

BELATED MEMORY AND THE DUAL FUNCTION OF FORGETTING AS PROTECTION AND REPRESSION IN SHAPING CHARACTER BEHAVIOR IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE BURIED GIANT*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of memory and forgetting in *The Buried Giant* through the lens of trauma theory, in which memory emerges as a delayed and disruptive return of unassimilated experience. While previous studies emphasize collective memory, limited attention has been given to how belated memory reshapes individual behavior. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's concept of belated experience, this study analyzes whether forgetting functions as a protection or repression and how remembering transforms emotional responses and relationships. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading of key narrative events, the study focuses on the function of forgetting and whether remembering changes the behavior of Axl, Beatrice, Wistan, and Sir Gawain. The findings show that forgetting functions simultaneously as psychological protection and political repression: it preserves emotional stability at the personal level while suppressing unresolved historical violence at the collective level. However, the return of memory destabilizes both domains, reshaping identity, moral perception, and relational dynamics. This study demonstrates that remembering does not simply recover the past but reconfigures the present, exposing the ethical tension between peace sustained through forgetting and truth revealed through memory. These findings contribute to trauma and memory studies by highlighting the complex role of forgetting as both a stabilizing and destabilizing force in post- conflict narrative. By foregrounding the behavioural consequences of belated memory, this study highlights how Ishiguro's narrative problematizes reconciliation built on enforced forgetting.

Keywords: *belated experience; Kazuo Ishiguro; literary trauma; memory and forgetting*

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INTRODUCTION

In literary studies, memory is often seen as a force that shapes identity and emotional experience. This can be seen from the way people respond emotionally and morally to past experiences. In trauma narratives, the return of suppressed memory often disrupts psychological stability, forcing individuals to confront painful events that were previously inaccessible (Balaev, 2008; Caruth, 1996). This process can alter emotional responses,



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challenge moral judgement, and reshape intrapersonal relationships (LaCapra, 2001; Whitehead, 2004). Trauma, in this sense, is not only a psychological experience but also a dynamic process that affects perception, behavior, and cognition (Borowska-Szerszun, 2016). However, the impact of memory is not straightforward. While remembering may enable individuals to confront truth and achieve understanding, it can also reopen unresolved wounds and produce emotional instability (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 1996). As a result, forgetting is not merely a narrative device in trauma fiction but may function as a form of psychological protection that shields individuals from overwhelming trauma, yet it can also operate as repression by concealing unresolved violence and delaying accountability (Caruth, 1996; Freud, 1917/1957). This complexity is further emphasized in recent literary studies which argue that forgetting does not function uniformly across contexts but may produce different effects at the individual and collective level, often preserving emotional stability while simultaneously distorting historical accountability (Falcus, 2020; Lukić, 2016). This dual function also reflects contemporary perspectives in memory studies that view forgetting as an active and structured process shaping identity and emotional continuity rather than a simple loss of information (Falcus, 2020; Rosetti et al., 2026).

This tension between remembering and forgetting raises a critical question: Does forgetting protect individuals from trauma, or does it merely suppress it? Within trauma theory, memory is understood not as a stable recollection but as a disruptive return of what was never fully grasped. According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), trauma is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs but returns later as an “unclaimed experience.” Trauma, therefore, appears through delayed memory and emotional response rather than direct recollection. Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) suggest that traumatic history resists immediate comprehension and emerges only through narrative reconstruction. Although scholars such as Ruth Leys (2000) and Dominick La Capra (2001) argue that trauma can be consciously processed and “worked through,” the tension between repression and return remains central to literary representation of historical violence by Caruth (1996).

This tension is dramatized in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* (2015). Critics have noted that the novel situates memory within a broader cultural and historical framework, presenting it as a meditated and constructed process rather than a transparent recollection of the past (Borowska-Szerszun, 2016; Charlwood, 2018). Set in a post-Arthurian Britain, the novel depicts a land enveloped in a mysterious mist that erases the collective memory of past massacres between Briton and Saxon. This mist disrupts both characters’ and the reader’s ability to clearly perceive past events, creating narrative uncertainty about what has occurred (Gordon, 2025). In this narrative, an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice, gradually discover that their personal histories have also been obscured. Thus, they embark on a journey to visit their son in the neighboring village in an attempt to regain their memory. Their journey unfolds a hidden political conflict embodied by Wistan, a Saxon Warrior who demands truth, and Sir Gawain, a knight who

once served King Arthur of the Britons and the one who defends the mist to keep a surface level of peace. It was later revealed that a mysterious mist produced by the dragon Querig functions as a mechanism of enforced amnesia that prevents the recollection of past massacres. When the dragon is slain, and memory resurfaces, both personal relationships and political stability are threatened.

