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A STUDY OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN THE BURIED GIANT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ETHICAL LITERARY CRITICISM

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro, a British writer who won the Nobel Prize in literature, is the author of another masterpiece, *The Buried Giant*, which was published in 2015. He focuses on the survival status of humanity and portrays the main characters' identity crisis caused by the ethical dilemmas. Based on the Ethical Literary Criticism proposed by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao in 2004, this paper studies the moral dilemma encountered by the four main characters in their pursuit of different goals, analyzes the process and significance of their identity reconstruction, and further explores the moral enlightenment that led to the ethical redemption, aiming to show that identity reconstruction is a process of overcoming uncertainty and doubt in ethical dilemmas. The process of identity reconstruction ultimately clarifies that forgetting the past is not an effective way to escape from the ethical dilemma. Conversely, people should courageously confront their painful past, reconstruct their identity, and strive to achieve self-reconciliation.

Key words: Ethical literary criticism, identity reconstruction, memory, forgetting

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of Ishiguro and *The Buried Giant*

Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-) is a Japanese British novelist, short story writer and screenwriter. He was named as one of the 50 greatest British authors since 1945 by *The Times* in 2008, and has been awarded the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature. Ishiguro has published eight novels, a collection of short story, a screenplay, and more. His early work *The Remains of the Day* (1989) won him the Booker Prize, the highest honor in British literature.

Ishiguro never manipulates the ethnic identity of Asians, in contrast to other writers from ethnic minorities; instead, he positions himself as an internationalist. Memory is a theme that runs throughout Ishiguro's creations. In his 2015 work *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro continues to use his powerful writing weapon—memory, to explore what one nation and society have forgotten and remembered. The background of the novel is set on the land of England which is shrouded in a mist of amnesia just after the end of rule of King Arthur. The protagonists, Axl and Beatrice, an old couple living in

a Briton village firstly discovered the amnesia of themselves and other people. They recalled that they had a son from whom they had been separated for a very long time, thus they set out to look for their son together. Along the way, they met the Warrior Wistan from the East, the knight of King Arthur, Gawain and found the truth about the mist: in order to achieve permanent peace and avoid the revenge from the Saxons, King Arthur cast a spell on a female dragon with the help of Merlin the Great Mage so that she could breathe out the amnesia mist. Warrior Wistan intends to slay the dragon and lead the Saxons to revenge, whereas Gawain's mission is to guard the dragon. Ishiguro is skilled at forcing the characters into a dilemma, making each character's choice marked by ethical consideration and struggle. Overall, the novel presents a fantastic literary story while in-depth discussing ethical issues in human nature.

1.2 Literature review

Since Kazuo Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize in 2017, *The Buried Giant* has gradually gained widespread attention in academia. Scholars have done research on the work from various perspectives, including post-colonialism, narrative theory, identity, post-modernism, ethics and new historicism.

1.2.1 Research abroad

Along with the popularity of post-colonial theories, the first approach tries to interpret the novel from the perspective of "the other" of post-colonialism. In *The Civil, Silent, and Savage* in Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, Alexander J. Steele (2016) holds that the political situation between Britons and Saxons in this novel further clarifies Ishiguro's continuous criticism of the logic of the western humanism mark—"the other". Some scholars focus on the narratology of the novel, holding the view that Kazuo Ishiguro abandoned his unreliable first person narrative mode in *The Buried Giant*, and prompted the protagonist to reconsider their personal situation through the way of a third person narrator. Stacy in her 2021 article *Looking out into the fog: narrative, historical responsibility, and the problem of freedom in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Buried Giant* explores the relationship between

narrative and historical responsibility, proposing that moral narratives must be based on recognition of the past experiences of others.

Some studies have focused on the issue of identity in the novel. Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun (2016) points out that the adaption of Arthurian legend presents the functions of literature in preserving, disseminating, and transferring the focal points of cultural memory. It further supports the construction of national identity. Also, some scholars investigate Ishiguro's use of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to explore the formation of British identity and cosmopolitanism.

