

A Comparative Analysis of Characters in *The Buried Giant* Based on Trauma Theory

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most prominent contemporary British writers and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017. *The Buried Giant* set on the Arthurian British Isles where the conflicts between Britons and Saxons came to a cessation, is his historical fantasy novel published in 2015. It is constructed around the conflicts between Britons and Saxons, demonstrating their lasting traumatic influence on individuals from both sides. This novel provides readers with a profound insight into the characters' innermost traumatic feelings which not only plague them but also are universal to mankind. Therefore, the novel featuring unreliable narrative is suitable for trauma studies and this paper mainly focusing on the two main characters, Axl and Sir Gawain, aims to conduct a comparative analysis to illustrate the similarities and differences of traumas experienced by them and their ways to tackle traumas and the results so as to explain that it is essential to expose and confront one's traumas in the process of recovering from them.

Keywords

The Buried Giant; trauma theory; Kazuo Ishiguro.

1. Similar Traumas; Different Temporary Solutions

As two main characters in this novel Axl and Sir Gawain are influenced by two types of traumas; one is caused by national conflicts while the other is triggered by failed love for different reasons and they choose different ways to settle the problems caused by traumas.

1.1. Trauma Caused by National conflicts

Though the first meeting between Axl and Sir Gawain may leave the impression on readers that they come from totally different worlds (a farmer and a knight and noble relative of King Arthur), the following narrative reveals the fact that both of them used to belong to King Arthur's Camp. Since Axl was one member of the Round Table Knights and the best diplomat of King Arthur and Sir Gawain was also one of King Arthur's most capable knights and was responsible for the attack aiming at noncombatants of Saxon tribes, it is reasonable to say that Axl and Sir Gawain share the same trauma caused by slaying innocent Saxon women and children in different ways. On the one hand, the agreement for peace which says that the two sides would not attack noncombatants propagated by Axl was broken abruptly by King Arthur. This leads to the result that Axl who once advocated righteousness and peace was reduced to a treacherous deceiver and thus was deeply traumatized. Such humiliation forced Axl to leave the king and his fellowmen and finally become an ordinary ploughman living with his wife Beatrice. On the other hand Sir Gawain who was famous for his virtues and honesty in Arthurian legends became the accomplice in carrying out the king's plan of slaying Saxons. In addition to this, he took part in the action of utilizing the she-dragon Querig to efface the memory about this disgraceful intrigue by her magical breath which appears in the form of mist. Although Sir Gawain finally chose to stay with the king, he still felt guilty and after being afflicted by senility,

he became an old man who seemed to be lunatic and indulged in his reveries about the dark past.

It can be seen that both Axl and Sir Gawain are afflicted by the trauma caused by conflicts between Britons and Saxons since the events forced the two who cherished their virtues and glory to become vicious liars and slayers of the innocent. Apart from this, both of them are also plagued by another trauma. That is the trauma caused by failed love and the two characters are also affected by it in different ways.

1.2. Trauma Caused by Failed Love

Leaving King Arthur and his followers is a turning point which allows Axl to live a plain life with his lover Beatrice. However, the love story does not have a happy ending. Even though Axl pursued righteousness and forgiveness towards enemies in the past, he finally admitted that "I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance." (Ishiguro 312-313) This sentence exposes his deficiency in character. Many years ago when they were strolling in a market, some man complimented Beatrice for her beauty. Axl remembered that he agreed with that man while Beatrice clearly recalled the fact that Axl was so furious that he almost killed that man and thus was nearly driven out of the village. After the narrative has exposed Axl's possessiveness, it is believable that he would punish Beatrice so harshly by depriving her of the right to mourn their son who left home because of parents' conflicts caused by her infidelity and was later killed by a plague sweeping the whole country even though the root of this is that Axl tried the same thing first. Axl failed to be a qualified husband and father and the unattainable true love from Beatrice and his son also left a scar on his heart, reminding of his cold-heartedness towards his family members.

