all must confront the consequences of the past.

The novel's real question is not simply whether remembering is better than forgetting, but whether it is at all possible to have experiences in which something is remembered or forgotten. Memory is shown to be a form of existential weight, but memory is also shown to be a weighty deficit. Ishiguro does not provide a definitive answer to this question. Instead, he leaves the reader with an inconvenient truth: that the past cannot be full known, and cannot be full buried, for a price. As Axl and Beatrice's narrative illustrates, personal and historical accounts are interrelated. Whether at the center of a marriage or the outcome of a war, memory is an ingredient in defining humanity and, at its very core, memory is the same thing that can bring us together or tear us apart.

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