



Trauma, Memory, and Moral Reckoning in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

*S. Shobana¹, Dr. A. Ajmal Khan²

¹ Part Time Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College, Trichy – 20 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

² Associate Professor and Research Advisor, PG and Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College, Trichy – 20 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19627402

Submission Date: 25 Feb. 2026 | Published Date: 17 April 2026

*Corresponding author: **S. Shobana**

Part Time Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College, Trichy – 20 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's An Artist of the Floating World examines the burden of memory in postwar Japan through the troubled recollections of Masuji Ono. Once a respected painter who aligned his art with nationalist ideals, Ono now lives in a world that views such loyalties with suspicion and shame. His return to the past reveals a divided inner life marked by pride, evasion, doubt, remorse, and the desire for dignity. The novel places this inward struggle within a wider historical crisis shaped by imperial collapse, generational change, and the erosion of patriarchal authority. Ono's memories of the floating world, his break from Mori-san, his participation in propaganda, and his uneasy exchanges with his family disclose a self caught between former conviction and later accountability. Ishiguro uses fragmented recollection, understatement, and tonal ambiguity to show how trauma survives within acts of self-explanation. This paper argues that the novel treats memory as a difficult moral field in which personal responsibility and collective history confront one another.

Keywords: *trauma, memory, moral reckoning, guilt, Masuji Ono, postwar Japan, art, complicity.*

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* presents the aftermath of war as a crisis of memory, authority, and self-worth. Its narrator, Masuji Ono, belongs to a generation that once enjoyed prestige and influence. During Japan's militarist years, his artistic work carried public value. In postwar Japan, that earlier status has lost its moral force. The world that affirmed him has receded, and the recollection of that world returns with unease.

Ono's account moves between present observation and remembered scenes from earlier decades. He recalls his apprenticeship under Mori-san, his movement away from the floating world, his embrace of socially purposeful art, his nationalist commitments, his treatment of former associates, and his family life after the war. These recollections do far more than restore a vanished past. They expose the strain between self-justification and remorse. They also reveal how historical collapse reaches into the household, the studio, and the mind.

This paper reads Ono's retrospective account as a sustained act of moral reckoning. His memories register personal guilt, damaged authority, and a broader postwar crisis in values. Ishiguro presents memory neither as a stable record nor as a clear path to confession. Memory in this novel is selective, defensive, wounded, and necessary. Through Ono's wavering voice, the novel studies the difficulty of facing a past once lived with certainty and later viewed with shame.

2. Postwar Japan and the Collapse of Public Certainty

The historical setting of the novel gives Ono's reflections their full pressure. Japan after the Second World War is a place of ideological reversal. Patriotism, loyalty, and national duty once carried public honour. After defeat, those same ideals invite censure. The older generation confronts a changed moral order, while the younger generation speaks from impatience, bitterness, and distance. Ono lives within this broken transition.

His earlier work belongs to the years when nationalist rhetoric shaped public life. One of the clearest signs of this allegiance appears in the slogan attached to *Eyes to the Horizon*: “No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward” (Ishiguro 137). The slogan carries the aggressive optimism of imperial ambition. It urges obedience, suppresses hesitation, and places collective expansion above private judgment. Ono once accepted this atmosphere as necessary. Later recollection exposes its violence.

The shift in social values appears sharply in his exchanges with Suichi, who gives voice to postwar anger. Suichi speaks of those who sent young men to die and yet continue to live comfortably, “afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility” (47). This judgment matters because Ono hears in it an accusation directed toward his own generation and, by extension, toward himself. Such moments reveal the new moral climate in which Ono must now place his life.

His position within the family also reflects this altered order. Once he would have expected unquestioned deference. Postwar domestic life offers no such security. Noriko and Setsuko respond to him with tact, caution, and at times quiet correction. Their attitude reflects a society that has reduced the moral weight of men like Ono. His authority persists as habit and memory, yet social confidence in that authority has eroded.

3. Memory and Self-Representation

Ono’s recollections never arrive as transparent truth. He remembers selectively, revises emphasis, and often presents himself in ways that preserve dignity. This quality gives the book its peculiar force. The reader hears a man trying to tell the truth of his life while also protecting himself from it. The effort to explain and the effort to evade often occupy the same sentence.

At several points Ono casts his younger self as one who acted with courage against the sway of others. He recalls defending Tortoise and later speaks of his own “ability to think and judge for myself, even if it meant going against the sway of those around me” (56). The phrasing raises him above conformity and gives his past an air of independent principle. Yet the same memory also exposes a man deeply attracted to ideological certainty and public approval. His language of self-respect and discernment therefore carries strain.

