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Constructive Destruction: A Study of Destructive Plasticity in Ishiguro's Characters

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Abstract

Destructive Plasticity, the constructive destruction, is the consequence of Ontological Metamorphosis, the process of transformation of self that is triggered by the psychological trauma a person is going through. The destructive plasticity may result in the partial or complete memory loss of a person and indifference to all pleasures and shocks. This metamorphic phase in a person's life, not only affects a person psychologically but the physical makeup of their brain also undergoes modifications. This research will analyze, how do the trauma-stricken characters in the selected texts of Ishiguro survive destructive plasticity? Catherine Malabou's theory of Plasticity has been narrowed down to the phenomenon in question, i.e.; destructive Plasticity to apply to Ishiguro's text *The Unconsoled* to test its validity to real life.

Keywords: Plasticity, Destructive Plasticity, Trauma, Ontological Metamorphosis, Mental Darwinism



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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of plasticity is derived from Catherine Malabou's philosophy that links neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology together to arrive at the identity (realization) of self along with tracking the transformation of self. It is the formation of self through transformation. Plasticity designates both the power to "take form (as in the plasticity of clay) and to give form (as in the plastic arts and plastic surgery) (Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, 2011) Catherine Malabou established this notion as a part of her thesis by analyzing Hegel's work, with Jacques Derrida as her supervisor. Malabou's book, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* Focuses on the intersection between psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and philosophy, envisioned through the lens of trauma. The key argument Malabou builds is that Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome and old age are key factors that reflect plasticity. Mental Darwinism, destructive plasticity, plastic ontology, and ontological metamorphosis are the terms used by Malabou to describe the different shades of plasticity. Mental Darwinism as a concept emerges in Catherine Malabou's latest book, *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality as*: "I shall push the Kantian thesis to its limit: what if, in the end, the agreement of the categories of thought with the real was simply the fruit of biological adaptation, an evolutionary process at the origin of the theory that some neurobiologists call "mental Darwinism"? (Malabou, *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality*, 2016)

However, in *Ontology of the Accident*, Malabou warns that plasticity can also behave as a 'plastic bomb' and in doing so has the power to unveil the self in insightful ways. If "You are your synapses" (LeDoux, 2003) as Joseph LeDoux, a neuroscientist argues, undoubtedly, we are susceptible to their disentanglements and mutations. This is defined by Malabou plasticity as the 'dark side', both being capable of giving form and equally able to annihilate it. As an upshot of trauma - material (e.g. a brain tumor or dementia) - or socio-political (e.g. depression or post-traumatic stress) or occasionally, without any reason, Malabou explains the diverging paths that emerge as a "deep cut in the biography of the subject, ontological violence that gives rise to a new being which has nothing in common with its preceding form (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012). This research is originally concerned with devising a theory of change as ontological metamorphosis where Malabou trails through a dynamic idea of plasticity - the capability to give and receive form - which she has attempted through a decisive interaction with contemporary neuroscience.

This paper aims to critically explore and evaluate the form of plastic characters in Ishiguro's literature. More specifically, this paper intends to probe into the proceeding research question: can Ishiguro's characters be called plastic characters and touch the different dynamics of plasticity: one of which is destructive plasticity?

Plasticity is a term that embodies the qualities of formation, deformation, and reformation. Plasticity marks a balance "between the receiving and giving of form." It is a natural molding of our mind as well as the brain that makes us who we are, in other words, forms our identity. This sculpting of self qualifies us, the humans, "subjects of history, a singular, recognizable, identifiable history, with all its events, gaps, and future (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012)." Plasticity is defined as the ability of a form that gives it the flexibility to modify it. It is a natural sculpting module that is improvised by multiple experiences that create us as a subject of history, the single identifiable history with all its probabilities. This plasticity can only be possible when there is a transformation in the structure and magnitude of neurotic connections that have high implications on the formation of the personalities (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012).

The common means of influence between Malabou and Ishiguro is an argument that favors their comparison based on theory. The work of Malabou is demanding as she reveals trauma as a full exit of being from its previous self. She argues that it is uncommon in western fancy. Malabou herself makes her theory of destructive plasticity applicable to superb works of literature. First of all, she takes examples from ancient Greek mythology which include tales of Peleus, Metis, Daphne, and Meleneus where godly modification was not permanent and it worked like a strategy. Malabou also gives an analysis of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and describes the short novel as the most successful and beautiful attempt to reach this sort of (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012).