In *The Buried Giant* (2015), the mist functions as more than a device of simple forgetfulness; it actively suspends the characters' capacity to consciously process their traumatic past. By delaying the return of memory, the mist postpones confrontation with moral responsibility and historical violence. As Teo (2023) observes, the suppression of memory allows the characters to maintain emotional distance from atrocities, thereby preserving a fragile social harmony.

While existing studies frequently focus on collective and cultural memory (Bai, 2023; Qingyue, 2024), fewer analyses examine the psychological dynamics of traumatic memory at the level of individual characters. A more closely related discussion is provided by Lorek-Jezinska (2016), who argues that the mist represents traumatic absence manifested through silence and narrative gaps. However, her analysis does not systematically examine how belated memory reshapes individual emotional responses and behavior.

Building on this gap, the present study applies Caruth's concept of belated experience to analyze behavioural and relational transformation in specific characters. By shifting the analytical focus from collective structures to individual experience, it also reconsiders conclusions drawn in collective memory approaches. In particular, it offers a critical re-evaluation of Bai's (2023) argument that enforced forgetting functions as a pragmatic mechanism sustaining social stability and preventing renewed conflict. While Bai emphasizes the stabilizing function of collective amnesia (2023). The present analysis indicates that the return of memory at the individual level procedures emotional destabilization, moral ambiguity, and relational fracture rather than reconciliation.

The aim of this study is to explain whether forgetting serves as a protection or a repression, and how remembering transforms characters' behavior within the narrative. Drawing on Caruth's trauma theory, it explores how memory suppression and recovery reshape the emotional, moral, and relational dynamics of Axl, Beatrice, Sir Gawain, and Wistan. Through this framework, the study argues that forgetting in *The Buried Giant* operates ambiguously by preserving fragile stability while concealing unresolved violence. The resurfacing memory ultimately destabilizes this artificial peace, revealing the ethical and psychological consequences of deferred trauma. In doing so, this study contributes to an alternative understanding of how Ishiguro represents trauma, memory, and complex negotiation between healing and accountability within the moral landscape of his fiction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trauma Theory

Trauma theory conceptualizes psychic rupture not as the event itself but as the failure of its immediate assimilation. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an experience that is not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence and therefore returns belatedly in intrusive and repetitive forms. Trauma is structured by latency: the event is registered but not integrated into conscious life, producing a temporal gap between happening and understanding (Caruth, 1996). This delayed structure of trauma is frequently represented in literary narratives through absence, fragmentation, and silence, where meaning emerges only through gaps rather than direct articulation (Lorek-Jezinska, 2016). Consequently, traumatic experiences often resist coherent narration and are instead manifested through silence, gaps, and disturbances in language and narrative structure (Maslida, Wajiran, 2025).

Caruth's formulation develops psychoanalytic insights from Sigmund Freud (1917, 1957), particularly repression, deferred action, and repetition compulsion. However, Caruth reorients Freud's clinical model into a literary epistemological framework. Trauma is not a psychic wound but a crisis of knowing: the subject survives the event without fully possessing it as knowledge. Later developments in trauma theory further emphasize that trauma should not be understood as a fixed psychological condition but as a dynamic process shaped by cultural, narrative, and contextual factors (Balaev, 2014; Luckhurst, 2008). This epistemic rupture explains why trauma returns indirectly, through repetition, fragmentation, and narrative disjunction, patterns that are central to the narrative structure of *The Buried Giant*, where past violence resurfaces only through partial and delayed recognition.

This emphasis on belatedness is reinforced by Felman and Laub (1992), who argue that trauma challenges testimony because the experience was never fully available to consciousness. While critics such as Leys (2000) question the absolutization of unspeakability, and LaCapra (2001) differentiates between “acting out” and “working through,” Caruth's temporal model remains particularly suitable for narratives structured around delayed recognition and suppressed memory, such as *The Buried Giant*.

