The Image of the River
in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the theme of the river in Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* which will be analyzed in relation to the nuclear devastation of WWII. Rivers have a special meaning to the inhabitants of Nagasaki since the rivers were filled with the corpses of people who were exposed to radiation after the atomic bombing. It is also known in Nagasaki that unidentifiable fireballs called *onibi* float over marsh ground at night in summer. Especially in his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, the river evokes the image of *Sanzu No Kawa*, a river which, in Japanese Buddhism, the souls of the dead are believed to be crossing on the seventh day of afterlife. The river imagery signifies the boundary between life and death, and it has been used as a metaphor for the transience of time. As such, the river displays an ephemeral texture. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the protagonist Etsuko reminisces about her days in Nagasaki. In her memories, she becomes friends with Sachiko and her daughter Mariko. One night, Mariko confesses to Etsuko that she sees a ghostly woman coming from the other side of the river. Ishiguro also writes about the rivers in other novels. For example, in *Never Let Me Go*, he uses the river as a metaphor for Kathy and Tommy's fate. In *The Buried Giant*, at the end of the novel, Axl sets Beatrice free and lets the boatman carry her alone to the island, which can be read as Beatrice's departure from life. My analysis explores Ishiguro's intentions when using the river and various

apparitions in his novels, with a special focus on *A Pale View of Hills*.

Keywords: the river, ghosts, Nagasaki, memories, transience of life, death

Introduction

The story of *A Pale View of Hills* is set in Nagasaki, Japan, which is Ishiguro's birthplace. Ishiguro says he remembers his days in Nagasaki so vividly because there was an enormous change in his life. Near Ishiguro's grandparents' house is a small river called Nakajima Gawa (the Nakajima River). For people in Nagasaki, the river is particularly meaningful, especially to victims of the atomic bombing. There is also a famous temple called *Kogenji* which has a picture of *Ugume No Yurei*, a woman ghost holding her baby in her arms. Ishiguro introduces the river into his novels to imply the transience of life. When looking back to the history of Japanese literature, we realize that rivers have been regarded as the embodiment of human life or philosophy since the Heian Period (794-1185). Ishiguro only spent the first five years of his life in Nagasaki, but it seems that he was able to grasp this philosophy well enough to write his stories of Japan. In Ishiguro's novels, *A Pale View of Hills*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Buried Giant*, rivers appear as a symbol of death indicating fate or the line between life and death. For instance, the river in *Never Let Me Go* can be viewed as a metaphor for the merciless fate of Tommy and Kathy. In the last scene of *The Buried Giant*, the boatman, who seems to personify Death, awaits on the bank listening to Axl and Beatrice's last conversation. He takes Beatrice to the island on the other bank, which could be read as a metaphor for Beatrice's death. Ishiguro admits that he became a writer because he wanted to write *his* Japan on paper before his memories faded away. Therefore, this essay examines the ways in which his constant preoccupation with the river and ghosts is reflected in his novel *A Pale View of Hills*.

1. The Image of Death in *A Pale View of Hills*

According to *Konko Myokyo [the Golden Light Sutra]*, the first appearance of the Sanzu River in Japan was back in the fourth century. When Buddhism was imported to Japan, part of the Buddhist philosophy or doctrine was infused into literature and art. For example, *Manyo-shu*, which is the oldest literature in Japan, contains *waka* that relates to the Asuka River. *Hojoki [The Account of My Hut]*, written by Kamo-no Chomei (1153 or 1155–1216), opens with a famous verse, “The river flows unendingly. Its waters pass and shall never return. Where the water eddies and pools, bubbles form only to vanish the next moment, while others are born in their stead. So, it is with man and his dwelling in this world” (2). Kamo-no Chomei also writes that all living things and their environments are impermanent:

Some die in the morning, some are born in the evening. All are so destined, just like the bubbles. From where humans, who are born and die, come and to where they go, I know not. Nor have I any idea for whom they take such pains... nor for what reason in this transitory life they love to decorate those dwellings. The ways in which the owners and houses so readily fade away, as if they compete on fragility, are like the dew and the morning glory: Sometimes the dew falls and the flower remains. Though it may remain, it will perish in the sun of the following morning. Or the flower may wither, while the dew remains. Still it will evaporate by the evening. (2-3)

In Buddhism, a river is considered a symbol that divides life and death. The philosophical implication is that nothing stays in one place, everything is in a state of flux and is transient, including human life.

