

## Mending to Live: Memory, Trauma and Narration in The Writings Of Kazuo Ishiguro, Herta Müller and W. G. Sebald

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the varied modes of articulation of trauma as evident in the narratives of Kazuo Ishiguro, Herta Müller and W. G. Sebald, and the role of memory in re-writing identities. It draws primarily on three books, viz., Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), Müller's *The Land of Green Plums* (1998) and Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1998) in order to underscore the evolutionary upheavals surrounding the reconstruction of violated Selfhood. This paper seeks to investigate the underlying subtexts of the Collective (and individual) Memory that bear the imprint of a troubled past and is, in consequence, shaped by it. Müller's *The Land of Green Plums*, for instance, studies the effect of political persecution on individuals and how that experience and its memories, in turn, shape the lives of those affected. Sebald's mnemonic opus, *The Rings of Saturn*, through a complex texture of personal memories and collective trauma, unfurls a chiaroscuro history of humanity. It explores the *unheimlich* in the backdrop of what appears to be an extended theatre of memory played across a time-space continuum. Set against the ineffable moral and material devastations of the Word War II, in Ishiguro's *A Pale View of the Hills*, memory and resilience power the scripting of identities not only for the living, but also for the generations to come. This paper is primarily concerned with the aftermaths of trauma and the complex fables of memory that impress upon and restructure individual and collective identities.

*'Man is born broken. He lives by mending'.*

(Eugene O'Neil: *The Great God Brown*)

## **Introduction**

Trauma and memory have been intriguing subjects of research and widespread scholarly studies and continue to interest us. However, the boundaries have, as a matter of fact, widened beyond the ambit of extremely severe or abnormal circumstances to accommodate many common distresses of everyday life. Although traditional entries like war, violent rape, concentration-camp experiences, sexual and psychological abuses during childhood still persist, the label of 'trauma' has now been effectively extended to many others situated between either extremes.

As a confirmation of the above, traumatic experience can ensue from the depiction of violence by the media, television news etc. In fact, trauma can become a condition of everyday life where the subject's residence in a city that had experienced wars, terrorist attacks, ethnic or communal violence can trigger a series of narrative repetition of the violence and the traumatic memories associated with it. Memories of a violent past can often obscure the fine line between reality and imagination actuating a sense of confusion and incomprehension. Eyewitness accounts of genocides and other ethnic and communal conflicts testify to this state of delirium indicative of the pervasiveness of assault that stretch beyond the realms of physical to the psychological and cultural.

This paper considers the cultural and socio-historical expressions of trauma and purports to interpret how they impinge on our memory--- by modifying, transforming and even reproducing it. It underlines a constant need to re-invent and revivify the Self, often necessitating the ritual of un-remembering, per se, to exorcise the psychedelic delusions and the many absurdities of reality.

## I

*Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here.*<sup>1</sup>

Etsuko's narration of postwar Japan in *A Pale View of the Hills* (1982) is dominated by the unreliability of memory. It is evident in the unexplained gaps and omissions, often voluntary, insofar as a general disinclination on the part of the narrator and the other characters to discuss the past in unsparing detail. Etsuko expresses her 'selfish desire not to be reminded of the past'<sup>2</sup> and so does her father-in-law, Ogata-San, when he urges Etsuko to 'forget these things'<sup>3</sup>. Memory exists only in limbo for Mrs. Fujiwara who reminds Etsuko that the tragedy is 'all in past now'<sup>4</sup>. The trauma of the atomic disaster and its terrible aftermath must be forgotten or remembered *differently* as Etsuko's reminiscing of postwar Nagasaki confirms: a certain day in the harbor caught in the middle of frantic reconstruction; the clamor generating more optimism than disgust--- it was also a time she remembered, when her daughter, Keiko was happy. *A Pale View of Hills* is a contemplative narrative set in the present in which Etsuko, now a widow living in the English countryside, reminisces about her life in postwar Japan. Another story that runs parallel to Etsuko's is that of Sachiko and her daughter Mariko; a compelling subtext, as the plot evidently reveals, to Etsuko's mnemonic narrative. Interestingly, the story of Sachiko and Mariko can be seen to function as a premonitory trope inasmuch as it foreshadows the migration of Etsuko (to England) and the death of Keiko. The difficult relationship between Sachiko and her daughter Mariko also adumbrates a similar difficulty between Etsuko and Keiko, bearing the same sense of doomed incomprehension leading to the latter's suicide. It has been argued that the subplot entailing Sachiko and her daughter is an alternate representation of events in Etsuko's life. In an interview with Gregory Mason, Ishiguro points out:

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<sup>1</sup> Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, 156

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 58

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76

*What I intended was this: because it's really Etsuko talking about herself, and possibly that somebody else, Sachiko, existed or did not exist, the meanings that Etsuko imputes to the life of Sachiko are obviously the meanings that are relevant to her (Etsuko's) own life. Whatever the facts were about what happened to Sachiko and her daughter, they are of interest to Etsuko now because she can use them to talk about herself.*<sup>5</sup>

The readers are reminded of the unspeakable violence of the war and its aftermaths through Mariko's memories of the woman she witnessed killing her own child. This is also, for a second time, enacted in Sachiko's merciless drowning of the kittens she was reluctant in letting Mariko keep. Trauma, in *A Pale View of Hills* is an indirect experience, imminent in memory and enacted *within* rather than without it.

Like the narration never steps into any elaborate discussion over the development of the relationship between Etsuko and her first husband, Jiro, leading to the possible dissolution of their marriage, the exact circumstances leading to Keiko's death is also left largely unexplored. In this context, Etsuko is almost always evasive in her hasty conclusion: '*such things are long in the past now and I have no wish to ponder them yet again. . . There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again.*'<sup>6</sup> Etsuko's somewhat guilt-ridden reluctance in recounting certain aspects of her past has been described by Brian W. Shaffer as her 'suppression of memory'<sup>7</sup>. Powerless, at the face of present realities that threaten to hurl her back to a past she willfully avoids acknowledging, the gaps in Etsuko's memory is as much a proof of her resilience as her vulnerability. In her dream, the girl she sees in a swing, Keiko who died by hanging herself and Mariko become one. She finds herself hopelessly riveted to the past, a reality so potent that it cannot be ignored; only suppressed to summon momentary relief. This is also the reason behind the vacillations and the unreliability of Etsuko's story as parts of her memory, in their being too painful, has to be reconstructed through the story of Sachiko and Mariko. Overcome by both sorrow and a desperate psychological need to explain the

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<sup>5</sup> Mason, Gregory. *An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro*. Contemporary Literature, 30, 1989, 337

<sup>6</sup> Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, 91

<sup>7</sup> Shaffer, Brian W. *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*. Columbia: SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998, 17

past and her actions, she recounts to Niki, her daughter: *My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko's interests very much at heart.*<sup>8</sup> This is a justification that belongs as much to Etsuko as Sachiko.

The use of mundane descriptions of everyday life to define and denote cataclysmic calamities is an important aspect of *A Pale View of Hills*. The day Etsuko visits the harbor at Nagasaki at the height of postwar reconstruction, she is drawn to the war memorial set in the Peace Park. Already a living memorial of wartime tragedies, Nagasaki was ironically transformed into a city of hope as reiterated by the incessant clanging of hammers, a sound that is particularly vivid in Etsuko's memory. The statue in the park, commemorating the dead, in its Hellenic exuberance evoked more optimism than doom--a reflection of the collective psyche that was eager, like Mrs. Fujiwara, to move forward leaving the past behind. Etsuko's impression of the statue is therefore, deceptive as the connection between experience and memory in relation to it is functionally misplaced. The representational value of the statue is diluted in Etsuko's association of it to a day, and apparently only to that, when she visited the harbor with her father-in-law and confirms the urgent bias to put the past peremptorily behind. The past is more than a flickering presence in Etsuko's imagination; it makes an inroad into her present in the form of memorabilia from another life per se, in the calendar showing the harbor at Nagasaki she has preserved for reasons unexplained and which she gives to Niki, for instance, and in the articles about Japan written by her dead husband, Mr. Sheringham. This is also the bridge linking Niki to her remotely Japanese past, the only authentic way by which she can understand and interpret her mother and conversely, herself, as situated in the firm ground of a past devoid of deceptions and ambiguities.

The wonted reliance on selective memory and the vacillations of remembrance in *A Pale View of Hills* anticipate, in a way, the importunity of silence in *The Land of Green Plums*. Just as the occasion of dialogue between Etsuko and Niki represents a shared space--an effort on the part of Etsuko to come to terms with her past and Keiko's death, the need to share, according to Müller, is essential to the mending of broken lives and memories alike.