Caruth's framework is especially relevant for this study because the analytical focus lies on belated memory and its destabilizing return rather than on therapeutic recovery or collective commemoration. This focus is particularly applicable to *The Buried Giant*, where memory does not emerge as immediate recollection but as a delayed and disruptive return shaped by narrative absence. Unlike models that emphasize clinical symptomatology or socio-political memory formation, Caruth's framework foregrounds latency, indirectness, and deferred confrontation. These concepts allow trauma to be examined as an ongoing structural force that reorganizes cognition and affects over time. This theoretical emphasis on belatedness provides a useful framework for understanding how memory operates in *The Buried Giant*, where the delayed return of the past shapes both narrative structure and character behaviour.

Memory Dynamics in Altering Individual Behavior

Within Caruth's framework, memory is not a stable retrieval of the past but a deferred confrontation. Because the traumatic event is not integrated at the moment of occurrence, it persists in unconscious latency and resurfaces disruptively (Caruth, 1996). Forgetting, therefore, signifies suspended knowledge because the past was never fully assimilated into conscious understanding. This condition of suspended knowledge is central to *The Buried Giant*, where the mist delays recognition and shapes how characters encounter their past, thereby structuring the timing and accessibility of memory within the narrative.

It is important to distinguish traumatic repression from ordinary forgetting. Ordinary forgetting may involve gradual fading or displacement, whereas traumatic repression results from structural incomprehension: the experience was never integrated into conscious awareness. Drawing on Freud (1917), repression operates unconsciously and continues to exert influence until triggered into return. Trauma thus displaces memory into indirect forms rather than eliminating it entirely.

Memory studies further refine this dynamic by conceptualizing remembering and forgetting as a reconstructive process. Halbwachs (1992) demonstrates that memory is socially framed and reconstructed within present contexts rather than stored as a fixed archive. However, while Halbwachs emphasizes collective frameworks of memory, such approaches tend to foreground social reconstruction over individual psychological transformation. This study shifts the analytical focus to the level of individual experience, examining how memory reshapes emotional response, decision making, and relational dynamics. Memory is intrinsically linked to the construction of identity and plays a crucial role in shaping moral and emotional frameworks (Rossetti et al., 2026). This gap is evident in *The Buried Giant*, where memory not only fades but is actively reconfigured. Thus, while Halbwachs and Astrid Erll illuminate how groups remember, they are less equipped to explain how individuals change when memories return, which this study explores through character behavior.

Similarly, Ricoeur (2004) argues that forgetting is not merely absence but a structural condition of remembering. This insight directly parallels the functions of the mist in *The Buried Giant*, where forgetting does not erase the past but determines the conditions under which later return. Assman (2011), Connerton (2008), and Erll (2011) further emphasize that memory is mediated, selective, and regulated.

When read alongside trauma theory, these perspectives clarify that remembering and forgetting are not opposite but interdependent processes (Ricoeur, 2004; Halbwachs, 1992). In traumatic temporality, forgetting may operate in two analytically distinct modes. First, forgetting functions as repression, referring to the structural non-assimilation of traumatic experience that remains inaccessible to conscious awareness (Caruth, 1996; Freud, 1917). This form is primarily associated with the suppression of collective or historical violence and the deferral of ethical accountability. Second, forgetting functions as a protection, referring to a temporary psychological stabilization that preserves emotional continuity and

intrapersonal relationships by delaying confrontation with traumatic knowledge (Balaev, 2008; Whitehead, 2004). While repression is oriented toward concealment, protection operates as a buffering mechanism that sustains effective stability at the individual level (Balaev, 2008). Although these functions are analytically distinct, they may overlap in practice: mechanisms that stabilize individual emotional experience can simultaneously contribute to the suppression of broader historical or collective trauma.

When repressed memory resurfaces, it does not simply restore the past; it reconfigures the present. Because memory is reconstructive (Halbwachs, 1992) and narratively mediated (Erl, 2011), belated recognition reshapes interpretive frameworks and affective orientation (Ricoeur, 2004). Behavioral alteration, therefore, emerges not as mechanical causation but as a structural consequence of deferred confrontation. The return of suspended memory recalibrates perception, emotional response, and relational stance, demonstrating how traumatic temporality participates in altering individual behavior. This aligns with recent research showing that engagement with traumatic narratives can influence emotional regulation, empathy, and behavioral responses, rather than merely restoring past knowledge (Yuan & Li, 2025).