Another famous verse that alludes to the transience of life, using the river as a metaphor is Kenko Yoshida’s *Tsurezure Gusa [Essays in Idleness]*: “The world is as unstable as the pools and shallows of the Asuka River. Times change and things disappear: joy and sorrow come and go; a place that once thrived turns into an

uninhabited moor; a house may remain unaltered, but its occupants will have changed” (25). According to the report written by Masahiko Kawai and Masamitsu Mizuno, rivers are used in the *Kabuki* and *Noh* plays as stage settings:

The story of *Aotozoshi Hanano Nishikie* (better known as ‘Shiranami Gonin Otoko’ or ‘Benten Kozo’) develops on the bank of the Inase River or the Sumida River. [...] Thirty out of 243 performances in the *Noh plays* relate to rivers, including the Aizome River and the Sakura River, and in the vicinity of rivers. In most of the performances, the river plays an important role, and it has been a transportation artery and a site of gatherings of humans, ghosts and gods. (169, my translation)

It is obvious that the river has been playing an important role in Japanese literature, culture, theatre and society since the Heian Period (794-1185). This philosophy has been passed down from generation to generation for 1,200 years in Japan, and Ishiguro, who is now a British citizen living in England, had it ingrained in him in his first five years of life in Nagasaki. In what follows we will focus on several meaningful scenes foregrounding the river in *A Pale View of Hills*.

At the beginning of *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko remembers what it was like in the vicinity of her house in Nagasaki from her current house in England. She refers to it as follows: “A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins” (11). Etsuko’s description recalls the image of Nagasaki City after the A-bomb strike. Then she explains how things started to get rebuilt, but the area remained unsanitary. She says that the area around the river in particular was an expanse of waste ground, dried mud and ditches which were an extreme health hazard: “All year round there were craters filled with stagnant water, and in the summer months the mosquitoes became intolerable” (11). It seems the image that first comes to Etsuko’s mind is the river and marshland, which was

verminous, an inferior environment. Etsuko mentions many times that she was pestered by insects. She states:

The summer grew hotter, the stretch of waste ground outside our apartment block became increasingly unpleasant. Much of the earth lay dried and cracked, while water which had accumulated during the rainy season remained in the deeper ditches and craters. The ground bred all manner of insects, and the mosquitoes in particular seemed everywhere. (99)

Every time she visited Sachiko, a friend of hers, she had to cross the muddy land. This indicates that the river and things associated with it are the gist of her memories of Nagasaki. Perhaps, Sachiko and Mariko are the symbolic figures of Nagasaki to Etsuko, and they are remembered with all those abominable and unpleasant things and unhygienic environment after the war.

Sachiko is a friend whom Etsuko met one summer in Nagasaki. She is a single mother raising a girl named Mariko. Etsuko describes the cottage where they lived as follows: "One wooden cottage had survived both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers. I could see it from our window, standing alone at the end of that expanse of waste ground, practically on the edge of the river" (12). Sachiko has an American lover, Frank, and she was the subject of gossip in the neighbourhood. She would leave Mariko unattended when she would date Frank. Mariko was frequently seen playing near the river alone. A child playing alone beside the river is dangerous and evokes drowning risks. Many scholars, indeed, describe this scene as suggestive of death or indicating a murderous relationship between Sachiko and Mariko. There is a good reason behind these, all the more so as Sachiko drowns Mariko's beloved kittens in the river.

