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**THE BURIED GIANT: FORGETTING THE PAST TO SURVIVE**

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**Abstract**

Memory is the pillar-stone of identity; we are what we remember of ourselves. On the other hand, forgetting is pejoratively held as slippage or loss, so we hold on to our memories and try not to forget. However, memory of the past also bounds and limits one's capacity. Besides, the social memory triggering vengeance and yielding perpetual bloodshed are sometimes better forgotten. Several scholars across disciplines have pointed out the importance of forgetting for making peace with the past and sailing through the present. The paper aims to examine the narrative of *The Buried Giant* from this perspective of leaving behind the traumatic past. The text will be examined to understand the need for personal as well as collective forgetting as a way to heal and keep sanity. The fantasy narrative has the dwellers of a post-Roman Brittonic village living in the mist of amnesia which protects them from disturbing past which when exhumed could potentially sabotage the peace of the place. The paper utilizes the arguments put forward by various scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Bjork, David Reiff, etc. to put a case for forgetting as an essential prerequisite for a healthy mind and society.

**Key words:** forgetting, trauma, sanity, memory

Lest we forget. Lest we forget!

“Recessional” by Rudyard Kipling

The zealous defense of past against oblivion has always been an important feature of human civilization. Memory is the repository of our identity, both personal and collective, so much so is the stress on keeping memory that it is held as “keeping the faith” and forgetting is considered as a loss, failure and “backsliding”. (Edkins 16) The “never shall I forget” call for the Holocaust tragedy has been one the most dominating discourse in the memory studies, resonating with Ricoeur's comment: “We

must remember because remembering is our moral duty.” (290) The moral duty obligation attached with memory is rather over-rated, as this stress on remembering has overlooked or dismissed the need of forgetting or letting go off the traumatic past which is essential to keep one's sanity and a peaceful co-existence in the society. The pivotal role of forgetting in keeping peace is the major theme in the novel, *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro published in 2015. The present paper argues through the narrative of this fiction that the obsession with recovering the past and letting it dictate our present

is not always desirable, rather it can jeopardize individual's and society's stability.

Against the idea of remembering past atrocities as popularly advocated, the fantasy tale of *The Buried Giant* deals with the dangers of bringing out the "buried" past which can damage the sensitive fabric of human society that has been built on innumerable wars and can disturb the mental frame of individuals as well. The narrative, an Arthurian tale set in the post-Roman Britain of sixth-seventh century with ogres, pixies, dragons, etc. has the inhabitants disconnected from their disturbing past through a perpetual state of forgetfulness. The Saxons and Britons after the war of Badon have forgotten the cruel bloodshed that was brought to an end through a treaty by King Arthur. Though the treaty was breached, peace was restored through a mass amnesia which has suppressed the bloody history. The idea resonates with Marc Augé's opinion in *Oblivion* (against Wiesel's insistence of remembering the violence incurred on Jews), that the survivors should be allowed to forget for their well-being and sanity as he wrote that the Holocaust survivors "must be able to do their share of forgetting...in order to find faith in the everyday again..." (88)

The protagonists of the novel are an elderly Briton couple, Axl and Beatrice who like the others in the land are struggling to come to terms with their foggy lives due to their failing memories under the effect of this amnesia which they call the mist. Axl was involved in the historic war and treaty but remembers nothing of it. Not only the social memory has been erased by this mist that pervades the landscape, people lack personal memories as well. The couple is trying to hold on to their relationships with love but are struggling as they have no memories as Beatrice comments, "It's queer the way the world's forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all." (36) In fact, they can vaguely remember that they have a son who lives in his village: "When they were pushing me just now, it was our son I remembered...Let's go to our son's village." (48)

The old couple embarks on a journey in search of their son which forms the major section of the plot. They meet couple of people on their way who join them in their adventures. It is on their journey that they realize that the mist is actually the breath of a dragon named Querig and the party is set to slain it to free the land of the curse of forgetfulness. They believe that they can restore the loving memories of their married life by regaining the past. Among those who join Axl and Beatrice is Wistan, a young Saxon warrior who unlike others is free from this amnesia and thus holds on the grudge to kill Querig to restore the memory of the past injustices. There is the Arthurian knight, Sir Gawain who stands as a counterpart to Wistan. The latter represents the urge to bring back the past to set the score while the former is the one trying to keep away the past.

Besides mist, there are other instruments symbolizing forgetfulness. The couple meets Ivor, who suggests that the mist may be a result of God's forgetfulness itself. Beatrice interprets it as some horrid past of which God Himself is shameful off. Also there is an allegorical encounter with Death, the boatman who ferries faithful couples across a river to the island of bliss. So Axl and Beatrice are willed to slain Querig to restore the personal memories of their relationship and Wistan wants to do so to avenge the deaths of his kindred Saxons. The killing of Querig, however at the end exhumes the not so pleasant memories which forewarns the coming catastrophes as Wistan exclaims: "The giant, once well buried, now stirs...Men will burn their neighbours' houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses..." (576)

Restoration of past indicates a problematic future ahead as Beatrice and Axl are exposed to the unfaithfulness of Beatrice in the past as the mist lifts. Axl addresses his wife and laments, "You and I longed for Querig's end, thinking only of our own dear memories. Yet who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now?" The social peace is also bound to be eroded as the bloodshed between Britons and Saxons lay unearthed to incite them for further wars and chaos as Axl mourns further, "Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men

make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest?" (575)

The narrative puts the discourse of moral duty to remember to question as memory can be "monstrous" as well. (Ricouer 413) The idea put forward by David Reiff in his books, *Against Remembrance* and *In Praise of Forgetting* may be relevant here to cite. Having witnessed the civil wars in places such as Bosnia based on some century old grudges provokes him to question the moral onus put on memory. The collective memory moulds a nation's identity but it is often manipulated by the state to keep the fighting tribes ever at war. (*Forgetting* 112) Thus *The Buried Giant* posits forward the havoc wrecked upon by memory of the disturbing past which would have been best left forgotten and brings to the question which Lewis Hyde asks in his *A Primer for Forgetting*: "If the arts of memory are rooted in blood, could there be an art of forgetting that puts an end to bloodshed?" (63)

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