Compared with Axl Sir Gawain has no such intimate relationships since he used to devote his life to concealing the massacre aiming at Saxons. However, he still has the desire for love and family. Even though Axl has been deeply traumatized by the loss of love, Sir Gawain still believes that it is much better than never having the opportunity to love. When facing Axl, Gawain revealed his own wavering mind: He envied Axl's courage which made him choose the right path and happiness of living with his wife while he now had to face the truth that King Arthur's shadow had engulfed him. He also knew that the mission of concealing the truth was doomed to fail, because the she-dragon had grown old. As for Sir Gawain, King Arthur is like the blazing sun which, on the one hand makes him worship its glorious light while on the other hand makes his seemingly loyal but void life more lamentable. Being a loyal mindless supporter to King Arthur without having personal love traumatizes Sir Gawain a lot especially after the death of the king and becoming the only guard for the she-dragon and the dark past.

It can be seen from the above that both Axl and Sir Gawain are traumatized by failed love. They fail to satisfy their desire for love for different reasons. Axl's possessiveness and paternalism cause him to lose what he has attained; Sir Gawain's blind obedience to King Arthur makes him fail to have his own thoughts and happiness. However, even though the two characters have similar traumas, they choose different ways to tackle their traumas temporarily.

1.3. Different Temporary Solutions

Traumas can naturally make defense mechanisms function if the brain operates normally. Defense mechanisms are psychological responses that protect people from feelings of anxiety, threats to self-esteem, and things that they do not want to think about or deal with. Defense mechanisms were first described by Sigmund Freud. According to him, these mechanisms protect the conscious mind from contradictions between the animalistic id and the idealistic superego, ultimately contributing to "mental homeostasis". "Freud's daughter, Anna Freud, expanded her father's theory and further described defense mechanisms, including

“suppression (consciously keeping unpleasant information from conscious mind), denial (denying that something exists), repression (unconsciously keeping unpleasant information from conscious mind), displacement (taking feelings out on others), projection (assigning one’s own unacceptable feelings or qualities to others), rationalization (justifying an unacceptable feeling or behavior), regression (reverting to earlier behaviors) etc.”(Liu and Yang 89). Some of them can explain the two characters’ behavior after they experienced double traumas.

As for Axl, it is not difficult to identify that he resorts to repression which appears in the novel in the form of mist produced by the she-dragon Querig. After removing the supernatural origin of the pervasive mist, it is obvious that it symbolizes repression since it can cause a collective amnesia which effaces individuals’ memory, especially the nightmarish, in a stealthy way and villagers including Axl even regarded the unusual thick mist as a natural phenomenon, being unconscious to it. “The loss of memory actually derives from psychological traumas” (Liu 66). This fact makes Axl’s escape from truth by unconsciously forgetting the death of his son and the conflicts between him and Beatrice fit the features of repression. However, repression is just like the natural phenomenon, mist, only masking something rather than erase its existence.

In contrast to Axl, Sir Gawain chooses plural mechanisms. First he seems to suppress his sense of guilt. Unlike Axl who has been influenced by magical mist, it can be seen from the novel that Sir Gawain clearly remembers the dark past and his duty to guard the she-dragon when he has become a weird old man. Thus, instead of forgetting traumas unconsciously, Sir Gawain resorts to suppressing them and pretends that they do not exist at all. Additionally, Sir Gawain seems to utilize rationalization since he tries to justify himself that all his behaviors were done for the more righteous success of King Arthur. Meanwhile, he also justifies his behaviors by assuming that even though slaying the innocent was a sinister action, he should prioritize his loyalty to King Arthur not only for their kinship but also for their monarch-subject relationship which requires him to obey the authority. Logically, Sir Gawain creates a set of reasonable explanations and in this way he can temporarily escape from the accusation of his conscience.

Although the two characters find makeshifts to tackle their traumas, it is far from recovering from them since it requires victims to rebuild their relationships with the outside world and others instead of hiding in their comfort zones by truly forgetting or pretending to forgetting the past or simply justifying it. Therefore, during this transitory stage, the two characters are occasionally influenced by the shadow of the past which can be flashbacks such as Axl’s fragmentary memory about his son, the happy past with Beatrice and his previous duty as a knight and diplomat as well as Sir Gawain’s reveries in which he exposes his guilty feelings, his hatred toward the duty of concealing the past, and his yearning for the ultimate relief——death.

Taking the situations of the two characters into account, it can be concluded that though traumas are generally latent, they still appear in nonlinguistic dream-like forms such as flashbacks and reveries and the recurring appearance of traumatic facts can arouse emotional responses. When Axl recalled the fact of leaving King Arthur, he felt that “he...was angry about something, but he had understood the importance of hiding his anger at least for the time being.”(Ishiguro 111) Apart from this, he also shares the painful flashbacks about a once united family with Beatrice. Sir Gawain could not help but retrospect the past conflicts about righteousness with Axl in his reveries. The emotional responses have been disturbing the life of the two characters. However, they also motivate them to try to confront the truth so as to treat themselves but they still make different options, thus leading to different results.

