

# *Analysis of Identity Construction in A Pale View of Hills from the Perspective of Spivak's Female Heterogeneity Theories*

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**Abstract:** *A Pale View of Hills* is the representative work of the British-Japanese writer Kazuo Ishiguro. The main content of the novel is Etsuko's real life in the UK and her memories of Japan before immigration. The narrator "I" fabricates the image of Etsuko as "the angel in the house" to justify herself. She tried to hide the trauma of her war memories through the stories of Sachiko and Mariko. The identity anxiety caused by the dual oppression of patriarchy and imperial colonialism is manifested in the recall process, which accords with the identity characteristics of "subaltern" of Spivak's female heterogeneity theories. By analyzing the text from the perspective of Spivak's female heterogeneity theories, the novel shows a stand of resisting colonialism, exposes the complicity of colonial war and patriarchy, and shows the tragic situation of Japanese women under the nature of semi-colonial.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Kazuo Ishiguro and A Pale View of Hills

Kazuo Ishiguro (1954—), a British-Japanese novelist and the winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature. In an interview in 1986, Ishiguro mentioned that after moving away from Japan, his parents tried to preserve his "Japanese identity" through family education and offset the influence of the foreign environment with "Japanese values". Apart from his parents, he had little personal contact with Japan. Before becoming a writer, Ishiguro had read the works of Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Charlotte Brontë and other Western writers, as well as Japanese writers such as Yasunari Kawabata and Natsume Sōseki. He stated that his depiction of post-war Japan in his works was mostly influenced by the films of Japanese directors like Yasujiro Ozu. Initially, he wrote to record his fading Japanese memories, and his Japanese heritage, educational background and experience of reading world literature have all become the unique literary genes in his novel creation.

*A Pale View of Hills* is narrated in the first person by the protagonist Etsuko, recounting her real life in Britain and her past experiences in Japan before immigration. The novel opens with the

suicide of her elder daughter Keiko in her room, which unfolds Etsuko's memories of life in Nagasaki. Shortly after the end of World War II, Etsuko in Nagasaki met Sachiko and her daughter Mariko. Sachiko lived in poverty, and when Etsuko helped the mother and daughter, she learned that Sachiko planned to immigrate to the United States with Mariko by the help of an American soldier, while Mariko refused to leave Japan and resisted constantly. As the narrator's memories draw to a close, the "truth" is gradually pieced together through scattered dialogues and interspersed real-life fragments: the narrator "I" is actually Sachiko, and the suicidal Keiko is Mariko. The narrator brought Keiko to Britain against her will, which led to Keiko's suicide. The truth of the novel is hidden in the narrator's narration, who conceals the truth by fabricating the experiences of Sachiko and Etsuko. As the narrator, "I" justifies herself in deceptive memories to achieve self-redemption, exhibiting symptoms of trauma sequelae.

## 1.2 A Pale View of Hills from the Perspective of Spivak's Theory of Feminine Heterogeneity

In the 1980s and 1990s, postcolonial theory connected gender issues with racial colonial issues, giving birth to postcolonial feminist theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942—), a renowned literary critic, elaborated on postcolonial feminist theory in a series of her works.

Born in India, Spivak holds a different perspective from European feminist scholars. She concerns herself with the living conditions of women in Third World countries, and emphasizes the need to strive for the right to speak for Third World women rather than act as their "spokesperson". In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak put forward the concept of the heterogeneity of the female subject. "Heterogeneity" has twofold meanings: first, the loss of power and the difficult living conditions of the female subject in a patriarchal society centered on male dominance; second, the joint exploitation of women by colonial and patriarchal systems. Women's oppression stems from patriarchy on the one hand, and on the other hand, in the economic and political fields, the "coexistent system" formed by the complicity of colonialism and patriarchy has exacerbated the heterogeneous attributes of Third World women due to the unequal international economic and political order, reducing women to subalterns in society. She defines the lower-class women in Third World colonies as "subaltern women", claiming that they suffer from "double effacement". She points out that in the context of a male-dominated colonial world, the subjective existence of "subaltern women" is doubly erased: men act both as the object of colonial historical compilation and the subject of gender ideological construction, while women in this context have neither power nor history, and are unable to speak for their oppressed selves, which further conceals their subaltern nature. Obviously, in response to the question of whether subaltern women can speak, Spivak's answer is: "the subaltern cannot speak"<sup>[2]</sup>.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, the narrator Etsuko suffers from dual oppression, and her trauma is not only attributed to the visible war in the novel, but also to the distortion of human nature by patriarchy hidden beneath the text. In fact, Japan is a traditional patriarchal society with certain militaristic elements in its national spirit. As the initiator of World War II, Japan was usually regarded as a Second World country, but its defeat in the war and the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reduced it to a defeated nation. The ideological invasion of Japan by the United States after the war led to the loss of independence in Japan's national identity, making Japan essentially a colonized country. The compromise between patriarchal Japan and imperial colonial America further exacerbated the living predicament of Japanese women in the post-war period. Etsuko, a Japanese woman, immigrated to Britain to escape trauma, which is a geographical shift from the "East" to the "West" and an identity shift from the "margin" to the "center". Through this transformation, a covert metonymy is formed between gender status and East-West colonial relations. This paper applies Spivak's Theory of Feminine Heterogeneity, focusing on the identity