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<sup>8</sup> Ishiguro, Kazuo. *A Pale View of Hills*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, 91

## II

*'There are all kinds of ghosts prowling these confused streets. they are the ghosts of monuments demolished...They grow like weeds on the ruins, like melancholy flowers of forgetting'.<sup>9</sup>*

*The Land of Green Plums* (1998) is a long, hard look on dispossession and depravity. Memory, being part of that dispossession, is incorporeal and is often abandoned in forgetting. It is set in socialist Romania<sup>10</sup> where the psycho-social burden of totalitarianism makes itself ubiquitously manifest as an inescapable condition of life. It dominates every aspect of the lives of the narrator and her friends whose intersecting stories illustrate the extremities of Ceausescu's regime. A prelude to the opening chapter, excerpts from the poetry of Gellu Naum<sup>11</sup> makes it clear that this is no book of nostalgic remembrances, but of the brutal aftertaste of oppression and its acknowledgement, doubly sinister in its deceptive simplicity. This is also what Müller adopts as a strategy: the articulation of trauma in *The Land of Green Plums*, is ironically, and in all vividness, attained with a rare economy of words. Where language has ceased to be reliable and perpetuating it in writing dangerous, words get replaced by silence which quickly mutates into habit: 'the habit of silence like the habit of fear'.

The effect of political persecution is most acutely felt in the loss of identity and orientation, in the dehumanizing mowing down to sameness of the infinite possibilities of human aspiration. As summarized by Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979):

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<sup>9</sup> Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. New York: 1981, 158

<sup>10</sup> *The Land of Green Plums* is set in Romania under the totalitarian regime of President Nicolae Ceausescu commonly referred to as the 'dictator' in the novel. Ceausescu came to power in 1965 unleashing a regime of supreme control that exhibited absolute centralization of power and a severe lack of empathy.

<sup>11</sup> Gellu Naum (1915-2001), a notable poet and Surrealist was associated with the Romanian avant-garde movement of the time.

*'The struggle of man against power is a struggle of memory against forgetting.'*<sup>12</sup>

The vicissitudes of dispossession in *The Land of Green Plums* vouch for a similar struggle. It is as much evident in the sameness of all artifacts against a forgotten or unclaimed diligence as in the provinces left behind, dispossessed in a limited sense; yet, a severance complete enough to strip one of his sense of belonging. Old places, like the dead in family photographs, survive only in limbo; almost like an afterthought of a time and place that can never come so close to the past as to resemble it.

This is also a book of silences; clipped yet articulate, brooding yet luminous reflection of a terrible reality---the superfluity and untrustworthiness of words being long established by the poem in the prelude:

*Everyone had a friend in every wisp of cloud  
that's how it is with friends where the world is full of fear  
even my mother said, that's how it is  
friends are out of the question  
think of more serious things.*<sup>13</sup>

It is no coincidence that the word nail-clipper appears recurrently throughout the text, an oblique insinuation at the extreme state-sponsored censor curbing free speech. Fear dominates the sham orderliness of the dormitories as much as the moral chaos of the bodegas; the desperate desire to flee to the land of 'bluejeans and oranges...and real mascaras'.<sup>14</sup> In people's memories, the places left behind, exchanged for the crude cities of detergent factories and slaughterhouses are doomed to live a shadowy half-life. Their provinces cannot be planted amid the crudities of their present and the stray mulberry tree or the wicker chair stand in the forlorn sunny patches of the elderly like ghostly sentinels from a forgotten time and place.

In an environment of almost ritualized silence, Lola with her men in white shirts and her irresistible passion for materialism stands out as a

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<sup>12</sup> Kundera Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. New York: 1981, 4

<sup>13</sup> Müller, Herta. *The Land of Green Plums*. London: Granta Books, 1999

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,

grotesque profanity insofar as the girls in the dormitory seem to be relieved by her absence. They do not want to hear about Lola, let alone discuss her or her notebook and are quick in their reprimand against the slightest variation to this order. Lola's disgrace brought about by her suicide represents a summary *Damnatio Memoriae*<sup>15</sup>, the complete expunction of the proofs of her existence from public memory. This is also the cruelty reserved for failed aspirations and is doled out generously by the dictator and his plum-chewing soldiers as a final imposition of forgetting on the collective psyche.