METHOD

This research applies a qualitative textual analysis to examine the impact of memory suppression and memory recovery on the behavior of selected characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015), guided by Caruth's trauma theory. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (p. 4). This definition aligns with this study's focus on interpreting the behavioral and emotional responses of the characters in relation to traumatic memory.

This study is categorized as library research since the data are derived from written sources rather than field observation. The primary data consist of narrative passages, dialogues, and character interactions in *The Buried Giant* that specifically depict experiences of forgetting as both protection and repression, as well as experiences of remembering that alter a character's behavior. Secondary data include scholarly books and journal articles related to trauma theory and memory studies. These secondary sources are used primarily to support and triangulate the interpretation of trauma-related processes such as repression, belated experience, and memory reconstruction rather than to provide historical context.

The selection of Axl, Beatrice, Wistan, and Sir Gawain is based on their representation of different facets of the memory and forgetting dynamics within the narrative. Axl and Beatrice represent the intrapersonal and emotional dimension of memory, particularly in relation to intimacy, loss, and relational stability. In contrast, Wistan and Sir Gawain represent the political and collective dimension, as their roles are closely tied to historical violence, ethical responsibility, and the maintenance or disruption of social order. This

selection enables the study to examine how forgetting and remembering operate differently across personal and collective levels.

Data were collected through close reading of key scenes involving these characters with particular attention to moments where memory is suppressed, partially recalled, or fully recovered. During the data categorization stage, textual evidence was classified into two analytical functions of forgetting: protection and repression. Forgetting is identified as protection when it functions to preserve emotional stability, sustain intrapersonal relationships, or prevent immediate psychological distress at the individual level. In contrast, forgetting is categorized as repression when it conceals past violence, suppresses moral accountability, or maintains broader social or political stability by obscuring historical truth. In cases where both functions appear simultaneously, classification is determined by the dominant narrative effect within the specific context.

In this study, “behavior” is defined as observable changes in characters’ actions, emotional responses, and relational dynamics as represented in the text. Behavioral transformation is identified through three main indicators: (1) shifts in dialogue patterns, including changes in tone, hesitation, or expression of uncertainty; (2) changes in physical actions or decisions, particularly those reflecting moral conflict or altered judgement; and (3) developments in internal reflection, as implied through narration or the character’s evolving emotional state. These indicators provide a systematic basis for analyzing how memory recovery influences character behavior.

The data analysis was carried out in several stages. First, relevant textual evidence was selected and categorized based on representations of memory suppression and recovery. Second, these categories were interpreted using Cathy Caruth’s concept of trauma as a belated and unassimilated experience. Finally, patterns of behavioral change and emotional disruption were examined to determine how memory functions simultaneously as protection and repression and how its return reshapes emotional responses, moral judgement, and intrapersonal relationships within the narrative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Forgetting in *The Buried Giant*

Forgetting plays a central role in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*, shaping both personal relationships and political stability within the narrative. The mysterious mist that covers the land causes people to lose their memories, preventing them from recalling past conflicts and personal experiences. Within trauma studies, forgetting is often understood as an ambiguous psychological process that can function both as protection and repression (Balaev, 2008; Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). Scholars of memory studies also emphasize that forgetting does not signify the disappearance of the past but rather the suspension of traumatic knowledge that continues to influence identity and behavior (Erll, 2011; Whitehead, 2004). In this sense, it simultaneously protects individuals from painful memories while suppressing unresolved historical violence (Lorek-Jezińska, 2016; Teo, 2023).