Etsuko visited Sachiko one night when Sachiko was preparing to move to Kobe before departing to America. As Sachiko was packing her belongings, Mariko was playing with her kittens. Mariko had made her kittens a home, which was a vegetable basket she had won at a festival. Mariko badgers her mother and insists on

keeping the kittens. However, Sachiko gets annoyed and says, “Aren’t you old enough yet to see there are other things besides these filthy little animals? You’ll just have to grow up a little. You simply can’t have these sentimental attachments forever. These are just ... just *animals* don’t you see?” (165). Then she starts to stuff the kittens into the basket and goes out to the river. She takes one of the kittens out of the basket and kneels on the grass to drown it. This scene reminds the reader of a woman Sachiko had met in Tokyo in an air-raid during the war. The woman was drowning her baby in the water, and afterwards she committed suicide by cutting her throat:

There was a canal at the end and the woman was kneeling there, up to her elbows in water. A young woman, very thin. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw her. [...] At first I thought the woman was blind, she had that kind of look, her eyes didn’t seem to actually see anything. Well, she brought her arms out of the canal and showed us what she’d been holding under the water. It was a baby. I took hold of Mariko then and we came out of the alley. (74)

Sachiko takes the kitten, which she had tried to drown, out of the water, and puts it back into the basket. This time she pushes the basket, with all of Mariko’s kittens inside, over the edge of the bank and lets it slide into the water. She even leans forward to push it downward to prevent it from floating. Ever since this incident Mariko has started to say she saw a woman. This woman who visits her from the other side of the river is only visible to Mariko. Like the mother who drowned her baby in the water, Sachiko did the same and killed the kittens with her own hand. The shadow of death hangs around the river in *A Pale View of Hills*. Brian Shaffer interprets this scene as “Sachiko’s figurative murder of her daughter” since it “takes place in this overdetermined first climax of the novel, when the Styx-like muddy river becomes a literal place of death for the cats” (33). The river in *A Pale View of Hills* represents for Ishiguro a symbolic tool to recall *Yomi No Kuni*, the Nether World, or simply death. Moreover, this scene could make

the reader think of the ephemeral duration of lives which can be taken away in an instant, and the vegetable basket stuffed with Mariko's beloved cats being thrown into the river by Sachiko is a symbol of the cruel disruption of a family.

Etsuko admits that her memories are faulty. Therefore, she talks about the same episode in which she goes out to search for the missing Mariko twice, in Chapter 6 and Chapter 10, but the narratives are inconsistent. Thus, at the beginning of Chapter 6, Etsuko says, "I was advanced in my pregnancy" (83) and that she was very careful not to move hastily. She recalls her feelings and confesses, "I was finding it strangely peaceful to walk beside the river" (83). Her description of the landscape begins to get uncanny. "Along one section of the bank, the grass had grown very tall" (83). The insects around her were making a lot of noise and eventually she found a rope tangled around her ankle, "as if a snake were sliding in the grass behind" (83) her. She picked it up and said, "When I held it up to the moonlight it felt damp and muddy between my fingers" (83). She noticed Mariko sitting in the grass a short way in front of her. "Hello, Mariko" (83), Etsuko called out when she found her. The symbolism of the rope and the snake — each suggests something sinister and foreboding. The rope and snake make one think of hanging and strangling which further lead to Keiko hanging herself in the apartment in Manchester. The rope appears again in Chapter 10 where the search starts with Etsuko walking along the river. She recalls: "Insects followed my lantern as I made my way along the river. Occasionally, some creature would become trapped inside, and I would then have to stop and hold the lantern still until it had found its way out" (172). Then she comes to the bridge and says, "While crossing it, I stopped for a moment to gaze at the evening sky. As I recall, a strange sense of tranquility came over me there on that bridge. I stood there for some minutes, leaning over the rail, listening to the sounds of the river below me. When finally I turned, I saw my own shadow, cast by the lantern thrown across the wooden slats of the bridge" (172). Mariko was crouching beneath the opposite rail looking at her

palms. Etsuko called out and said, "What are you doing here?" (172).