The palliative powers of forgetting are underscored in the sham reconstruction of faith and order in a land dominated by increasing hopelessness and in the despairing attempt of grandfather to quieten the fearful memories of the war. Forgetting also allows for the imperative uniforming of the proletariat of 'tin sheep and wooden melons'<sup>16</sup>, the useful disintegrating of the mulberry trees and the villages where they stood into the monochrome setting of the city. An infectious sameness seems to dominate the setting where even the letters sent by the mothers are all same and so are their illnesses and the fates of the SS fathers. An appalling contrary to this endless litany of sameness existed only in the peripheral reaches: the dwarf woman with a grass pigtail, the raving philosopher with a misplaced consciousness of his surroundings and the delirious old woman in the market place had all 'exchanged fear for insanity.'<sup>17</sup>

The unending struggle of memory against forgetting is anticipated in the sudden and involuntary encroachment of the past into the present. As a proof to this incessant conflict marking the failure of the State to attain a complete expunction of the memories of the dead, Lola and the defiance she represented underscore an obstinate refusal to be permanently erased:

*Edgar said: Everywhere you look, you see Lola's notebook. It's as big as the sky.'*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Literally meaning 'damnation of memory', *damnatio memoriae* connotes an erasure from remembrance. It originated in ancient Rome as a mark of dishonor to traitors. Practicably, it was the most severe form of punishment in which a total erasure from public memory of the one who brought dishonor to the State was effected by removing every material trace of the subject concerned. The Stalinist regimes employed it as a method of expunging from public memory every material evidence of their political and ideological opponents.

<sup>16</sup> Müller, Herta. *The Land of Green Plums*. London: Granta Books, 1999, 43

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

The narrator and her friends, Edgar, Georg and Kurt, in their desperate obsession to flee the country, nurture the same defiance as Lola's. Albeit, secretively. From sharing books prohibited from circulation, slyly stowed away in the summerhouse, to common fears, they represent individuals battling political persecution; their memories embittered by similar experiences; their fates doomed to follow identical trajectories.

The extent of control as exercised by the State is further accentuated by the recurrent imagery of stopped clocks. The narrator comes home to her village when the grandfather clock, the alarm clock have stopped. Mother's wristwatch, too, does not give time. To the child, '*Without the alarm clock, there'll be no morning.*'<sup>19</sup> With the coordinates of time displaced beyond any meaningful redemption, life is transformed into eternal waiting. It seemed that everybody was waiting for the ailing dictator to die; but, the stopped clocks, as it appears, had conspired to postpone even that inevitability.

Trauma and its articulation in *The Land of Green Plums* follow the tortuous trajectory of individual lives to a point where personal tragedy is encompassed into a broader social realm. The deaths of Georg and Kurt are cruel imperatives that must reach out even to the miraculous land of 'bluejeans and oranges' leaving behind a luminous detritus of deathless aspirations and an optimism that must survive a brewing army of accomplices.

Behind the deceptively simple façade of Müller's dark, yet lilting prose is an urgent desire to reach out into the open from the abysmal depths of disenchantment and despair. Like Ishiguro who employs the mundane events of everyday life to convey matters of monumental significance, Müller lets her plot develop around simple people living uneventful lives. It is because her characters are so plebian, that the tragedy strikes as particularly harsh. With no legitimate claim to martyrdom, the events circumscribing the lives of the narrator and her friends accentuate the trauma as suffered by a nation and that which unapologetically wields the ultimate power to transform identities.

Unlike *A Pale View of Hills* where only liminal glimpses of the aftermath of the atomic disaster are allowed to surface, the unspeakable

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 106

outrages of the totalitarian State in *The Land of Green Plums* flow like a steady, insidious stream of iniquities; morbidly real and threatening in its power to overwhelm and surprise. Although essential to endow one with a sense of history and belonging, what is visible is admittedly paltry, when compared to that which cannot be acknowledged without jeopardizing sanity.