Forgetting as a Protection

In Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015), forgetting functions as a psychological protection that preserves emotional stability by suspending memories. This protective dimension aligns with contemporary readings of Ishiguro's novel that emphasize how forgetting can sustain emotional continuity and relational stability despite fragmented or inaccessible memory (Falcus, 2020). The mysterious mist that covers the land erases personal and collective memories, allowing characters to maintain relationships without confronting the painful events in their past. For Axl and Beatrice, the mist temporarily stabilizes their marriage by making them forget about their painful memories, conflicts, and guilt, enabling them to sustain affection without fully recalling the experiences that once strained their relationship. Within trauma theory, this condition aligns with Caruth's (1996) concept of belated trauma, where traumatic events are not fully assimilated at the moment they occur but remain latent until they resurface later in a destabilizing way. Memory gaps, therefore, operate as a defensive structure that shields individuals from overwhelming emotional injury. As Oanh (2021) explains, traumatic memory often produces a tension between knowing and not knowing, in which forgetting functions as a “protective filter” that prevents subjects from confronting painful truths directly. Similarly, trauma scholars argue that forgetting can temporarily stabilize identity by delaying confrontation with traumatic knowledge (Balaev, 2008; Whitehead, 2004).

Within the narrative, this protective function of forgetting can be observed in Axl and Beatrice's inability to recall past conflicts, which temporarily shields their marriage from unresolved resentment. Earlier tension in their relationship, particularly the death of their son and Beatrice's lingering feeling of abandonment remain obscured by the mist. Because of these inaccessible memories, the couple continues their journey with mutual tenderness rather than resentment. Their past memories remain “unclaimed”, delaying direct confrontation and allowing emotional wounds to gradually heal. This condition reflects how forgetting may sustain emotional continuity even in the absence of full recollection, enabling individuals to maintain rational stability despite fragmented memory (Falcus, 2020). This realization of forgetting as protection becomes evident when Axl later reflects on the possible role of the mist in strengthening their relationship. Axl said, *“I was wondering, princess. Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did? Perhaps it allowed old wounds to heal”* (p. 269). This reflection suggests that forgetting has functioned as a protective mechanism within their marriage. The fading of painful memories allows their emotional bond to develop without being continuously destabilized by past conflicts.

Axl expresses a similar realization when speaking to the boatman, acknowledging that their love endured despite earlier difficulties: *“I’ve wondered myself, boatman. And I think now it’s no single thing changed my heart, but it was gradually won back by the year shared between us. That may be all it was, boatman. A wound that healed slowly, but heal it did. For there was a morning not long ago, the dawn brought with it the first signs of this spring, and I watched my wife still asleep though the sun already lit our chamber. And I*

knew the last of the darkness had left me. So we came on this journey, sir, and now my wife recalls our son crossing before us to this island, so his burial place must be within its woods or perhaps on its gentle shores. Boatman, I've spoken honestly to you, and I hope it doesn't cast your earlier judgement of us in doubt. For I suppose there's some would hear my words and think our love flawed and broken. But God will know the slow tread of an old couple's love for each other, and understand how black shadows make part of its whole" (p. 266).

In this passage, Axl recognizes that the passage of time and the absence of painful memories allow emotional reconciliation to occur. Rather than confronting unresolved grievances directly, forgetting created the conditions for gradual healing. As trauma theory suggests, the suspension of traumatic knowledge may temporarily protect individuals from emotional destabilization (Balaev, 2008; Caruth, 1996).

The protective dimension of forgetting also appears earlier in the scene where Beatrice expresses concern about their inability to remember their shared past.

"What are you saying, princess? How can our love whither? Isn't it stronger now than when we were foolish young lovers?"

"But Axl, we can't even remember those days... We don't remember our fierce quarrels or the small moments we enjoyed... We don't remember our son..."

"We can make all those memories come back, princess. Besides, the feeling in my heart for you will be there just the same, no matter what I remember or forget" (p. 36)

In this exchange, Axl attempts to separate emotional attachment from historical knowledge. By insisting that his feelings remain unchanged regardless of what is remembered, he privileges present emotional stability over the recovery of past experiences. His response suggests a reluctance to disturb the fragile harmony that forgetting has created. Beatrice expresses a similar attitude when she says, *"He's our son, So I can feel things about him, even if I don't remember clearly"* (p. 20). Here, emotional intuition replaces memory as the foundation of their bond. Even without clear recollection, the emotional connection remains intact, indicating that affective relationships can persist independently of complete memory.

Axl's later request reveals a deeper anxiety of the disruptive potential of remembering: *"Should memory return.... of times I disappointed you... Promise me you'll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment"* (p. 219). This statement demonstrates Axl's awareness that recovered memories could destabilize their relationship. His concern implies that forgetting has functioned as a protective buffer that preserves their past affection. In this sense, *The Buried Giant* presents forgetting not merely as loss but as a temporary psychological mechanism that protects individuals from confronting traumatic or emotionally damaging truths.