1.2.2 Research at home

Compared to the foreign, research on *The Buried Giant* started relatively late in China. On the basis of post-colonial culture and globalization, some papers reflect the ethical problems faced by ordinary people when dealing with changes in the conflicts between cultures. Some scholars thought that this work reveals the dilemma of self-identity choice brought by the opposition between war and peace, the confusion of family identity choice, and the crisis of national identity choice brought by the opposition between memory and forgetting. Taking Hassan's postmodern theory as the theoretical basis, some scholars analyze the postmodern features including uncertainty and fragmentation that appear in the novel, probing into Ishiguro's acceptance and application for postmodern ideas. There were also researchers who adopt the post-structuralism to analyze a symbolic image "fog" and how memory, as a metaphorical presupposition, reproduces the identity of British couple.

The narrative style and writing techniques presented in the work are also a research focus in domestic academia. The imitation of the 14th century English knight Sir Gawain from the perspectives of characters and plot has also been analyzed by the academics. They explored how to deal with death, love, and forgetting with an ironic attitude.

Some documents on Ishiguro's novels focus more on ethical issues. Scholars mainly research Sir Gawain's and Wistan's identity crises and ethical

dilemmas. By presenting the characters' conflicts between rational will and irrational will, these articles argue that individuals should shoulder their ethical responsibilities when facing past memories. In addition, some papers note that, from the perspective of New Historicism, the reference to the Anglo-Saxon history in *The Buried Giant* reexamines the Britishness and exposes the intricate roots of national conflicts.

To sum up, although scholars at home and abroad have done research on this novel from various perspectives, few have systematically and deeply explored the characters' identity crises and identity construction from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. Therefore, this paper adopts the method of close reading to look into the states and reconstruction of the identity with the aid of relevant theories of ethical literary criticism, aiming to reveal Ishiguro's concern for reality and offer a new perspective for readers to explore his works.

2. Ethical Literary Criticism

2.1 Western Origin

Western ethical criticism has a long history that can be traced back to the ancient Greek era. In Western literature, ancient Greek mythology contains ethical content. With regard to later themes in Homer's epic, Greek and Roman dramas, they were directly related to ethical and moral values. For example, the story of Odysseus being loyal to his wife in Homer's Epic, as well as Sophocles murdering his father and marrying his mother in Oedipus, are constantly subject to ethics and morality. From the beginning, literary criticism in ancient Greece and Rome included the evaluation of moral ideology because of the close connection between the themes of literary works and the descriptions of ethics and morality.

During this period, the leading figures who criticized literature from an ethical perspective were Plato and Aristotle. Plato, while discussing literature, actually applied ethical principles to criticize poets; Aristotle emphasized the moral aspect of literature and argued that the person imitated by the imitator must be noble or despicable, which precisely indicates that Aristotle examined the people and

things described by the poet from a moral perspective, thus placing moral evaluation in an important position.

But in the West, ethical criticism has long existed as a general idea rather than forming a systematic critical theory and method. The rise of the Enlightenment movement in the 18th century led to the flourishing Western literature that emphasized ethical education and moral criticism. However, it was not until the mid to late 19th century that practical research on literary ethics began. During this period, the research of western literary ethics focused on discussing and evaluating literature from a moral perspective, but was only limited to commentary and did not establish a theoretical foundation of ethical literary criticism. Afterwards, western ethics and literary criticism experienced a history of estrangement—writers and critics increasingly valued the aesthetic role of literature, rather than whether it was related to morality.

Since the 1980s, the Western academia has begun to contemplate the ethical deficiencies in literary criticism. At this moment, western literary criticism has developed two tendencies. One is to examine the theoretical value of literature from the perspective of ethical theory, and the other is to study writers and works from a methodological perspective. These two tendencies indicate that western literary ethics has shifted from studying the general moral values to an ethical analysis for writers and works. Despite the profound historical origins of western ethical criticism and its tendency towards ethical literary criticism, a comprehensive theoretical framework or unique critical technique has never been established. Ethical criticism has not completely departed from ethics, nor has it developed into a literary criticism method.

