

# Writing the Female Body: A Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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**Abstract.** Ishiguro projects the struggle of a migrated woman and the search for her identity primarily, at the same time subtly describing the pains and fears of a woman who traverses through the phase of pregnancy and imminent motherhood. Contemporary literary criticism may focus on the problematics of the conscious and subconscious desires of the characters, but body essentially is the locus of all human adventures which are represented through desires, moods, fears, creativity and feelings. The paper discusses Ishiguro's depiction of pregnancy in *A Pale View of Hills* and his projection of female body in order to determine that pregnancy and procreation are no longer taboo subjects and to analyze the impact pregnancy has on female. Kristeva talks about the female body, motherhood and pain which is not a construct of the society and culture. She presents a universal and natural interpretation of womanhood. Ishiguro effectively presents this pressure of being a female through Etsuko's character in *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko's own painful experience of pregnancy and maternity has made it difficult for her to believe that for other women, pregnancy can be a matter of happiness and joy.

## 1 Introduction

The representation of women in literature primarily has always been through the lens of masculinity. The male author gazes at the female persona and creates women characters that have been perceived through the rules of patriarchy. The feminine physique, sensibilities and urges were attenuated to conform to the existing patriarchal standards. Contemporary writers have made considerable changes with the changing times and they have succeeded in writing about women sensitively giving due representation to the fairer sex in their writings. Their writings have expanded the horizons of the universe of feminist discourse.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *A Pale View of Hills* has female protagonist Etsuko who has migrated from Japan to England. Her memories lead the reader to labyrinth of her life and the saga of her life unfolds in front of the reader disclosing the mysterious suicide of her daughter Keiko. She has another daughter Niki with her second husband which posits her as an essential figure of motherhood in the novel. There is a parallel mother-daughter relationship in the novel, Sachiko and Mariko, through which Etsuko projects her anxieties and trauma of being a mother and a woman.

Ishiguro projects the struggle of a migrated woman and the search for her identity primarily, at the same time subtly describing the pains and fears of a woman who traverses through the phase of pregnancy and imminent motherhood. Contemporary literary criticism may focus on the problematics of the conscious and subconscious desires of the characters, but body essentially is the locus of all human adventures which are represented through desires, moods, fears, creativity and feelings.

The paper discusses Ishiguro's depiction of pregnancy in *A Pale View of Hills* and his projection of female body in order to determine that pregnancy and procreation are no longer taboo subjects and to analyze the impact pregnancy has on female. Candis Bond remarks, "Pregnancy, one could argue, creates an entire new system of external, tactile stimuli that could positively alter the mind's ways of knowing and experiencing the self and the world" (p.23) [1].

## 2 Material and Methods

The paper explores the text and analyses various incidents, situations and the characters of the novel *A Pale View of Hills* to underline the female experiences. An interpretative model has been used for content analysis to reach an understanding of the relationship of a woman with her physical body.

### 3 Discussion

Ishiguro provide ample examples of these changes in a woman as he describes Etsuko's first pregnancy and her experiences. Etsuko's pregnancy and related fears can be traced in the following words, "The child's response had, it is true, upset me somewhat; for in those days, such small things were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about motherhood" (Ishiguro17) [2]. Etsuko does not directly refer to her fears and is not ready to acknowledge her gloomy and pessimistic feelings about motherhood. Her insistence about her own happiness under the circumstances is guided by the social norms which suggest that a woman who is about to have a baby must be joyous and she reiterates the expected answer, "Unhappy? But I'm not unhappy in the least" (Ishiguro 77). Her narrative is replete with the negative images about children, e.g., Mariko's fear of Etsuko (Ishiguro 17, 83, 173), child drowned by a mother witnessed by Sachiko and Mariko (Ishiguro 43, 74). Like every woman in the patriarchal society, Etsuko's self is fragmented, as on one hand she yearns to be an independent woman and on the other hand expectations of being an ideal mother are weighing upon her. The famous feminist critic Julia Kristeva writes about this ordeal, which is the fate of every woman, in her essay "Stabat Mater":

My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs. And yet, when its own joy, my child's, returns, its smile washes only my eyes. But the pain, its pain – it comes from inside, never remains apart, other, it inflames me at once, without a second's respite. As if that was what I had given birth to and, not willing to part from me, insisted on coming back, dwelled in me permanently. (p.167)[3]

Kristeva talks about the female body, motherhood and pain which is not a construct of the society and culture. She presents a universal and natural interpretation of womanhood. Ishiguro effectively presents this pressure of being a female through Etsuko's character in *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko's own painful experience of pregnancy and maternity has made it difficult for her to believe that for other women, pregnancy can be a matter of happiness and joy. Niki tells her about an unmarried friend of hers planning a baby and Etsuko's reaction, "But surely she can't be happy about it" (Ishiguro 48), shows her deep-rooted trauma. He has convinced herself that nobody is happy at the news of pregnancy and says, "But people always pretend to be delighted. It's like that film we saw on the television last night" (Ishiguro 49).