While forgetting in Axl and Beatrice's relationship appears to function as a form of emotional protection, this personal experience also reflects a broader structural pattern within the narrative. The same mechanism that allows individuals to avoid painful memories simultaneously operates at the collective level, where the mist suppresses the history of violence between Britons and Saxons. In this sense, the dynamics of forgetting within their

relationship parallel the broader process of collective amnesia that sustains political peace by concealing unresolved trauma. This overlap suggests that protection and repression are not entirely separate functions, but rather interconnected processes that operate across different levels of experience.

Forgetting as a Repression

Unlike protection, which operates at the level of emotional stability and intrapersonal relationships, repression functions at the collective level by suppressing historical violence and preventing ethical accountability. While forgetting in Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) can function as a form of protection, the novel also portrays it as a mechanism of repression that suppresses unresolved historical violence and maintains fragile political stability between Britons and Saxons. At the same time, such enforced forgetting operates unevenly across levels of experience, as what appears to stabilize intrapersonal relations may simultaneously obscure collective trauma and prevent ethical accountability (Lukić, 2016; Teo, 2023). The mysterious mist that covers the land causes widespread amnesia, preventing both groups from recalling the massacres and political betrayals that followed King Arthur's campaigns. As a result, former enemies coexist peacefully because the memories that resonate with conflict remain inaccessible. In trauma theory, repression occurs when traumatic events are not fully assimilated in the moment they occur and are therefore buried rather than resolved. Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that traumatic experience often remains inaccessible to conscious understanding and may later return in belated and disruptive forms. In this context, the mist that covers the land in *The Buried Giant* operates as a narrative mechanism that suppresses collective memories of violence until they eventually resurface. As Ewa Lorek-Jezińska (2016) observes, the novel portrays forgetting as a form of traumatic absence, in which the past continues to shape the present even when it is deliberately obscured from conscious memory.

This repressive function of forgetting becomes evident in the scene where Sir Gawain explains why the dragon must remain alive. "*Without this she-dragon's breath, would peace ever have come? Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village*" (p. 241-242). Through this statement, Sir Gawain openly acknowledges that the mist suppresses memories of past massacres between Britons and Saxons. The apparent harmony between the two groups is therefore not the result of genuine reconciliation, but the consequence of enforced forgetting. By erasing the memory of past atrocities, the mist prevents individuals from confronting the violence that shaped their history. As Teo (2023) argues, the novel presents forgetting as a political mechanism that sustains fragile peace by preventing society from recalling traumatic events.

Sir Gawain further warns that the disappearance of the mist will awaken the violent past: "*Think, sir, once that breath should cease, what might be awoken across this land even after these years!*" (p. 242). This warning suggests that the past has not truly disappeared but remains buried beneath the surface of collective memory. The mist merely postpones the return of historical trauma rather than resolving it. In accordance with trauma theory,

suppressed memories retain their psychological force even when they are temporarily forgotten (Caruth, 1996). When these memories eventually resurface, they threaten to destabilize the fragile peace that forgetting has maintained.

In contrast to Sir Gawain's defense of the mist, Wistan strongly rejects the morality of such enforced forgetting. For Wistan, peace built upon the suppression of past violence cannot be justified. Questioning the legitimacy of a world in which past crimes are deliberately erased from memory, he asks: "*What kind of god is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished?*" (p. 242). Through this rhetorical question, Wistan challenges the ethical foundation of the mist. His statement implies that forgetting allows historical crimes to remain unacknowledged and prevents justice from being achieved. In this sense, repression protects the perpetrators of violence while silencing the memory of those who suffered from it.

Wistan further criticizes the illusion of peace created by forgetting when he confronts Sir Gawain: "*Foolishness, sir. How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and magician's trickery? ... Yet they await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover*" (p. 242). Through the imagery of "maggots" and "white bones," Wistan suggests that the violence of the past continues to exist beneath the surface even when it's hidden from memory. These metaphors emphasize that traumatic events cannot simply disappear through enforced forgetting. Instead, the past remains buried, waiting to be rediscovered. This idea reflects Carruth's (1996) argument that trauma persists in latent forms until it reemerges in the present. Similarly, Ewa Lorek-Jezińska (2016) notes that *The Buried Giant* portrays forgetting as a strategy that conceals rather than resolves historical trauma.