2.2 Contemporary development

After ethical criticism was introduced to China, it bursts out new vitality. On the basis of Western ethical criticism and traditional Chinese moral criticism, domestic scholars have established a methodology for ethical literary criticism, interpreting and evaluating literature from an ethical perspective. As the founder of ethical literary

criticism, Nie Zhenzhao conducted a systematic and in-depth study for the first time in *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, defining some basic academic concepts and issues in the theory and practice of ethical literary criticism.

According to Nie Zhenzhao, ethical literary criticism is a research method to read, analyze and interpret literary works, to study literary authors and literary problems from perspective of ethics. "In terms of methodology, ethical literary criticism is an approach to literary criticism developed based on the introduction of ethical methods and the assimilation of them into the texture of literary-critical methods. It is used not only to interpret the moral phenomena recorded in literature on a historical and dialectic basis but also to make a value judgment of those in current literature based on the moral values in the reality"(Nie 8). The basic thought of this method is that literature is the art of ethics in nature as it is the special expressions of ethical ideas and moral life in a particular historical period.

Compared with Western ethical criticism, it has four distinct characteristics: firstly, it changes the literary ethics into ethical literary criticism as a mean efficiently to solve practical literary questions (Nie 41); secondly, it regards the educational role of literature as its fundamental function; thirdly, it replaces the concept of ethical criticism with the concept of literary ethical criticism and distinguishes it from moral criticism, allowing literary ethical criticism to avoid moral criticism's subjectivity and turn into objective literary ethical criticism, thus resolving the issue of the gap between literary criticism and history; finally, it established its own critical terminology and discourse system, such as ethical environment, ethical taboo, ethical selection, etc., making literary ethical criticism an easy tool for criticizing literature.

Ethical predicament, ethical environment, ethical identity, and ethical selection are all core terms in ethical literary criticism. In Nie's view, ethical predicament refers to the unresolved conflicts and contradictions encountered by characters in literary works. Ethical environment, also known as the ethical context, is the historical background of literary creation. Analyzing and

criticizing literary works in specific ethical environment, as well as formulating objective ethical interpretations, are necessary conditions under the ethical literary criticism.

Ethical choice is concerned with actions humans take to acquire their human nature. Ethical choice consists of free choice and moral choice. Free choice is an external manifestation of instinct and the result of animal factors. Moral choice is the external manifestation of rationality and the result of human factors. The external ethical choices are not only the main content of literary text, but also the basis of ethical issues and moral evaluations.

In terms of ethical identity, a human being's identity is an identification of his or her existence in society, and we are responsible for the responsibilities and duties that it entails. Literary works address the question of human identity by depicting how people make their own choices. There are many different categories of ethical identity found in literary texts, including identity based on occupation, identity based on blood relatives, identity based on ethical relationships, identity based on collaborative and social relationships, etc. Literary works offer moral cautions and lessons for people's ethical choices, whether they show how members of a particular identity regulate themselves or how people attempt to obtain that identity through self-selection in society (263).

In a word, the purpose of literary ethical criticism is not only to make comments on literature from an ethical standpoint, but also to discover the ethical value of literature as an objective existence and the truth of life described in literary works. The ethical value of literary works is historical and objective, not depending on our moral will. Therefore, this article will focus on the ethical identity under the ethical literary criticism, analyze the identity crisis of different characters through their ethical dilemmas, and explain the ethical choices made by characters to reconstruct their identities.

3. Confusion: Dislocation of Ethical Identity

Ethical identity refers to the identity that a person possesses and is recognized and accepted by

society. A person may hold multiple ethical identities from different dimensions. As identity is associated with ethic, the change of identity is likely to lead to the ethical confusion and conflict (Nie 264), and causes the dislocation of the protagonist's identity ethic. The ethical line of *The Buried Giant* is the ethical conflict brought about by forgetting and truth, guarding and revenge, while ethical identity is a typical ethical knot on this line. As Nie pointed out, "all ethical problems are often related to ethical identity" (Nie 265), several main characters encounter the confusion of identity ethics in their own tangled ethical dilemma.