construction and living predicament of "subaltern women" under this "coexistent system". It discusses how, in semi-colonial Japan where patriarchy and imperial colonialism constituted a "coexistent system", women lost their subjective status in family and society and became "subaltern women" who could not speak.

## 2. The Angel in the House: Self-Suggestion of the "Splendid Mother"

*A Pale View of Hills* focuses on two mothers: Etsuko, a newly married expectant mother, and Sachiko, who has just moved into a shabby house by the river. Etsuko in Nagasaki was regarded as a good wife and a housewife without social work by everyone around her. She was responsible for housework for her husband and father-in-law on a daily basis, never defied her husband, and took good care of her father-in-law who only stayed at home for a short time. In her conversation with Mrs. Fujiwara, she said self-mockingly: "I don't do a great deal anyway.....I lead a very easy life."<sup>[1]</sup> She devoted herself to taking care of the family, acting as an "angel in the house". At that time, Etsuko, who was pregnant with her first child, was considered by people around her to be bound to become "a splendid mother"—the phrase "a splendid mother" appears as many as 20 times in the text. Both Mrs. Fujiwara and Sachiko, who were also mothers, once said to Etsuko: "I'm sure you'll make a splendid mother."<sup>[1]</sup> When talking about her identity as a mother, Etsuko also said: "Yes, I will. Thinking about the child cheers me up."

The other mother, Sachiko, hardly qualifies as "a splendid mother". She learned from Etsuko that her daughter Mariko was injured in a fight with other children, but she did not care. She knew that Mariko, who had just moved into the community, could not adapt to the new life, yet she paid no attention. On the one hand, she repeatedly claimed that she wanted to move to the United States for Mariko's own good; on the other hand, she deliberately ignored Mariko's feelings. At that time, a series of child murder cases occurred in Nagasaki, and few children were seen outside after dark, but Sachiko often left Mariko alone to meet her American boyfriend, putting Mariko in a dangerous situation.

The identity of "mother" brought hope to Etsuko, who had suffered from the war, making people around her see the "future" symbolized by the newborn, and also made Sachiko have a false fantasy about the "future". The wish "you'll be a splendid mother" implies Sachiko's self-awareness—she hoped to become "a splendid mother" herself. She hinted at her future wish to be a good mother by praising Etsuko, and fantasized that after moving away from Japan, Mariko would live in a better environment, and she would turn over a new leaf and become a qualified good mother by then.

In fact, the "splendid mother" is an integral part of the "angel in the house". When women are excluded from the male-dominated society, being a selfless "family devotee" is their only choice. The "angel in the house" abandons their own thoughts and interests, sacrifices their right to survival, and devotes themselves wholeheartedly to compassion and dedication to others. In post-war Nagasaki, women could find no more identity recognition and individual belonging beyond the role of the "angel". It should be pointed out that the loss of women's right to speak and subjectivity is caused by patriarchy, and at the same time, the existence of the "angel in the house" is one of the ideological manifestations that fundamentally support patriarchy.

## 3. "Subaltern Women" Under the Trauma of War

### 3.1 Mental Trauma: The Lingering Shadow of Post-War Japan

In Ishiguro's writing, the setting of the story background is the final key piece of the puzzle, carrying special emotions. Nagasaki, one of the story backgrounds of *A Pale View of Hills*, is of great significance in World War II. It witnessed the war ruthlessly claiming people's lives and

destroying countless families. The broken Nagasaki is a "city of memories" bearing people's war trauma, reminding people time and again that this place was once a living hell. The beginning of the novel depicts the dismal scene of post-war Japan: people's post-war life seems to be restarting, but in fact everything has come to a standstill—whether it is post-war reconstruction or people's daily life.<sup>[4]</sup>

Mrs. Fujiwara is one of the victims of the war. She lost almost everything in the war. She once had five children, and her husband, a prominent figure in Nagasaki, died in the ruins with their four sons. Having lost her husband, Mrs. Fujiwara's social status plummeted. To make a living, she opened a noodle shop and lived with her eldest son. She often thought of her deceased relatives, and in her memory, she noticed people who shared the same emotions as her. She saw a young couple who "did nothing but immerse themselves in grief for the deceased": "A pregnant girl and her husband spending their Sundays thinking about the dead." <sup>[1]</sup>The war not only injured people's bodies and broke countless families, but also inflicted enormous mental trauma on people's minds.