There are two recurring images in this scene described in the two chapters. These are "insects" and "Etsuko's emotions." In Chapter 6, the insects make a lot of noise, and, in Chapter 10, insects gather around her lantern. Etsuko has described the insects as if they were the symbol of the unsanitary condition after the war in Nagasaki, bringing about a state of irritation in her. She is feeling uneasy about her search for the missing child. However, in both scenes she finds herself "strangely peaceful" (83) or feeling "a strange sense of tranquility" (172), which contradicts her mental state. Etsuko repeats the word "strange," which suggests that she finds her antagonistic feeling unusual. In the earlier part of the story in particular, she mentioned that walking across the waste ground, she "had become resigned and cynical" (99), and she vividly remembers the days of that summer because of her anxiety related to "misgivings about motherhood" (99). What is the cause of this discordance? It could be the emergence of her consciousness and sub-consciousness, or she was conversing with two different people, Mariko in Chapter 6 and Keiko in Chapter 10.

In Helen Fau's insightful article entitled "Making the Voice Wordless in *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro," she states that "The grassy and snake-like rope, recalling the umbilical cord, tangles around the pregnant Etsuko's foot in the muddy marsh as if it tried to strangle the unborn baby, as if it fulfilled the mental abortion Etsuko wishes to have" (154-55). Considering Etsuko's mental state, maybe in this scene she is able to see all the creatures and insects, grubs and midges wriggling in the marshland as a metaphorical expression of the 'fountain of life.' However, the image of death that the river induces in *A Pale View of Hills* cannot be erased, so for Etsuko, all those insects are loathsome, and she wants them annihilated. In this case, Fau's theory concerning Etsuko's desire to have an abortion may have a point. Shaffer states that the rope can be associated "with Keiko's noose – that she removes and then holds in her hands shortly before catching up with the girl [Mariko]" (35). He further adds that "Etsuko's worst

nightmare is [...] that she is somehow not merely loosely implicated in her first daughter's suicide but is its instigator" (35-36). Shaffer points out that the rope reminds her of Keiko's death and symbolises Etsuko's guilt. Barry Lewis mentions the fact that the rope could be an allusion to Mariko's suicide: "She is constantly running away from her mother to spend time alone by the river, and is traumatised by the ghost of the 'other woman'. She has severe mood disturbances, and at different times annoys the customers at Mrs Fujiwara's noodle-shop, insults Sachiko's American lover, eats a live spider and attacks a fat boy on a day out" (35). Etsuko never mentions Mariko's death or any fatal accident in the story, but, as Lewis argues, Etsuko is giving us many hints. Fumio Yoshioka states that the rope that entangles Etsuko's ankle is related to Keiko who had committed suicide by hanging herself with the rope in her apartment in Manchester:

Mariko makes an impulsive response to any possible threat to her life. For example, she turns frozen and motionless at the sight of a rope which Etsuko disentangles from her ankle as she comes to seek her at the river – a rope associated easily with hanging. Under the existing conditions, hypersensitivity affords the sole means of self-protection to this poor little girl (79).

Takahiro Mimura explains that "Everything that relates to the image of Keiko's death, which stems from Etsuko's oppressed feeling of guilt, is changing its form repeatedly in the novel, Mariko's invisible woman included" (64, my translation). As Mimura further argues, *A Pale View of Hills* is narrated by Etsuko, so the whole story could be read as a story of remorse for her true feelings: on the surface she is being a good mother searching for the child, but the true feeling that she conceals could be ignorance.

The contradictory point in the two chapters is the place where Etsuko finds Mariko. In Chapter 6, Etsuko recalls "the grass had grown very tall" (83). Mariko was "sitting in the grass a short way in front of me [Etsuko], her knees hunched up to her chin. A willow tree – one of several that grew on the bank – hung over the spot

where she sat” (83). Mariko was sitting in the grass. The willow tree is the typical stage setting for a ghost in Japan. This scene also reminds us of the umbilical cord that connects the baby to its mother. Etsuko is holding the rope (the umbilical cord) as if indicating that the child’s life is in her hand. Etsuko and Mariko converse in this scene as follows:

“Hello, Mariko,”[...] I took a few steps towards her until I could make out her face more clearly.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Nothing, just a piece of old rope. Why are you out here?” [...]