3.1 Axl and Beatrice as Seekers

As villagers living in the mist, the couple, Axl and Beatrice, is people who only have fragmented memories. It seems that pursuing memory appears natural for people with memory loss. Therefore, when realizing that problems occurred in people's memory and perceived their son in the disappearing memories, they firmly embarked on the journey of looking for their son. Meanwhile, following the encounter of the boatman, Beatrice had a new question: "if without our memories, there's nothing for it but for our love to fade and die" (Ishiguro 45). Therefore, this is also a journey to search for precious memories between the couple. The mist, nevertheless, not only obscures the sweet memories of family and love, but also covers up the painful wounds. During their journey to find their son, the two constantly reminisced about some painful past, resulting in an identity opposition. In this case, "If the selectors make the moral judgments on each of them individually, both choices are correct and conform to the universal moral principles. But once the selectors choose one between them, the other will violate the ethics" (Nie 262). The couple turned from the initial dilemma of forgetting to the new ethical dilemma of identity: memory can bring truth, but the truth may be cruel or even hurt their relationship as the husband and wife. Should they stop in recalling, or pursue to the end and bear the possible consequences of memory?

Beatrice is frightened of being one of the tragic widows who has been separated from their husband owing to memory loss, thus she wishes to

recollect the past with Axl. She believes that memories could prove that they were a loving marriage in the past while preserving their current love. Even though they claim to be a loving couple, if they are unable to recall the most priceless moments from the past, they are destined to be torn apart by the boatman. Axl, however, is not keen on pursuing past memories. He believes that his current sentiments for his wife won't change whether or not his memory is recovered. The true reason why he refuses to restore his memory is that it inevitably exposes some of the evil and trauma of the past, which poses a threat to their current relationship. This kind of fear of the past stems from his uncertainty about the future. As he regains his past, his image as a loyal, considerate, and brave husband will collapse. Axl was once a valiant soldier and a guardian of peace in the Saxon village. He failed to prevent the British from killing innocent Saxons during the war between the two races. In the subsequent confrontation with King Arthur, he had to choose to leave timidly. He betrayed his wife, while out of revenge, Beatrice also deceived him. Infidelity worsened their marital relationship, to the point where both persons harbored hostility towards each other. As a result, their son, unbearable their terrible relationship, ran away from home and died of the plague. Despite their reconciliation, the irreversible consequences of their son's death became their eternal pain.

In contrast, the present Axl is courageous and devoted. He took good care of Beatrice along the way, showcasing the image of a caring and loving husband. Based on this, the negative memories of the past made Axl afraid that his wife would recall their disputes and leave him. At the end of the novel, when three children asked them to bring the poisoned goat to the plains where Quering lives, Axl sternly refused and resisted the deconstruction of his current responsible identity as a husband from past memories. He finally, grudgingly, gave in to his wife's insistence and agreed to children's request.

Standing at the crossroads of memory and oblivion, the Axl couple fell into the ethical dilemma of identity choice. Choosing memory, that is, choosing a past husband image, will remind Axl and Beatrice of the betrayal in marriage, shattering their

current perception of love. On the other hand, they will lose those precious memories of the past and unable to prove their intense love to pass the boatman's test if they choose to forget and become the present self. The contradiction and confusion between these two identities gradually deprived Axl's courage to explore the truth of amnesia.

3.2 Gawain as a Watchman

As two individuals who are not affected by amnesiac mist, Gawain and Wistan face identity dilemmas arising from the opposition between war and peace. Sir Gawain appeared as a righteous knight who defended and protected the aging dragon, promising to fight for the justice. However, the disclosure of old memories revealed other sides to Gawain, shattering his heroic image as a protector of justice.