### III

Memory and trauma are the two principal themes explored in *The Rings of Saturn* (1998). As Sebald reminds us of his vicarious re-living of wartime Germany through William Hazel's impressionistic accounts of the war, the reader is introduced to an alternate domain of reality, dominated by the traumatic memory of the carpet bombings of the German cities by the Allied forces during World War II. The images of wartime Germany and the Holocaust are recurring visitations in Sebald's literary works; given, the biographical fact that the author's father, a member of the Reichswehr and later the Wehrmacht remained a prisoner of war until 1947 and that the backdrop of his childhood was painfully tinged with the lurid memory of Nazi Germany. Sebald articulates his concern in the collection of essays, *On the Natural History of Destruction* about the wartime bombing of the German cities and the surprising absence of any real (German) response in writing on the subject. His astonishment on discovering this strange lack of records of an important historical event signifies an epochal erasure brought about by the traumatic experiences (of war) that had resulted in an ominously complete expunction of the painful wartime detail from the Collective German Memory. William Hazel, the gardener at Somerleyton, seems to echo Sebald's personal concern on this strange deficiency of written/oral records:

*'(W)hen I was in Luneburg, with the army of occupation, I even learnt German, after a fashion, so that I could read what the Germans themselves had said about the bombings and their lives in the ruined cities. To my astonishment, however, I soon found the search for such accounts invariably proved fruitless. No one at the time seemed to have written*

*about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly, it was as if everything had been erased from their minds.*<sup>20</sup>

The imaginative (re-)invocation of lives and places therefore, becomes imperative. The only remaining way to retrieve the past lies in one's readiness to explore the tattered and worn out pages of Received History; to navigate through the surreal gaps in the time-space continuum from an imaginalist and ultimately redeeming perspective. Sebald precisely achieves this by employing memory and where it proves fallible, imagination. This is particularly apparent in *Austerlitz*, where Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist, has to chalk out his own survival strategy by re-conjuring his past from the burnt-out embers of fragmented dreams and repressed memories. His only hope lies in breaking through the barriers of regimented history to reach out to the liminal possibility of salvaging the past that has suffered the indelible scourge of time.

The horror of traumatic experiences is reiterated in the subsequent chapters of *The Rings of Saturn* where Sebald describes a souvenir photograph depicting the senseless murder of a Serb called Branco Jungic by militia men at the Jasenovac camp on the Sava. The raw articulation of trauma is stylistically intended to shock the reader who, through the very *act* of reading, becomes irredeemably implicated in the violence of the past as a proxy witness. Sebald recalls the mass execution of Jews, Serbs and Bosnians by the Croatian militia and the massacre during the Kozara campaign when thousands of women, commodified, were sold as slave laborers and rounded off to Germany. The orphaned children were either subjected to instant slaughter or transported to the Croatian capital in shoddy trainloads. Sebald remains acutely conscious of his biographical association with the Jews<sup>21</sup> and his own somewhat troubled childhood with the sinister memory of Holocaust looming large in the backdrop. Consequently, his partial

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<sup>20</sup> Sebald, Winfried Georg. *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage, 2002, 39

<sup>21</sup> As a school-going boy, Sebald was shown images of the Holocaust which, at the time, he could not fully comprehend. But the specter of the atrocities remained a lasting impression in his mind to which he recurrently returned in his travel-memoirs. Wartime Germany loomed large in his narratives and the demons of his childhood never fully deserted his writings.

identification with the children orphaned and dislocated during the Kozara campaign can be read as a throwback signifier of his own troubled past:

*Like everyone else they learnt the socialist ABC at school, chose an occupation, and became railway workers, sales girls, tool-fitters or book-keepers. But no one knows what shadowy memories haunt them to this day.*<sup>22</sup>

*The Rings of Saturn*, metaphorically, transforms into a hall of mirrors wherein the disjoint reflections from the past, ceaselessly colliding against each other, fabricate the present. However, Sebald's compelling memoir incapacitates both visual and verbal tropes as lacking in adequate *re-presentational* powers that fail to resist the abrasions caused by *passing* Time and are, as a result, finally obliterated beyond any meaningful redemption. Individual and Collective Memory<sup>23</sup>, as he indicates, are partially capable of salvaging the past; but are constrained with a crippling dependency on man-made artifacts: the printed text or the photograph, for instance. These again, are inadequately endowed with the precise power to re-present reality. The re-presentational capabilities of language, as Sebald implies in *The Rings of Saturn*, too, remains seriously questionable and its premises flawed, as its coordinates can be easily displaced or falsified and thrown off balance through constant and repeated manipulation and morphing of texts and contexts.