“Why have you got that?”

“I told you, it’s nothing. It just caught on to my foot.” I took a step closer. “Why are you doing that, Mariko?”

“Doing what?”

“You were making a strange face just now.”

“I wasn’t making a strange face. Why have you got that rope?”

I watched her for a moment. Signs of fear were appearing on her face. (84)

After this conversation, Mariko runs away. Etsuko describes the way Mariko disappears as “footsteps running off into the darkness” (84).

In Chapter 10, Etsuko recalls the scene in the following manner: “the little girl was before me, sat crouched beneath the opposite rail. I came forward until I could see her more clearly under my lantern” (172). Mariko is underneath the railing at the other side of the river. Then Etsuko and Mariko converse as follows:

“What’s the matter with you?” I said. “Why are you sitting here like this?”

The insects were clustering around the lantern. I put it down in front of me, and the child’s face became more sharply illuminated. After a long silence, she said: “I don’t want to go away. I don’t want to go away tomorrow.”

I gave a sigh. "But you'll like it. Everyone's a little frightened of new things. You'll like it over there."

"I don't want to go away. And I don't like him. He's like a pig" [...]

The little girl was watching me closely. "Why are you holding that?" she asked.

"I told you. It just caught around my sandal, that's all."

"Why are you holding it?"

"I told you. It caught around my foot. What's wrong with you?" I gave a short laugh. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not going to hurt you."

Without taking her eyes from me, she rose slowly to her feet.

"What's wrong with you?" I repeated.

The child began to run, her footsteps drumming along the wooden boards. She stopped at the end of the bridge and stood watching me suspiciously. (172-73)

Cynthia F. Wong points out that "the conversation between the young girl and Etsuko evolves, the identity of the young girl becomes more confusing. Referred to only as 'the child' or 'the little girl', she could have been either Mariko or Keiko" (31). She also claims that not clarifying who Etsuko is talking to leaves "the identity of the child ambiguous" (32). I certainly agree with her point. In addition, it seems more likely that Etsuko is talking to Keiko in Chapter 10. In Chapter 6, the scene ends with Mariko's footsteps, but in Chapter 10 it has turned to "her footsteps drumming along the wooden boards" (173). The difference between the sounds of the footsteps gives us a hint that, in Chapter 6, the child is wearing a pair of rubber sandals or shoes (or that she might be bare-footed) and in Chapter 10 the child is wearing a pair of wooden sandals (*geta* sandals). This also indicates that the girl in Chapter 10 might be wearing a *yukata*, which is a traditional cotton kimono which the Japanese wear with *geta* sandals in summer, and this means that she comes from a wealthy family. Furthermore, in this chapter, Etsuko remembers gazing at the moon while on the bridge. She says, "A half-moon had appeared above the water and

for several quiet moments I remained on the bridge, gazing at it. Once, through the dimness, I thought I could see Mariko running along the riverbank in the direction of the cottage” (173). The reason for which Etsuko recalls this scene twice in the novel has been debated by many scholars. It may be because of her feeling of guilt in that she made her daughter commit suicide. She pretends that she is strictly talking about what had happened between Mariko and herself. However, the truth was that one of the stories involved her daughter. She could not utter Keiko’s name because it was too unbearable for her. Therefore, she indicates this by slightly changing the settings. The river in Chapter 10 is the Sanzu River, which is the indication of Keiko’s death. Etsuko remembers the bridge and her shadow. The contrast between the moonlight and the shadow brings about an eerie spell resembling the image of Death, which is more of a western gothic image. As Shaffer states, “Freudian theory helps explain Mariko’s (and Keiko’s) attraction to the river (and hence, symbolically, to death)” (28).