The internal conflict triggered by a previous war and the current state of peace is the cause of Gawain's identity confusion. Through Gawain's two reveries, we can infer that the British violated the The Law of the Innocents, which is an agreement Britons reached to protect the innocent after war with the Saxons. Undoubtedly, it is morally wrong to kill innocent people in any situation. The fact that Gawain obeyed King Arthur's command is glorious, but it is also a shameful past. Now, he must deny his past and his involvement in war as the guardian of peace between two countries. Gawain is addicted to the current hypocritical peaceful world and vows to defend it. He is sensitive to any mention of the massacre when Beatrice demanded to know why there were countless corpses in the cellar. Then he became panicked and angry, asking "what do you suggest, mistress? That I committed this slaughter?" and added that "can just one knight of Arthur killed so many?" (Ishiguro 173). Faced with Beatrice's questions, he chose to avoid them and said, "many things in this place are left best unseen" (167). Gawain refuses to confront his past or reveal how sinful he was in the past. He became furious and sought to defend himself after the elderly women accused him of violating the peace deal and labeled him as "A Slaughter of Babes." His identity and conscience have been challenged by the past, hence he rejects the truthfulness of history.

On the other hand, as King Arthur's favorite knight, Gawain regards personal honor above all else in his life. His entire life had been committed to preserving the honor that displayed his masculinity in the hopes that it would bring him respect and admiration. He must continuously reenact himself from previous conflicts, and remind the world of his bravery and good skills in combat so as to keep his knightly aura. For instance, he lied that he was sent to kill the female dragon, so that the mission brought by King Arthur could be completed. However, as the dragon has never been slaughtered, this loyal knight can only be accused of disloyalty by the widows, and the one who is obviously carrying out his mission can only be referred to as being weak-willed.

A person's identity is a sign of his or her existence in society, and he or she needs to bear the responsibilities and obligations given by identity. Gawain was aware that he was an authoritative instrument rather than a heroic knight, though. He simply obeys directions from his superior without thinking and even lost his bottom line for being a human—killing innocent people as a result of his mindless loyalty. In addition to urgently needing to remember the past to demonstrate his loyalty and bravery, he also desperately wants to forget the past because of its shameful actions. He becomes a contradictory individual since his ethical identity as the guardians of dragon and mist cannot be recognized by the outside world. His present cannot exist without the past, but his blind rejection of the past has led to the loss and confusion of his ethical identity. Therefore, he had to pose as a dragon slayer in order to safeguard the dragon. In contrast, the dragon was not put to death, and as a result, even the widow called him a coward. He was puzzled about "a slaughter of babes. Is that what we were that day?" (214). It turns out that he could not find his identity—the initiator of war or the guardian of peace, lost in the ethical dilemma of identity.

3.3 Wistan as an Avenger

Due to the war's destruction, Wistan made the decision to seek revenge. Meanwhile, he particularly enjoyed the warmth and friendship of the British nation during peacetime. Wistan's viewpoint on war reflects his identity confusion. He

claims to be the protector of his homeland, an advocate of justice, and someone who opposed the indiscriminate killing of innocent people. But in reality, he is also the main planner of a new round of war and the destroyer of the homeland. This dual contradictory identity gradually emerged during the dragon slaying journey in Westan, which also led to his confusion and bewilderment at the end of the mission.

Initially, Wistan identified as an avenger since the memory of hatred overshadowed other emotions. His ethical choice to kill the dragon and dispel the mist in order to achieve the revenge has always been unwavering. When faced with the monks letting wild birds peck their bodies to atone for the sins, he did not pity them, believing that it was only "the drawing of a veil over the foulest deeds" (151) and that justice had not been done; when faced with people sent by Lord Brennus to kill him, he did not shrink back; when faced with Gawain's patient advice, he remained unwavering. He always opted for the revenge. In the end, Gawain died by his sword, and the dragon was also slaughtered. He was, nevertheless, bound by a strong feeling of nationalism and self-protection, which filled his heart with a narrow love for his own homeland and loathing for the other nation. His blind perception of war is the root cause of this limited narrow heroism.