2. Diverse Options and Results

2.1. Identifying “Walls”

The first step for treating traumas is breaking the “walls” around the victim to let them have the opportunity to act and reestablish the broken relationships. “The essential part is helping

them restore connections with other individuals and the outside world.” (Shi 136) As for Axl, his “wall” in the novel is tangible. It is the village where he has lived with his wife for many years. This village, being similar to the mist, is also a symbol of repression since it endows him with the disguise of being an ordinary farmer living happily with his wife. Additionally the word village creates an unreal peaceful family atmosphere for Axl because he believes that his son has grown up and just lives in another village. The village which is half-buried in a hill is like a lotus land, providing unreal sense of safety and togetherness for Axl.

On the other hand, what traps Sir Gawain is intangible. It is his duty to take care of the she-dragon and conceal the past. As the relative and knight of King Arthur, Sir Gawain feels honored for this but is also shackled by this. His sense of responsibility coerces him to fulfill the duty so as to protect King Arthur’s legacy while his conscience and ego pity his blindness and vainly self-sacrifice. His duty not only prevents him from feeling depressed by inculcating the sense of honor and loyalty but also deepens the influence of traumas since the duty itself is against his will.

As what mentioned before, breaking the “walls” is the first step to remedy traumas and identifying them can provide characters with guidance. However, Axl and Sir Gawain take different attitudes, leading to diverse results.

2.2. Axl’s Choice and Reconciliation

Even though both of the two seem to identify their “walls” since flashbacks remind Axl of leaving the village and finding his son and Sir Gawain also complains in his reveries about the toil of his duty, they still choose different paths.

Axl, motivated by flashbacks about the past and their son and his unconscious love and guilt chose to step onto the journey, aiming to remedy his traumas. The journey of retrieving the past is not smooth but Axl tried his best. Beatrice’s support is essential since when being asked about what would happen if the she-dragon died and all the nightmarish things concealed by repression emerged, Beatrice who was also the victim of Axl’s cruelty chose to believe him. She answered firmly: “We’ll have the bad ones come back too, even if they make us weep or shake with anger. For isn’t it the life we’ve shared? Axl and I would remember our life together, whatever its shape, for it’s been a thing dear to us” (Ishiguro 157). Though later with the progress of plot, Beatrice also recollected the past conflicts with Axl, the possible forgiveness obtained from her plays an important role in reaching the final reconciliation after recalling the fact that their son’s death was the fault of both of them before they were ferried by the boatman to the island. In the way of admitting the harm done to Beatrice, accepting the fact that both he and she caused their son’s death, and reaching reconciliation with his wife, Axl confronts and remedies his trauma caused by failed love and happily accepts the promise of boatman that he is allowed to live together with his son and wife once again on the island in the afterlife.

Axl still has another trauma to tackle that is the one caused by national conflicts. On his journey he encountered a Saxon warrior Wistan and Edwin who later became Wistan’s apprentice. When Wistan was still a boy, he witnessed Axl come to his village and at that time Axl looked like a prince, bringing with him the agreement for peace. Therefore, after the massacre happened and Britons took Wistan away from his mother to train him to be a warrior and humiliated him during the training, Wistan believes that all the Britons, including Axl were treacherous enemies whom should be slayed without mercy. For this reason he tried his best to search for the she-dragon and to slay her in order to reveal the past and revive Saxons’ vengeful will. He taught Edwin the same thought so as to make him hate Britons as well. However, during the whole journey, Axl’s kind attitude, his willingness to save Edwin from being killed by villagers, his help in finding and slaying the she-dragon and revealing the truth, and his admission of being deceived by King Arthur make Wistan believe that Axl did not commit the crime deliberately and he thus still kept his virtues and acted righteously. This

changed Wistan's vengeful thoughts, making him alongside Edwin think about the possible reconciliation between two nations. This result allows Axl to relieve from the burden caused by national conflicts for the fact that he not only justified that he kept his principles for righteousness but also still tried to rectify the past mistake and seek for the future reconciliation and peace between two nations.