Sachiko also became homeless due to the war and moved into a shabby hut by the river. Her late husband's uncle wrote to ask her to go back, but she refused to return to the big house filled with all sad memories. She said it was a tomb with countless empty rooms. The word "room" is emphasized many times in the text. Etsuko and Sachiko's descriptions of "rooms" are very similar to the narrator's descriptions of the rooms after moving to the countryside in Britain. The narrator once wanted to sell the house here because the rooms were "too big", and Keiko's bedroom reminded her all the time that Keiko's ghost was still in that closed and dismal room. Obviously, these are living spaces in different places, but they use the same negative descriptions: "empty", "tomb", "stark". The personal color the subject endows to the "room" gives it a special implication, which also reflects the subject's own mental state, that is, the sense of discomfort and alienation towards the "home". Here, the identity of the story's subject is also revealed: "I" is both Sachiko and Etsuko who empathizes with Sachiko. Faced with the marginal predicament and traumatic memories, the narrator attempts to reconstruct the subject through imagination and deceptive narration, and chooses to escape through deceptive narration because she cannot overcome the pain. However, the negative color she attaches to the environment exposes the failure of subject reconstruction. In the patriarchal space, women have no independent economic status and lack the right to pursue their dreams. They become marginalized "subaltern women" in empty rooms, forever losing the integrity of the subject and the home where they can place their sense of belonging.<sup>[4]</sup>

### 3.2 Identity Transformation: East and West, Margin and Center

As a defeated nation in World War II and a colonized country under American cultural invasion, the Japanese people in the post-war period began to waver in their once proud "Japanese identity". At the same time, the devastated Japan became a space full of sad memories, and under the shaping of Western ideology, the colonial powers were instead regarded as the "land of happiness". Sachiko, the narrator "I" who suffered from war trauma, was unwilling to stay in Japan and thought Japan was no longer suitable for herself and her daughter to live in. Attracted by the "Western myth", they firmly believed that immigrating to the West would lead to a happier life.

The authoritative Western ideological invasion portrays the East as "backward, barbaric and unfortunate", while the West is regarded as "superior, civilized and happy". After the reshaping of the Eastern image, Western ideology gradually replaced the local culture. In the process of suppressing the colonized countries, the geographical "East" and "West" form a contrast with the identity "margin" and "center", constructing an oppositional relationship between the East and the West. The West's central status is strengthened, and the East becomes a marginal land.

The disillusionment of national defeat made Sachiko and Etsuko fall into a state of desperate

collapse in their hearts. Sachiko always used acting for Mariko's good as an excuse to cover up her motive of going abroad to escape: "Did you think I hadn't considered all this? Did you suppose I would decide to leave the country without having first given the most careful consideration to my daughter's welfare?" "Japan is no place for a girl. What can she look forward to here?"<sup>[1]</sup> But the facts have proved that Sachiko is not a qualified mother, and she does not care about Mariko's true feelings and situation. She would rather struggle in an unequal romantic relationship with Frank, just to seize the slim chance of leaving Japan. Sachiko is a pathetic victim of the colonial war. Helpless and alone, she can only rely on Frank, an American man, to find a way out, and humbly maintain this cross-border relationship to realize her "American dream".

In Sachiko, the inferior national identity of the East is vulnerable in the face of the strong Western culture. She regards Frank as her "Western knight", longing for him to help her break away from her "marginal" identity. At the same time, the power relationship between the "fragile Eastern woman" and the "Western knight" parallels that between the "weak East" and the "powerful West", forming a covert metonymy between gender status and East-West colonial relations. It can be said that the depiction of the "fragile woman" implies the colonial desire of the "East being forced to turn to the West". Spivak's Theory of Feminine Heterogeneity points out that under such colonial rule, women's subjectivity is irresponsibly erased. The "Eastern woman" has become the "subaltern among the subalterns" at this time, and the female subject is marked with the double brand of patriarchy and colonial rule. Thus, under the dual construction of patriarchy and colonial ideology, women become the false "Other" under the fantasy of Western ideology.