In Wistan's view, war is equivalent to vengeance and violence, and the powerful always kill the weak. He described a horrific war scene, "for you Britons, it'll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You'll flee or perish. And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land" (297). However, there were no signs of peace after the mother dragon was killed; rather, more assassinations and conquests were about to start. Wistan was blinded by narrow rage and heroism, which ultimately turns him into a new war machine.

The Saxons' resent memory will soon be awakened following the successful dragon slaughter, and the samurai will conquest this region alongside his monarch. Although Wistan appears to be a determined avenger on the surface, his heart is actually riddled with contradictions and dilemmas.

He "looked overwhelmed and not in the least triumphant. Without a word, he sat down on the blackened ground right on the rim of the pit" (295). He had actually been certain that he should hate every Briton, but after feeling the love and care of the Axes, his conviction was weakened. After the dragon slaughter, he persuaded the couple to leave the place where massacre was about to start. For one thing, upon the arrival of war, there is so-called justice and revenge that Wistan has always pursued; for another, there is goodness and compassion in his nature. He was deeply lost in identity confusion. The ethical identity will bring the corresponding ethical responsibility, and ignoring or violating the ethical responsibility will cause the identity dislocation. Wistan lost love due to war, but peace allowed him to experience warmth and compassion once more. He was uncomfortable with his contradicting identity, which even caused him to lose after killing the dragon.

4. Choice: Reconstruction of Ethical Identity

Ishiguro describes the ethical environment and identity confusion faced by the characters, expressing his ethical concerns about faith, race, and memory. In ethical literary criticism, it is necessary to return to the ethical scene of history to analyze the ethical factors that influence the fate of characters, interpreting their choices from the point of ethic and making a moral evaluation from history (Nie 265). From the three dimensions of truth, peace and justice and the description of different ethical identities of the characters, this chapter will examine characters' identity reconstruction based on their ethical choices in the ethical dilemma, and further excavate the moral reasons behind these ethical choices. This dynamic self-persuasion process demonstrates the intricacy of people's identity definition and ethical choices.

4.1 Pursuit of Memory and Truth

As the journey of searching for their son progressed, the Axl's ability to make a choice between recalling and forgetting become harder. The image of the loving couple has been challenged, and the ethical choices made by them are also full of their emotional struggles. For Beatrice, it cannot prove her love to Axl if she doesn't even have past

memories. Hence, when the priest in the monastery suggested that the mist may also have buried some traumatic memories and questioned whether she was truly determined to drive away the mist, she responded that unpleasant memories are not frightful, believing that “even a child knows not to fear the twists and turns before” (Ishiguro 157). She did not hesitate in the least when a group of children entrusted them with the task of slaying the female dragon and driving the mist away in poisoned goats. In Beatrice’s view, the boatman’s query was the key to identifying her love for Axl. However, when some fragmented memories reminded her of the bad deed she had done to her husband, she also fell into doubt about whether to let the mist dissipate and couldn’t help but ask Axl, “will you turn away and leave me on this bleak” (282). It can be seen that bad memories are not as insignificant to Beatrice as she claims. Finally, Beatrice chose to pursue the truth, for the reason as what she said to Axl during the dragon slaying, “let’s see freely the path we’ve come together, whether it’s in dark or mellow sun” (290).

As for Axl, when memories first appeared in his mind, he was controlled by anger and pain. However, the negative emotion of fear of the recurrence of traumatic memories was quickly replaced by the impulse to protect his wife. Forgiveness paved the way for their reconciliation. Axl performed his obligations as a responsible husband by watching over his dying wife, “I will never, never give her up” (Ishiguro 233). He reestablished his identity as a capable husband by successfully assuming the burden of being a husband. What’s more, the wife Beatrice was also very concerned about her husband’s safety, and even willing to sacrifice her own life to ensure Axl’s survival. In other words, both parties earned ethical recognition and moral acceptance as qualified partners by upholding their ethical duties to their families. Moreover, they accepted the fact that their son had already died, and no longer condemn each other for the painful memories they once had. By recalling and mourning their son, they reconstructed their ethical and moral identity as parents and lovers.