The image of death is attached to the river in Nagasaki where an enormous number of human corpses were found, and it is known that a lot of *onibi* emerge during summertime, the time of *Obon* season. Ishiguro deliberately set the story of *A Pale View of Hills* in summer. He could not resist writing about the ghostly river because the river epitomises Nagasaki.

2. The River and the Ghosts in Japan

In an interview with Masayuki Ikeda, Kazuo Ishiguro admitted that he was interested in Japanese ghosts: “I am interested in Japanese ghosts. They are so different from the British ones” (148, my translation). Everybody has one or two favourite ghost stories from their childhood days, and Ishiguro is no exception. At the temple, *Kogenji*, located in the vicinity of Ishiguro’s former residence, once a year around the *Obon* season, the temple shows respect for the souls of the dead and opens its vault to the public, showing a *Kakejiku*, or hanging scroll, which has a picture of a ghost woman carrying her baby. Monks chant sutra and perform a ritual to

worship her soul. According to folklore, a woman fell madly in love with a man who was originally from Nagasaki. He was working temporarily as a carpenter in Kyoto. After his work ended, he abandoned her and left for his hometown. She followed him to Nagasaki, but it was too late because he had married a woman whom his parents had recommended. The woman who followed him from Kyoto was carrying his baby, but she was devastated upon hearing the news and committed suicide. She was buried with six *mon* coins in her coffin. There was a custom in Nagasaki to bury the deceased with six *mon* coins so that the deceased could cross the Sanzu River and go to Heaven. However, the woman who had committed suicide turned into a ghost and visited a candy store night after night to feed the baby with candy in her grave. On the sixth day, the owner of the candy shop followed her and found the baby in her grave. The monks at the temple raised the child and in return she provided water to the neighbourhood.

Speaking of ghosts, there are many ghost stories related to wells in Japan. The most typical example in recent years is the Japanese horror movie *Ring*. That movie also features a female ghost appearing from the well. At Ishiguro's grandparents' house, there was an old well in the garden. Kyoko Hirai visited his grandfather's house, but, unfortunately, after it had been renovated. However, she saw the well in the garden. Hirai describes her impression of the garden as follows:

When I stepped into the garden, I noticed one stone lantern; its surface was weathered, and disguised by tendrils of an old ivy plant that had entwined the nearby shrubs. A small hill and well are still there untouched, and a maple tree and azaleas, planted by Ishiguro's grandparents, were fully grown. I can see the old well through the reception room, which in childhood days most children believed was where you would see an apparition. If you were born around the same year as the Ishiguros, I am sure you would agree with me, as the image of the old well is engraved in our memories. (17, my translation)

This essay recalls the short story, “A Family Supper,” which Ishiguro wrote before making his official debut as a writer. There is a scene where the protagonist describes the well in the garden: “The tea-room looked out over the garden. From where I sat I could make out the ancient well which as a child I had believed haunted. It was just visible now through the thick foliage. The sun had sunk low and much of the garden had fallen into shadow” (434). When comparing these two scenes, the description of the garden is similar. In short, Hirai is indicating what she saw in the garden of the former house of the Ishiguros, and the memory which Ishiguro recalls is almost the same. What becomes clear is that the image of ghosts has stayed in Ishiguro’s mind.