A similar tension marks his recollection of his break from Mori-san. Ono presents that departure as the result of conscience and seriousness. He tells his teacher: “My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world” (146). The sentence gives moral grandeur to his decision. It frames his departure as a rejection of decadence in favour of historical duty. Yet later developments cast a shadow over this claim. What once appeared as ethical seriousness becomes entangled with propaganda, coercion, and complicity. The remembered declaration remains important, though its meaning shifts under retrospective pressure.

This unstable self-representation reaches a particularly sharp point in the passages where Ono admits doubt. “There was no question in my mind that I had been right to do as I did,” he says, before adding, “there were times when I could not deny feeling doubts” (61). This movement from certainty to hesitation reveals the divided structure of his memory. He wishes to preserve the conviction of the past, yet later knowledge enters and unsettles that conviction. His voice never settles into either full confession or complete self-exoneration.

4. Trauma, Status, and the Crisis of Identity

Ono’s inward struggle is tied to the loss of social status as much as to moral guilt. Before the war he possessed a public identity as a respected artist and influential man. After the war, that earlier significance becomes a burden. The change enters the marriage negotiations for Noriko, where the father’s reputation matters, and where his past suddenly becomes something to manage, soften, or distance.

This reduction of stature wounds him deeply. Setsuko’s effort to minimize the larger significance of his work gives one of the clearest signs of this change: “Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father’s work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking” (156). Her statement protects the family in a practical sense. At the same time, it diminishes the very importance Ono still wishes to preserve. He longs for acknowledgment of influence and pardon together. The social world offers him neither in full.

Ono’s relation to his father deepens this crisis. His father had embodied an older patriarchal order built on command, fear, and unquestioned obedience. Ono remembers the pressure of those early years with unusual vividness: “although month after month went by and I was never required to say anything more; I nevertheless lived in dread of the next business meeting” (42). Fear entered ordinary routine and became part of his formation. Authority, for him, always carried a coercive edge.

That early model helps explain both his later attachment to hierarchy and his frustration in postwar family life. He inherited the values of a father-centred world, yet he lives in a period that no longer grants such authority the same

legitimacy. The result is a painful mismatch between inward expectation and outward reality. Trauma in the novel therefore includes more than the memory of war. It also includes the collapse of long-standing forms of masculine identity.

5. The Floating World and Haunting Memory

The floating world of Ono's early artistic life remains one of the most evocative parts of the novel. It stands for beauty, pleasure, fragility, and transience. Under Mori-san's guidance, the floating world appears as a space where art attends to fleeting radiance rather than public purpose. Mori-san tells Ono that "the finest, most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark" (121). The statement offers an aesthetic creed built on evanescence.

Ono's later recollection of this world is marked by nostalgia, admiration, and unease. He once believed that devoting one's talents to such transient pleasures was wasteful. "It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity" (121), he admits. The sentence matters because it reveals how suspicion entered his artistic imagination long before his turn toward propaganda reached full force. He came to see the floating world as morally insufficient, too enclosed, too delicate for an age of national crisis.

Yet the floating world returns in memory with a haunting authority that his later commitments never fully erase. Its vanished beauty becomes a measure of what he left behind, and perhaps of what he betrayed. Ishiguro places this world beside postwar ruin in order to stress impermanence at every level: aesthetic, social, political, and personal. The nightlife district, the houses, the old artistic values, and the imperial order all belong to a past now touched by wreckage and distance.

The haunting force of these memories lies in their doubleness. They console and wound at once. Ono can still take pleasure in recalling teahouses, canal-side lanterns, and the old city before the war. Yet each return to that world also sharpens his awareness of loss and of the choices that carried him away from it. The floating world persists as a site of desire, regret, and self-measurement.

6. Art as Witness and Complicity

Few issues in the novel carry greater moral weight than the question of art's relation to power. Ono begins as a painter shaped by an aesthetic ideal of beauty. He later turns toward a public art that claims social seriousness and patriotic necessity. That change becomes the central ethical movement of his career.

He justifies the turn in a language of responsibility. In troubled times, he argues, artists must value something more tangible than the pleasures of courtesans and lantern-lit streets. Such reasoning gives his choice a moral seriousness that he continues to value in retrospect. Yet Ishiguro steadily exposes the cost of this seriousness. Once art joins political rhetoric and state ideology, it loses innocence. It begins to help produce the very public atmosphere that later generations condemn.

Ono's propaganda work offers the clearest example. His public role, including his identification as "an official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities" (147), places him close to institutional coercion. Art here ceases to be a private craft or a celebration of fleeting beauty. It enters the machinery of surveillance, conformity, and nationalist fervour. The artist becomes implicated in the state's moral failures.