#### **4. The Dual Oppression of "Subaltern Women"**

##### **4.1 The Failure of Isomorphism: The Failed Mother and the Crisis of Identity Recognition**

The "angel in the house" is the female image pursued by patriarchal society; conversely, the obedient "virtuous housewife" is also the support of the patriarchal society and one of the ideological manifestations constituting the "coexistent system". Keiko, as Etsuko's eldest daughter, is a "foreigner" she brought from Japan. Keiko's suicide is caused by the conflict between her Japanese identity and the British environment. Etsuko brought Keiko to Britain to give her a better life, but the reality was contrary to her expectation. After immigration, Keiko chose to commit suicide under the pressure of childhood trauma and the foreign environment, and Etsuko's identity as a "splendid mother" collapsed as a result.

After Keiko's suicide, her ghost lingered in the room, and nightmares plagued the narrator "I". The narrator had to fabricate the image of Mariko in her memories to escape self-blame. In the memories, Sachiko is not a competent mother—she uses Mariko as an excuse to cover up her motive of going abroad. On the contrary, facing her friend's daughter, Etsuko in Nagasaki is more like a thoughtful mother. After learning that Mariko did not want to go abroad, she expressed her worry to Sachiko: "Moving to a different country, with a different language and foreign ways."<sup>[1]</sup> Mariko might not be able to adapt to life abroad, but Sachiko insisted on taking Mariko away from Japan. Etsuko could not persuade Sachiko, so she could only comfort Mariko that going abroad was not that bad. In reality, the narrator said the same to Keiko: "If you don't like it over there, we'll come straight back. But we have to try it and see if we like it there. I'm sure we will."<sup>[1]</sup> Etsuko's care for Mariko in Nagasaki is actually the narrator expressing her worry about her daughter Keiko through the mouth of memory.<sup>[3]</sup>

Mariko is the shadow of Keiko, the childhood version of Keiko. Mariko's resistance to going abroad actually happened to Keiko, and the narrator's memories indirectly reveal the real reason for Keiko's suicide. Mariko once found a litter of kittens. In the eyes of the young Mariko, she was just like the kittens, homeless. Therefore, she begged Sachiko to allow her to keep the kittens, but

Sachiko refused ruthlessly and drowned the kittens with her own hands. The kittens symbolized Mariko's last glimmer of hope, the final "umbilical cord" connecting her to Japan. After the kittens were drowned, her fate of being destined to leave Japan was declared. Her opinions were ignored by her mother, and from then on, she no longer held any hope for her family. As an adult, Keiko retained the childhood trauma of Mariko: she did not trust her family, isolated herself from the world in the strange Britain, locked herself in the room, and finally chose to commit suicide. The worry Etsuko had before going abroad became a reality—Keiko could not adapt to the foreign life after immigration at all, and she became the kitten drowned in the family and society.

Keiko's death caused a new identity anxiety and trauma to the narrator "I". The narrator fully realized her dereliction of duty as a mother, so she chose to justify herself through deceptive narration and fabricated the image of Etsuko in Nagasaki, an idealized "angel in the house". Etsuko's care for Mariko in Nagasaki is actually the narrator's compensatory behavior to Keiko. She did not take into account Keiko's psychological state in reality, but at least Etsuko in the memories could be a qualified "angel in the house".

The novel's criticism of the "coexistent system" of patriarchy and imperial colonialism is obvious. Under the setting of "mother and daughter", the double failure of Etsuko's identity as a "splendid mother" and Keiko's immigrant identity proves the failure of institutional isomorphism. The image of Etsuko as a "splendid mother" shown in Nagasaki is not real, and the obedient "angel in the house" does not exist. Both the narrator "I" and Sachiko are women who fled. Through the deviation between reality and memory, the novel negates the superficial image of Etsuko as the "angel in the house" in Nagasaki, and also satirizes the so-called "Eastern femininity". Under the contrast between gender status and East-West colonialism, both the "East" and "women" are regarded as the "weak". The failure of the "splendid mother" image breaks the false fantasy of the "angel in the house" projected on Eastern women under patriarchy and shatters the imperialist fantasy. At this level, the novel takes a female stance and raises objections to the dominant ideology with a critical attitude.