When considering the connection between Ishiguro and the ‘river’ as well as the ‘ghost’ in Japanese literature, Kenji Mizoguchi, the movie director of *Ugetsu Monogatari*, (*Ugetsu* in short), comes to mind. Ishiguro mentioned this name as one of his favourite Japanese movie directors in several interviews. Although the ghostly scene of a boat being rowed on water was shot on Lake Biwa and not a river, there are other scenes in which a river divides human life from the spiritual world. *Ugetsu* was originally written by Akinari Ueda in the Edo period. The story consists of nine chapters in five volumes. He started writing it in 1767, and it took him five years to complete it. Mizoguchi made it into a film and released it in 1953. It was awarded the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival. This film is a crafted piece of Japanese art that contains Japanese musical instruments in the background, such as *Biwa*, *Taiko* (Japanese drums), *Fue*, *Shakuhachi* and *Koto*, as well as interjection sounds along with a *Noh* dance performance. Gregory Mason points out that *Ugetsu* resonates in *A Pale View of Hills*:

In the novel, too, the reader “begins to realize that it involves things which are not what they seem,” and that “there may be mirror realities in reflection or opposition.” As Etsuko’s present visions and dreams fuse with her past memories, the reader gets a growing sense, as in *Ugetsu*, that there may be “a stream of ghostly existence

running as a kind of parallel to our own, with branches reaching out to cross our lives at moments capriciously determined by fate.” (42)

The story develops in *Ugetsu* as if the spiritual world and present world coexisted in parallel. Furthermore, in *A Pale View of Hills* Keiko's room is left untouched, and both Etsuko and Niki sometimes hear a noise coming from her room as if she were still alive. Ishiguro knows that it is one of the Japanese conventional practices to pay respects to the souls of the dead and that ancestors' souls sometimes visit the house.

When Ishiguro constructed the part of the plot about entering the other world, *Ugetsu* must have been useful. Genjuro, the protagonist of the movie, follows Princess Wakasa and an old woman who guides him to the Kuchiki residence, which exists beyond the human world. They walk through the grass that had grown tall which resembles the reeds along a river, evoking the image of the Sanzu River, the border between human life and death. This scene is evoked in *A Pale View of Hills* where Etsuko went out searching for Mariko and described the landscape as, “Along one section of the bank, the grass had grown very tall” (83). Moreover, it evokes the scene in which Mariko says, “The woman came round again [...] Last night. While you were gone. [...] She came last night. She said she'd take me to her house” (27).

In the interview with Ikeda, Ishiguro stated that “Ghosts described in Japan are very scary but at the same time they are very beautiful. I am currently visiting the library and reading about the *Kabuki* and *Noh* plays that contain ghost stories” (148, my translation). Ishiguro regards the Japanese ghosts as “very scary but at the same time they are very beautiful,” so it is obvious that he had seen something beautiful in them and associated the Japanese ghost image with the *Kabuki* and *Noh* plays. *Ugetsu* contains both aspects. The scene in which Princess Wakasa, played by Machiko Kyo, wears a beautiful kimono and performs a *Noh* dance is dreamlike and beautiful. Ishiguro mentions Machiko Kyo's name when asked about his favourite actress in Japanese films. Japanese ghosts, such as Princess Wakasa or Miyagi, a wife and a ghost who

waits for her husband to come home after being killed by a wanderer, and their beautiful images must have inspired him. Tadao Sato explains Japanese ghosts in the following terms: “Usually ghosts which appear in the human world carry remorseful vengeance, whereas ghosts watching over our lives are in Heaven, therefore they do not appear in the human world. However, whoever imagines a scary ghost in his mind is seeing the ghost as the soul of the dead who died ‘normally’ and looks after people kindly. The ghosts in *Ugetsu Monogatari* express it in a real form” (82, my translation). The corresponding image of the scary, remorseful vengeance of the afterlife in Japanese films is, perhaps, a demon in the western ones. *Friday the 13th* borrows the day and date when Jesus Christ was killed, and in *The Exorcist* a priest prays holding the cross and trying to expel the evil spirit from a twelve-year-old girl. Sato describes the image of evil spirits in western movies as “Demons [which] are the absolute villains that eternally stand against God. They neither disappear after wreaking vengeance nor look after human beings kindly” (82-3, my translation).