Ono later tries to face this implication with a degree of candour. "My paintings. My teachings," he says, before acknowledging that he acted "in good faith" and now admits he "was mistaken" (100). This admission matters because it grants responsibility without fully surrendering the dignity of intention. He still wishes to preserve a distinction between sincere belief and destructive consequence. The tension remains unresolved, and Ishiguro keeps it unresolved. That choice gives the novel its seriousness. Art bears witness to history, yet art may also assist history's crimes.

7. The Bridge of Hesitation

One of the richest symbols in the novel is the Bridge of Hesitation. Ono recalls that the bridge earned its name because conscience-troubled men could be seen lingering there, unsure whether to enter the pleasure district or return home (80). The image is immediately wider than its anecdotal origin. The bridge becomes a place of suspension, a threshold between desire and duty, past and present, justification and acknowledgment.

Ono claims that when he stands there in retirement, he does so merely to observe the city and its changes. The claim persuades only in part. His repeated return to that bridge suggests a deeper inward need. It offers a physical vantage point from which he surveys the altered world around him and the altered meaning of his own past. From there he sees districts once alive with old pleasures and now marked by poverty, reconstruction, and historical distance.

The bridge therefore condenses the moral structure of the novel. Ono is a man of hesitation. He hesitates between defending and judging himself, between reverence for the past and acceptance of its failure, between private pride and public shame. The bridge gives these hesitations a visible form. Its liminal position reflects the condition of a narrator who never occupies one side of the moral divide in full.

The symbol also reaches beyond Ono. It speaks to postwar Japan itself, poised between imperial memory and democratic reconstruction, between denial and admission, between inherited values and a revised social order. In that sense, the bridge joins the personal and the national with unusual economy.

8. Narrative Method: Fragment, Understatement, Ambiguity

The structure of the book plays a crucial role in its treatment of trauma and memory. Ono's account moves across different years and returns repeatedly to earlier moments with altered emphasis. This non-linear movement resembles the operation of troubled recollection itself. The past does not unfold in sequence. It returns by association, through place, conversation, mood, and wounded pride.

The opening pages already establish this pattern. The house, the hill, and the Bridge of Hesitation work as triggers of recollection. Physical surroundings activate moral reflection. The city becomes a mnemonic landscape in which private history and collective history remain intertwined. Ono's house, in particular, stands as a complicated emblem of prestige, inheritance, loneliness, and damage. Its commanding position on the hill suggests distinction, while the war-damaged veranda and altered domestic space introduce fracture into that distinction.

Ishiguro's style deepens this effect through restraint. The prose avoids dramatic self-exposure and relies instead on nuance, implication, and tonal drift. Pain enters through qualification, delay, and understatement. Conversations remain formal even when tension runs beneath them. Such restraint suits a narrator who would rather circle a wound than expose it at once. The reader must infer much of the emotional truth from small shifts in phrasing and emphasis.

Ambiguity follows from this method. Ono's admissions matter, yet their scope remains uncertain. His gestures toward responsibility carry sincerity, prudence, and self-preservation all at once. The ending retains this ambiguity. He can look at younger people rebuilding the city and feel "genuine gladness," while also remaining haunted by "whatever mistakes" the nation made in the past (167). The closing mood offers neither absolution nor collapse. It offers a partial accommodation to history, and that partiality is wholly fitting.

9. Conclusion

An Artist of the Floating World treats memory as a site of conflict rather than repose. Through Masuji Ono, Ishiguro portrays a man who revisits the past in order to secure dignity, judge his actions, and endure the burden of what he once believed. Pride, self-respect, remorse, nostalgia, and evasion move through his account together. The result is a portrait of consciousness under historical pressure.

The novel also places Ono's inward reckoning within a larger postwar crisis. His damaged authority, strained family relations, and compromised artistic legacy reflect the fate of a generation whose public values have collapsed. The floating world, the propaganda paintings, the marriage negotiations, the ruined veranda, and the Bridge of Hesitation each disclose a different aspect of that collapse.

Ishiguro's achievement lies in the quiet rigour of this portrayal. He refuses melodrama, simple confession, and easy redemption. In their place he offers a voice marked by revision, incompleteness, and uneasy lucidity. Ono never arrives at full exoneration or full surrender. He arrives at something harder: the awareness that one may act in conviction and still carry blame, that memory may preserve dignity and expose failure in the same motion, and that historical ruin continues to live within ordinary speech, family ritual, and acts of recollection.

References

- Ishiguro, K. (1986). *An artist of the floating world*. Faber and Faber.
- Caruth, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Harrell, K. E. (2014). *The narrators and narratees of Kazuo Ishiguro* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Denver).
- Hart, J. L. (2015). *The poetics of otherness: War, trauma, and literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.

CITATION

Shobana, S., & Khaan, A. A. (2026). Trauma, Memory, and Moral Reckoning in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*. In *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature* (Vol. 6, Number 2, pp. 96–99).

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19627402>