Thus, the mist in *The Buried Giant* functions not only as a protective device but also as a form of repression that conceals unresolved violence within the collective consciousness of the society. By preventing both Britons and Saxons from remembering the atrocities committed during Arthur's conquest, the mist sustains a fragile political stability built upon silence and historical denial. However, such stability remains temporary, since the suppressed past continues to exist beneath the surface and may reemerge once the mechanism of forgetting disappears (Lorek-Jezińska, 2016; Teo, 2023)

Remembering Altering Character Behavior

Remembering in *The Buried Giant* functions as a transformative process that alters characters' emotional responses and behavior. Recent studies further suggest that the confrontation with previously suppressed trauma does not simply restore coherence but actively transforms decision-making, often producing moral hesitation, emotional instability, and behavioral change (Bai, 2023; Guan, 2025). As the mysterious mist that suppresses memory gradually fades, Axl, Beatrice, and Wistan memory returns, and they begin to confront experiences that had previously remained inaccessible. This process reflects what Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as

belated experience, in which traumatic events are not fully understood when they occur but only become meaningful after a period of latency. Trauma scholars note that delayed recollection often produces emotional disruption because the subject encounters the past only after it has been repressed or suspended (Balaev, 2008; Whitehead, 2004). In the narrative, the lifting of the mist functions as the moment when suppressed memories begin to resurface. Remembering, therefore, does not simply restore the past but transforms how characters interpret their emotional experiences and relationships (Oanh, 2021; Whitehead, 2004).

The transformation is particularly visible in the relationship between Axl and Beatrice. Earlier in the narrative, when the mist still obscures their memories, both characters strongly resist the idea of separation. When a boatkeeper suggests that they travel separately in two baskets across the river, Beatrice immediately objects: *“Axl, please let’s not be parted”* (p. 179). She kept repeating her concern over and over, insisting, *“Please, Axl I don’t want us to separate”* (p. 179). Axl reassures her that they will remain together, responding, *“We’re not to be parted, princess... it’ll be as good as we’re arm in arm”* (p. 179). This dialogue emphasizes the strong emotional attachment between them and their determination to remain united despite the physical difficulties of their journey. At this stage of the narrative, their relationship appears stable because the mist has concealed the painful memories embedded in their shared past.

However, as fragments of memory return, both characters gradually realize that their shared past contains painful experiences capable of breaking their relationship. The narrative hints when Axl recalls a disturbing fragment of their past: *“There was a stormy night, a bitter hurt, a loneliness opening before him like unfathomed waters”* (p. 239). The resurfacing memory introduces emotional uncertainty and suggests that their past relationship may have involved unresolved conflict previously concealed by the mist. According to trauma studies, such recollections often force individuals to reinterpret earlier experiences and reassess their emotional attachments (Balaev, 2008; Whitehead, 2004).

The destabilizing effect of remembering becomes clearer during the couple’s final encounter with the boatman, when the possibility emerges that they may not cross the island together. Beatrice appears more willing to accept this separation, telling Axl: *“It’s only for a moment or two husband. Let’s do it this way, Axl, or I fear we’ll lose the great dispensation offered us”* (p. 269). Her willingness to trust the boatman contrasts with Axl’s hesitation, suggesting a shift in their relational dynamic as memory gradually returns. As scholars have noted, the resurfacing of suppressed memories often produces relational instability because individuals must reassess the emotional foundations of their relationships (Balaev, 2008; Oanh, 2021). Despite this realization, the emotional consequences of remembering remain unavoidable. As they prepare to separate, the dialogue becomes markedly solemn: *“Farewell then, Axl”*; *“Farewell, my one true love”* (p. 270). The farewell indicates a profound transformation in their relationship. Earlier in the narrative, Axl consistently insisted that they should remain together, but here he ultimately accepts the possibility of separation.