*The Rings of Saturn* narrativizes history and memory in a seamless continuum of intersecting stories told from a dominantly imagist perspective. What Sebald attempts to chronicle in his non-linear mnemonic contemplation of the world is a re-invoked genesis of the time-space equation---one to which he has ascribed his own coordinates and sense of relevance. In his imageries of war, the torture in the camps of the Croatian Ustasha and the Holocaust, one encounters the imprint of a 'negative philosophy of history'<sup>24</sup> as expressed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which, contrary to the

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<sup>22</sup> Sebald, Winfried Georg. *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage, 2002, 98

<sup>23</sup> Coined by Maurice Halbwachs, Collective memory is a group construct used to denote public memory (as against individual or personal memory) from the representational point of view.

<sup>24</sup> *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a scathing critique on Western dominion. In the negative philosophy of history, Horkheimer and Adorno chart the progress of civilization since the Enlightenment as one representing decline rather than progress.

nineteenth century liberalist stance on the subject, views the history of human civilization as one of veritable regression.

Sebald recognizes the fallibility of memory in re-constructing history. Musing at the panoramic depiction of the 'Battle of Waterloo' in Brussels, he acknowledges the virtual assumption of a 'vantage point', an abstract height which necessitates a certain 'falsification of perspective':

*'This then...is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was...What became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point?'*<sup>25</sup>

The fallibility of memory imparts histories with a sense of unreliability, an often fabricated representation of the past; which, given its moments of terror, has to conjure its own resilience in forgetting. It is by un-remembering or remembering *differently* that we preserve our identities or re-discover another; or, as Sebald points out in *Vertigo*, try tirelessly to seek depiction in the absurdities of design:

*'(O)ver the years I had puzzled out a good deal in my own mind, but in spite of that, far from becoming clearer, things now appeared to me more incomprehensible than ever. The more images I gathered from the past, I said, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling.'*<sup>26</sup>

Memory is illusive. It consists of multiple, infringing realities. Like the conflicting stories of the four witnesses to murder in *Rashomon* (1950)<sup>27</sup> memory leads to subjective and often, far too diffusive interpretation of

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<sup>25</sup> Sebald, Winfried Georg. *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage, 2002, 125

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

<sup>27</sup> *Rashomon* is a 1950 Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa. An adaptation from Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story, *In a Grove*, Kurosawa's film explores the widely differing accounts of witnesses on the same event. It lays emphasis on the subjective nature of truth and how that contributes to the unreliability of interpretation of the past.

reality. That abundance of rendering cannot yield inviolate restitution is the most poignant irony that lies at the heart of the terrible unheimlich of the Sebaldian universe.

Interestingly, *The Rings of Saturn* reaches out to what Alison Landsberg calls 'prosthetic memories'<sup>28</sup>, which allows for, and makes possible an experiential relationship with subjects from the past. Like the randomly selected 'identification cards' given to visitors in the Washington Holocaust Museum, pairing them with the victims and survivors of the tragedy, *The Rings of Saturn* enunciates an experiential relationship with the (troubled) history of mankind. It enacts a metaphorical encroachment of the past into the present, representing the numerous ways in which the interpretation and understanding of histories shape our understanding of ourselves and the past and in turn, is transformed, reclaimed and finally, regenerated.

The aftermath of trauma watermarks a major departure from the familiar uniformity of mundane perceptions, often, to the alien and uncertain grounds of the surreal. It leads to a differential interpretation of reality and the reformulation of memories and identities. It affects our perception of history and the past in ways that may not always be immediately apparent. The modes of narration, as evident in the writings of Ishiguro, Müller and Sebald indicate that the line between reality and delusion is not as solid as we would like to imagine. As recent PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) studies surrounding war veterans and other victims of trauma would show, the experience of violence has a profound influence on the perception; the degree of its intensity deciding who or what we become. And, it is indeed a fortunate irony that memory, which we often consider the burden of our experience, should also nurture within itself the secrets of replenishment.

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<sup>28</sup> Alison Landsberg uses the concept of 'prosthetic memory' as an artificial implant of past events in the public memory that is no less real than the original experience. In her book, *Prosthetic Memories: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), she argues how such a method 'can produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender.'

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