For those who are in close relationships, forgetting the traumatic experience does not truly

heal the wound. The only way to heal a wound is to face it and reconcile with the past. Axl ultimately decides to confront the past even though it might damage the image of his current husband because it is worthwhile that restoring memory can recover the beauty of their love. With a short period of forgetting, their wounds also healed to a certain extent. In the end, Axl sided with Wistan when Gawain pleaded with him to persuade the warrior not to slaughter dragons, and his thirst for memory, truth, and ethical identity overcame confusion.

4.2 Guardianship of Peace

The identity crisis faced by the Knight Gawain is manifested in the irreconcilable relationship between self-awareness and loyalty at the personal level. As an independent individual, Gawain has instinctive desires, including the thirst for love, companionship and understanding of others. None of these, according to his mission, could be fulfilled, otherwise he would have become a traitor. At the collective level, Gawain must decide between upholding peace and concealing the truth: guarding the female dragon means that the truth is buried, which is detrimental to justice and will shatter his knightly image; if the dragon is killed, Saxons’ hatred memory is reawakened, which may subvert the peace and his image as a guardian of peace.

Gawain has been struggling with how to cast off this ethical dilemma. He ultimately made a decision, choosing to safeguard peace and accept his past. He actively reflected on his entire life, denied the so-called truth of history, and did not blindly believe that King Arthur was always correct. Instead, he started to consider and question whether the triumph built upon the massacre was worthy of boasting about. What’s more, he acknowledged that he could have followed his own judgment and been loyal to himself.

Gawain dedicated his life to maintaining peace. The only way, in his opinion, for the entire nation to sustain long-term peace and stability and for two antagonistic ethnic groups to live in harmony with one another is to forget the past. It is because of this that the memory loss caused by the mist exhaled by the dragon can heal the wounds of both

tribes. Similarly, Gawain believed himself to be the guardian of peace and considered that the unjust war started by King Arthur had been over for a long time. He thought: "the bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet... Leave this country to rest in forgetfulness" (286). In fact, Gawain himself, like Wistan, strongly opposes harming innocent people. For instance, even though Gawain considered Wistan to be an adversary, he declined to assist Sir Brennus' soldiers in removing him.

What's more, he had personally witnessed the destructive power of hatred. During the war, a seemingly weak British girl cruelly wielded a hoe in front of her enemies, repeatedly chopping at their heads.. Meanwhile, he did not approve of the practice of killing innocent people in the war launched by King Arthur, but it is the fact that despite the curse of slaughter will never stop, "beloved Arthur brought lasting peace here between Briton and Saxon" (111). Gawain engaged Wistan in a final combat at the Giant's Tomb, where he paid the price of his life and completing his path of protection.

As Wistan's final goal is vengeance, Gawain is still working to stop him from killing Querig. Protecting Querig is more about preserving the peace between the two races rather than meaning Gawain accepting Arthur's memory manipulation. Accompanied by his identity as a defender of peace was destroyed by Wistan, the final result showed that Gawain was powerless to preserve the peace, which renders existing peace came to an end. Overall, Gawain's identity reconstruction into the ethical dilemma is a failure as a result. However, Gawain's redemption in the ethical dilemma can be regarded as a success from another perspective, which lies in the fact that the confrontation has defeated evasion, and truth has triumphed over lies. Realizing that he was an independent individual, not a subordinate of King Arthur, he has developed self-awareness and started the process of reclaiming his ethical identity.