The way the Japanese view religion is different from those in other countries. There are, of course, religious groups other than Buddhists in Japan, but the majority of Japanese households belongs to a Buddhist sect among thirteen major sects, including the Jodo and Jodo-shin sects. However, most people do not practice any religion in particular. The ancestors of the Japanese held Shinto beliefs, but after Buddhism started gaining ground, people adopted a variety of religious beliefs. Since Shinto is a polytheistic belief indigenous to Japan, people easily accept a new deity in the religious system. Lewis refers to the traditional custom of *Obon* and a ghost story called *Yotsuya Kaidan*, and explains that “If Ishiguro’s work is to be classified in terms of its Japaneseness, we would expect his treatment of ghosts and suicide in *A Pale View of Hills* to be informed by traces of conventional Japanese topics and symbols” (29).

The way in which the Japanese worship their ancestors’ spirits is noticeable in *An Artist of the Floating World*, which shows

Ishiguro's understanding of Japanese tradition. Masuji Ono, the protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World* describes the reverence given to the reception room where the Buddhist altar is placed:

For throughout my years I have preserved the sense, instilled in me by my father, that the reception room of a house is a place to be revered, a place to be kept unsoiled by everyday trivialities, reserved for the receiving of important guests, or else the paying of respects at the Buddhist altar. Accordingly, the reception room of my house has always had a more solemn atmosphere than that to be found in most households; and although I never made a rule of it as my own father did, I discouraged my children while they were young from entering the room unless specifically bidden to do so. (41)

Ono learned from his father that the reception room is different from other rooms and that it should be kept clean and respected. The tradition has been passed down from father to son. He probably learned from his parents or grandparents to put his palms together to pray and pay respects to his ancestors. He himself felt the "solemn atmosphere" and his memory of the room made him write about it. During his childhood, Ishiguro must have been told numerous folktales, ghost stories, and real-life stories of the atomic bombing. He must also have become acquainted with various religious perspectives and views about life and death. As he grew up, his memories of Nagasaki were stimulated by Japanese movies and books and sprang back to life. Particularly, the stories he heard from his mother must have had a great impact on him in the creation of *his* Japan. Ishiguro's mother was a survivor of the A-bomb strike in Nagasaki. In the interview with Ai Tabe, after being awarded the Nobel Prize, Ishiguro stated that he had heard about the atomic bombing in Nagasaki from his mother, when he was a little boy: "My mother lost her friend in the bombing. She said it was a 'horrific experience.'" In the same interview, he also mentioned that, after releasing his short stories before making his major debut as a writer, "She said I am responsible to let the next generations know about the memory." When Ishiguro decided to

become a writer, the first thing that came to his mind was Nagasaki. In his fiction, he wanted to create/reproduce Nagasaki the way he remembered it; consequently, he used the river to suggest the transience and the fragility of life as a metaphor in his novels. He is preoccupied, almost obsessed, with the river, which proves that he views Nagasaki as the root of his identity as it was his hometown. It was inevitable for Ishiguro to go back to the stories he had heard in his childhood days, including the stories about ‘the river’ and ‘the ghosts,’ especially the ghost with a baby in *Ugume No Urei*.

3. Conclusion

‘All is void’ is the fundamental Dharma of Buddhism. This philosophy was gradually embodied and transformed into the river and started to permeate Japanese culture, literature and art. It has been deeply engrained in the Japanese mind, hence in Ishiguro’s own mind. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro lets Etsuko speak about how different the Japanese are from the British at the beginning of her story: “Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than the newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room” (10). Ishiguro pointed to the prejudices the British have against the Japanese and succeeded in keeping the image of death throughout the story. Life is transient, all is void is the doctrine ingrained in Ishiguro, and this cannot be changed. The river that appears in *A Pale View of Hills* takes on similar connotations. When Ishiguro reminisces about his childhood days, the ghostly river cannot be detached from them. He was an inhabitant of Nagasaki, and the river of Nagasaki inhabits Ishiguro. Furthermore, Buddhism expounds that the grand river of truth is running in the depths of our consciousness. The river of Nagasaki is still running in Ishiguro’s mind, changing its form and seeping through the lines of his novels.

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