The eerie and spectral setting of *A Pale View of Hills* with recurring images of gloom, blood and death acts as a backdrop for the novel as Etsuko becomes a symbol of hope of future and horror of life. Her pregnancy can be viewed as a promise of the regenerative power of female body but it is also associated with fear and pain. Mrs Fujiwara's enthusiasm about the birth of Etsuko's child makes Etsuko anxious instead, "Etsuko, you're looking rather tired today." "I suppose I am." I laughed a little. "It's only to be expected. I suppose" (Ishiguro 24). The lack of energy of a woman during pregnancy has been accepted as perfectly natural and she is again advised, "Your attitude makes all the difference. A mother can take all the physical care she likes, she needs a positive attitude to bring up a child" (Ishiguro 24-25).

Etsuko outwardly accepts her traditional role as a breeder even though she has internal rage and resentment. She projects her own hated self in the story of Sachiko so that the mother Etsuko can be shown as a perfect mother. Critics have pointed out, that Sachiko and Mariko are fantasy figures "onto whom Etsuko can project her own guilt for neglecting and abusing Keiko" (Shaffer 21)[4]. All imperfections are directed towards character of Sachiko who does not prove to be a good mother for Mariko. Etsuko's suppressed guilt of not being a good mother for Keiko and creation of two fantasy figures, Sachiko and Mariko, is her response towards the society for tricking her into motherhood. Niki also rejects the idea of motherhood:

"Perhaps you'll get married and have children soon," I said. "I miss little children."

"I can't think of anything I'd like less," said Niki.

"Well, I suppose you're still rather young"

"It's nothing to do with how young or old I am. I just don't feel like having a Lot of kids screaming around me." (Ishiguro48)

Niki's decision is an assertion of a woman that she has control over her body and is not bound by the reproductive expectations of the society. Niki considers those women "miserable" who believe that childbearing is their only option:

“So many women”, he said, “get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they’re just

miserable. But they can’t pluck up the courage to do a thing about it. They’ll just go on like that for the rest of their lives.”

“I see. So you’re saying they should desert their children, are you, Niki?”

“You know what I mean. It’s pathetic when people just waste away their lives.” (Ishiguro 89-90)

Ishiguro subtly projects the idea of female body and maternity, yet he is silent about certain aspects of motherhood. He does not delve deep into the female experience of child bearing and remains silent about the tribulations of a female during child birth. The silence and omission about the female reproduction issues and health can be read as the reflection of the socio-cultural attitude towards “female body”. Motherhood is celebrated and considered sacred, but the associated physical strain is not discussed openly. Women have internalized and accepted the social norms and they very rarely question these traditions. Matek considers the shift from womanhood to motherhood a traumatic event in the life of Etsuko, “The multiple layers arising from Ishiguro’s ambiguous narrative allow for all of these interpretations to hold true if motherhood, the past, and the circumstances in post-war Japan are seen and acknowledged as being traumatic” (p.132) [5].

Ishiguro’s novel is conspicuous by absence and inadequacy of father, Jiro is not a helpful husband.[6] He appears in the novel to give commands to Etsuko for her household duties as a wife, “I wouldn’t mind some tea, you know” (Ishiguro 154).[7] He seems to have no interest in Etsuko’s life and he never appears to be a considerate husband or father. He never enquires about Etsuko’s health and made no comments about her pregnancy.[8] Evasion and repression are evident in the relation between husband and wife, where a pregnant woman does not get the emotional and psychological support from husband, which leads to the suppressed anger in Etsuko.[9] The event of pregnancy which is supposed to be full of happiness becomes a source of trauma for the wife.[10]

## 4 Conclusion

Ishiguro presents an ambivalent attitude towards pregnancy; the novel is full of anxieties and fears desires and experiences of woman during the period. Etsuko’s worries about impending motherhood combined with various negative images about children fills the novel with tension, posing valuable questions about pregnancy and the female body. Pregnancy in the text becomes an instrument in locating the position of woman in the society. *A Pale View of Hills* poses compelling questions about pregnancy, female experience and women’s agency within the society.

Ishiguro cannot be labelled as feminist or anti-feminist. Ishiguro’s attitude towards women characters is ever evolving and complex. This paper is an endeavour to inspire a conscious discussion about the treatment of women, their reproductive issues and health in the novels. Ishiguro’s characters like Etsuko, Niki and Sachiko are on the threshold of a metamorphosis into a confident and self-aware womanhood. The paper tries to locate Ishiguro’s writing amidst the modern historical and philosophical influences in which the individual is not bound by the expectations of gendered binaries and women’s voices are heard and the spirit of humanity is alive and dynamic.

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