4.3 Execution of Revenge

"We should analyze characters' ethical choices and their results in a specific ethical environment and ethical context when analyzing

literary works, to reveal the historical value and realistic significance of literature" (Nie 256). Warrior Wistan grew up with the Britons from an early age before moving to the East. He has the memory of Saxons being slaughtered, hating the Britons, but at the same time, he admires and sympathizes with those who are excellent and kind-hearted Britons. Both of these emotions are rooted in Wistan's mind. Nevertheless, Wistan ultimately made the decision to seek revenge despite his internal conflict over whether he should be the world's defender or destroyer. His desire to resolve the ethical dilemma and his search for the reconstruction of ethical identity are also revealed by his vengeance.

Knight Gawain is immune to mist since he is the protector of dragon, while Wistan has a talent for resisting magic, hence his memory cannot be taken away. "How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a place hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery?" (Ishiguro 286). The war that once took place on the English lowlands is still clearly in Wistan's memory. He had always yearned for the day of revenge and justice, thus his perpetual goal was to clear the mist. Although he seemed hesitant and frustrated, a sense of duty prompted him to kill the dragon and participate in the upcoming battle of revenge. The reason why Wistan helped Saxons retrieve their memories is to give Saxons a new perspective on war. There is no doubt that recovering memories and then taking revenge on the British is the way of healing the war wounds. His pursuit of memory ultimately triumphed by defeating Gawain and killing the dragon.

However, Wistan was caught in doubt and hesitation after he successfully performed his duty, "yet now the hour's almost upon us, I find my heart trembles like a maid's" (296). The Eastern King will make use of the hostility of the Saxons to conquer this region with the help of dissipation of mist. In regards to the coming conflict, Wistan admits that despite his best efforts, there is a voice in his heart that resists this flame of anger. He foresaw a future where "men will burn their neighbors' houses by night and hang children from trees at dawn" (297). Therefore, intertwined with multiple ethical dilemmas, he has stuck in the spiritual dilemma. He

ultimately chose to shape himself as an avenger in the process of pursuing his identity. However, Wistan had a premonition that his fellow Saxons were about to be conquered, and upcoming war would once again plunge people of both races into the pain and suffering, with a serious impact on their lives.

In this sense, Wistan's identity reconstruction enabled him to fulfill the mission bestowed upon him by the rulers, while also causing him to be deeply confused about the rationality of his identity choice and the future of the entire nation. He was given the task of killing the female dragon by the king. With this ideal in mind, Wistan committed himself entirely to exposing the traumatic memory beneath the mist so as to arouse the hatred and rage of Saxons. There will be another power combat for the authorities. It is obvious that powerful individuals will rule people's fate, and that public will once again suffer from the pain and suffering of wartime. Wistan, who was determined to seek revenge, had no concern for his own life, let alone the lives of others. Nevertheless, the fact that Wistan was prepared to take action and exact revenge on the British after witnessing the suffering caused to his Saxon compatriots by the massacre proves that he possesses the qualities of a warrior, capable, fearless, and loyal to his duties. As a national avenger, Wistan successfully completed the task entrusted to him. However, with the blood debt of revenge, Wistan became an accomplice and victim of this political power struggle.

5. Conclusion

Under the guidance of ethical literary criticism, this paper studies the identity reconstruction that various characters have to deal with, and reveals the profound significance of their ethical choices. Ishiguro has always been concerned about the survival status of marginalized people. Unlike the protagonists who actively recall their past in his previous works, the characters in *The Buried Giant* hold contradictory attitudes towards their identity. The Axl couple, who embarked on their journey of finding their son, confronted the identity dilemma brought by past trauma; Gawain, who touts as a messenger of peace, lingers at the crossroads of

forgetting and accepting, war and peace; Wistan, who had been steadfast in killing the dragon, also fell into confusion after the mission was completed. All characters, however, ultimately come to their own ethical identity, despite being fraught with doubt and uncertainty, yet serve to inspire readers. The description of moral and ethical dilemma indicates Ishiguro's attitude towards history and memory. Readers will realize that simply forgetting the past is not an effective way to avoid ethical predicament. Instead, people should bravely face their painful past, reconstructing their identity, and strive to achieve reconciliation with both themselves and others.

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