2.3. Sir Gawain's Blindness and Destined Death

In comparison with Axl who actively reestablishes the relationship with his wife and Saxons who may contribute to future peace between Britons and Saxons, Sir Gawain chooses another path. He refuses to admit the mistake made by King Arthur and himself who functioned as the accomplice in the intrigue of creating amnesia. Ishiguro deconstructs the image of Sir Gawain completely. Positive remarks about this character can be found everywhere especially in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Much of the poem is devoted to depicting Gawain's shield with a five-pointed star on it. "Five-pointed star is a symbol coined by King Solomon and often used to represent the knight's 'five virtues', namely generosity, compassion, purity, humility and piety" (Xiao 35-36). In this novel Sir Gawain is one of the typical Ishiguro's characters who are not willing to confront the mistakes and fabricate other excuses to relieve themselves. Their unreliable narrative in the novels reflects the fact that their conscience is always pricking them no matter they pretend to forgetting the past or not. Sir Gawain in this novel shows the banality of evil. The image of him is highly similar to that of Stevens in *The Remains of The Day*. Like Stevens, Sir Gawain has his own "Lord Darlington" to whom "Stevens unconditionally obeyed" (Bao and Zhang 78). Sir Gawain always called his uncle a great king. He trusted his decision and successfully completed the arduous task of catching the she-dragon even though his fellows were slayed in this action. King Arthur's act of breaking the agreement, slaughtering noncombatants, and using magic to conceal the truth though was obviously ignoble, Gawain, being aware of the injustice, did not choose to stand out but continued to defend King Arthur.

As Stevens excused Lord Darlington's immoral practices, Gawain chose to rationalize King Arthur's actions despite lingering doubts in his mind: Since the curse of carnage between the two sides would never be broken because of hatred, and perhaps using the she-dragon's breath to bring amnesia and conceal the dark past might break the curse once for all, and "a great king, like God himself, must perform deeds mortals flinch from!" (Ishiguro 275). However, he fails to understand that truth cannot be concealed or falsified and that the right way to solve problems is depending on honesty, communication and mutual trust; concealing it can merely deepen his own sense of guilt.

Gawain is also somewhat different from Stevens who gradually opened his heart when he left Darlington Hall to visit Miss Kenton, and realized that he had given up his own ability to judge and thus become the banality of evil and unconscious accomplice. After facing the truth, Stevens retrieved his self-worth while Gawain failed to do so. When facing Axl, Gawain revealed his mind. He envied Axl's courage which made him choose the right path and happiness of living with his true love. He also knew that the mission was destined to fail because the she-dragon would only live for a season or two. Nevertheless, he was still willing to risk his life to ambush and stop Wistan, just because he believed in vain that another season or two may be "long enough for old wounds to heal forever, and an eternal peace to hold among us" (Ishiguro 286). He ignores the difficulty existing in the process of achieving "difficult forgiveness" (Burow-Flak 248) since history is not a merely "narrative construction" (Stacy 1) but "an objective truth" (Stacy 1).

Gawain, despite wavering, ultimately chooses to blindly obey King Arthur's orders, preserves the legacy of his reign, and continues trying to conceal the past. Such behavior makes him fail to rectify his mistakes and remedy his traumas by confronting the past and reestablishing relationships with others like Axl. Sir Gawain sacrifices his personal happiness to fulfill the duty

of concealing the truth. However, there is no doubt that the false peace cannot lead to a hopeful and harmonious future. For this reason, Gawain's attempt to protect the she-dragon at all costs is doomed to be in vain, and he himself will also be cast out by being killed by Wistan. Eventually Sir Gawain still fails to treat his traumas since he obtains no love from a lover or family. He cannot witness the reconciliation between the two nations, either and keeps the identity as the accomplice until death.

3. Conclusion

The paper makes a comparative analysis between Axl and Sir Gawain, two characters who are inflicted by similar traumas caused by failed love and national conflicts, illustrating the reasons causing traumas, traumas' expressions and characters' makeshifts aiming at tackling them and the different results: Axl confronts the past, reestablishes his broken relationships with others and successfully remedies his traumas while Sir Gawain fails to do so and merely attains a lamentable death. The conclusion can thus be drawn that a true recovery from traumas requires victims' optimistic attitude and willingness to change and to confront the truth so as to restore their relationships with others and relieve them from the past burdens.

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