#### 4.2 An Attempt at Deconstruction: The Setting of Niki's Identity

The novel's criticism of patriarchy and imperial colonialism is also reflected in the setting of Niki, the narrator's second daughter of British-Japanese mixed blood. Niki's father wanted to give her a Japanese name, but Etsuko insisted on giving her an English name because she was unwilling to recall her past experiences in Japan. The finally chosen name "Niki" sounds similar to a Japanese name, so it is considered to "had some vague echo of the East about it"<sup>[1]</sup>. At the time of naming, the Eastern name chosen by the Western father and the compromise of the Eastern mother make the name "Niki" bear the "eclectic" nature of both the East and the West at the same time. On another level, the names Niki and Keiko sound similar, and the two half-sisters have a certain continuity in their names. The act of "naming" endows Niki with more Eastern colors and deepens her connection with her Japanese sister Keiko in terms of "Japanese identity". Niki's Eastern genes can also be seen from her appearance. Niki's father once said that Niki and Keiko looked very similar, and Etsuko said they were far more alike than Niki's father admitted: Mrs. Worcester from the community once taught Keiko to play the piano, and then taught the young Niki for about a year. When she saw the grown-up Niki, she even mistook her for Keiko. The fact that Keiko, a Japanese, and Niki, a British-Japanese mixed blood, look very similar, and Niki is even mistaken for having Keiko's Japanese appearance, indicates that the "Eastern color" in her is far more distinct.<sup>[7]</sup>

Before this, Etsuko always thought that it was her selfishness that led to Keiko's suicide and blamed herself constantly. However, Niki approved of her mother's act of fleeing Japan. In her opinion, women have the right to pursue their own happiness and future, the so-called "femininity"

is ridiculous, and her mother had sufficient and legitimate motives to leave Japan—she should be proud of her escape. Niki mentioned that one of her friends was writing a poem about her mother, recording her incident as a "fleeing woman". Spivak believes that the subaltern cannot speak, and they can only be heard through non-subaltern intermediaries. As an intermediary, Niki establishes the history of the existence of "fleeing women" through the act of "writing poetry". Once, countless "subaltern women" lost their voices in the history compiled by men, and they felt guilty and uneasy about their rebellion. The act of "writing poetry" records their stories, leaving women's traces in history ever since, and the silent "subaltern women" finally have a voice.

Keiko's "ghost" has plagued Etsuko since the beginning of the novel, a sorrow she could not walk out of. But when Niki was about to leave for London, Etsuko finally summoned up the courage to check the "ghost" in Keiko's room, only to find that it was Niki making coffee in the kitchen. As Etsuko saw, Niki is a confident and self-sufficient young woman with a bright future. Her existence will dissolve Etsuko's trauma and bring her hope for a new life. After untangling her heart, Etsuko finally confessed that she had hurt Keiko: "But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same." "Don't be silly, how could you have known? And you did everything you could for her. You're the last person anyone could blame."<sup>[1]</sup> Etsuko finally spoke openly about her nightmare, and at this moment, Keiko's "ghost" seemed to have dissipated.<sup>[6]</sup>

The novel begins with cold and continuous rain, but it is a sunny day when Etsuko sends Niki back to London. Etsuko's nightmares are blown away like mist, and she reaches a reconciliation with her past. As the key to ending Etsuko's unreliable narration, Niki makes Etsuko face Keiko and her past calmly. Niki has a blood connection with her Japanese mother, but she negates her mother's traditional female concepts, an act that breaks away from the traditional pattern of "mother-daughter inheritance". She stands in the position of the observer with the attitude of a new generation, and claims her "self" from her mother who is the "Other". The setting of Niki's identity reveals an attempt to transcend colonialism and patriarchy: both Western and Eastern cultures are the "Other" to her, so Niki thus gains the subjective identity. The "subaltern women" cannot speak, but Niki speaks for them. Her resistance to her inherent "Eastern femininity" and her remarks attempting to break away from patriarchy all show a possibility—the deconstruction of the imperial patriarchy.

## 5. Conclusion

Spivak's theory of feminine heterogeneity centers on women from the Third World. While Japan is generally categorized as a Second World country, <sup>[5]</sup>*A Pale View of Hills* portrays the oppressed condition of Japanese women within a semi-colonial context through its depiction of the collective trauma and national identity inferiority of post-war society. Whether the narrator "I," Etsuko, or Sachiko, all are "subaltern women" oppressed by the patriarchal society of semi-colonial Japan. Their endeavors to reconstruct their identities embody the resistance of "subaltern women" against unequal gender relations and colonial hierarchies. In particular, the character of Niki is constructed as a catalyst that grants them a voice. Analyzing the novel's anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal undertones through the lens of Spivak's theory of feminine heterogeneity serves to draw greater attention to the plight of marginalized and colonized women. This approach not only aligns with Kazuo Ishiguro's own creative philosophy but also endows the research with profound social and practical significance.

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