Remembering also alters the emotional and moral orientation of Wistan. After killing the dragon Querig and the mist that suppresses memory across the land, Wistan does not display triumph but instead appears deeply unsettled. This reaction reflects the complex psychological consequences of confronting trauma, where the recovery of memory leads not to clarity but to uncertainty and ethical ambivalence (Guan, 2025; Wang, 2021). The narration shows Wistan took surprisingly a long time to climb out of the pit. When at last he appeared before them again, he looked overwhelmed and not in the least triumphant. Without a word, he sat down, then he gazed emptily beyond, at the clouds and the pale hills in the distance. When Beatrice thanks him for his deed, Wistan responds with unexpected hesitation, confessing: *“Perhaps I’ve been too long among you Britons. And now I sit here, shaking not from weariness but at the very thought of what my own hands have done”* (p. 250). His reaction suggests that restoring memory carries consequences heavier than he had anticipated. The act of ending the mist will allow past violence between Saxons and Britons to resurface, potentially reigniting violence across the land. This moment reflects what Caruth (1996) describes as a belated experience, in which the meaning of traumatic actions becomes fully realized only after they occur. Trauma scholars argue that the return of suppressed memory often destabilizes emotional certainty because individuals must confront the ethical implications of past violence and future conflict (Balaev, 2008; Whitehead, 2004).

This hesitation contrasts sharply with Wistan's earlier determination before killing the dragon. When confronting Sir Gawain, Wistan firmly rejects the idea that peace built on forgetting can endure, declaring: *“Foolishness, sir. How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and magician's trickery?”* (p. 242) At this earlier stage, Wistan expresses absolute confidence that restoring memory is necessary to reveal the truth of past massacres. He insists that buried violence will inevitably resurface, stating that past horrors *“await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover”* (p. 242). The contrast between the two moments reveals a significant transformation in Wistan's emotional stance. Before the dragon's death, he views remembering as a clear moral necessity; after accomplishing his goal, he experiences uncertainty about the consequences of restoring memory.

This situation illustrates how remembering in the narrative reshapes not only historical knowledge but also characters' behavior. Although confronting the past is often associated with the possibility of recovery and rebuilding of relationships (Guan, 2025), Wistan's reaction suggests otherwise. Rather than achieving resolution, the return of memory produces hesitation, moral uncertainty, and the anticipation of renewed violence.

CONCLUSIONS

The study examines the role of forgetting and remembering in *The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro through the lens of trauma theory and memory studies. The analysis demonstrates that forgetting in the novel is not merely the absence of memory but a structural condition that actively shapes both emotional stability and political order. On the one hand, forgetting operates as

a protective mechanism that allows individuals, particularly Axl and Beatrice, to sustain intimacy by suspending unresolved conflict. On the other hand, it functions as repression by concealing the violence underlying relations between Britons and Saxons.

The findings show that these two functions are not separate but interdependent. The same mechanism that preserves emotional bonds at the personal level simultaneously suppresses historical accountability at the collective level. This dual function complicates the assumption that remembering is inherently restorative. Instead, the return of memory, consistent with Cathy Caruth's concept of belated experience, emerges as a destabilizing force that reconfigures emotional attachment, moral judgement, and social relations. Remembering in the novel does not simply recover the past; it transforms how characters understand themselves and their relationship, often producing uncertainty rather than resolution.

These findings suggest that *The Buried Giant* is a critical reflection on the ethical tension between peace and truth. Forgetting may enable temporary coexistence, yet it does so by deferring unresolved trauma, while remembering exposes hidden violence but risks renewing conflict. The novel thus challenges binary assumptions about memory as either healing or harmful, presenting it instead as a process that simultaneously enables and disrupts stability.

However, this study is limited by its primary focus on trauma theory and psychological approaches to memory. By emphasizing belated experience, repression, and emotional response, the analysis does not fully engage with alternative frameworks such as historical, political, or postcolonial perspectives, which may interpret the mist and collective forgetting in relation to power, ideology, or imperial violence. These perspectives could offer different insights into how memory operates within broader structures of domination and conflict.

Future research may extend this study by applying alternative theoretical approaches, particularly postcolonial or historically grounded analysis, to further examine the relationship between memory, power, and violence in the novel. In addition, comparative studies could investigate how the function of forgetting in *The Buried Giant* relates to memory and repression in other works by Kazuo Ishiguro, such as *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*. Such research would contribute to a broader understanding of how literature represents the ethical and psychological complexities of remembering and forgetting in post-conflict contexts.

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