In *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, Malabou introduces the analysis of *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, with respect to her theory of destructive plasticity. She calls this work the best example of destructive plasticity. Truly, the fiction of Kafka has a strong dreamy quality and his influence has been acknowledged by Ishiguro. The discussion about the comprehensive comparison of their oneiric style has limited scope. But differences can be summed up by noticing that Kafka represents a few specific motifs about dreams; however, Ishiguro represents appearances of dreams with extensive technique classified above along with his choice of first-person narration (Kazuo, *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, 2008).

The waking up of Gregor as a gigantic monster with unknown reasons is a pure illustration of destructive plasticity--enigmatic transformation. After making a list of major neurological problems enclosed in destructive plasticity, the path of *Ontology of Accident* presents readings of major writers, like Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Maguerite Dulas, Thomas Mann, Maurice Blanchot, and Ovid. Daniel Katz and Angela Moorjani study the change of a being into a self-destructive self and its interpretation into modulated subjectivity. However, the theoretical linkup between neuronal processes and the rise of I, the neuronal frame of self that provides the latest updates about happenings of its annihilation and simultaneous reproduction, is quite vocal.

Kristine M. Allen writes an article *Habit in The Mill on Floss* by George Eliot. She tells that George based on her knowledge of modern studies of physiology and psychology asserts that the foundation of emotional links is associations in the brain. In Allen's view, George Eliot intended to portray his characters as synaptic selves. They were not only constructed by societies, but also formed based on their own choices. She mentions that George himself was committed to representing the intricate physio-psychological nature of the mind (Allen, 2017).

Light has been shed on the creativity of Kazuo Ishiguro from every aspect. By taking into account a broad range of themes, like colonialism, construction of national identities, memory, repudiation, globalization, etc. the analysis of work has been done. However, the research about the plasticity of his characters has not been done so far.

Psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience are the three corners of a triangle with its central focal point "self". Self is what your being is all about; brain and mind contribute to sculpting the self. It is believed that the brain has never been a source of philosophy itself. Although, the brain takes an important position in Descartes' *The Passion of the Soul* and Bergson's *Matter and Memory* yet "it remains a secondary organ that receives and transmits information without enjoying "the slightest symbolic autonomy" (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012). Damasio agrees that Spinoza may have comprehended the basic concepts behind the natural system that is responsible for the corresponding materialization of mind and body, but he says, "I am convinced that mental processes are grounded in the brain's mappings of the body, collections of neural patterns that portray responses to events that cause emotional and feelings (Damasio A. , 2003).

The cognitive category of neuroscientists, as well as psychologists, have successfully studied the underlying mechanisms of the brain i.e. memory, perception, attention, and thinking. They have strived to make us understand the psychological and neurobiological aspects of self. The urge to dive deep into the soul of philosophy raises the question, what makes man think, contemplate, and meditate; its answer, according to Aristotle, "For it is owing to their 'wonder' that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize" (Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, 2013). Descartes is of the view that in six primitive passions in French, wonder occupies the first place. In "The Passions of the Soul", all the passions are found in this order: wonder, joy, sorrow, love, hatred, and the last one desire. Descartes defines wonder as: "When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel or very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it ought to be, he causes us to wonder and to be astonished at it (Descartes, 1643).

Neuroscience has redefined emotions and psychical life. Psychoanalysis just like neurology introduces the idea of a plastic psyche or plastic brain that copes with the demand for change and remains the same at a parallel level; it marks a balance between memory and what is awaited and between receiving and giving of the form. We learn from our experience, however, that illness and wellness principles are constructed socially. The disparity between the normal and the abnormal processes is culturally complex and historically evolving in a significant way.

Literature gives us data to apply and study humanities or even scientific theories on it, to evaluate the results of the study and reach a certain conclusion. Catherine Malabou's theory of plasticity has been selected to be applied to the characters of the selected novels of Kazuo Ishiguro. The traces of memory loss, use of selected memory, indifferent and cold behavior due to some identified and some unidentified reasons of trauma leading to the conspicuous changes in self are merged into the lines of "The Uncounseled" by Ishiguro. The theory of plasticity is a container of all the gears that can deal with the issues Ishiguro's characters are dealing with. Malabou is of the view that the modification in the form of neuronal connections evokes plasticity that is an indirect, but very basic cause in the formulation of a personality (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012). The preceding discussion establishes that the theory of plasticity has its three interconnected dimensions; neuroscience, psychoanalysis, and lived philosophy or phenomenology.

In the novel "The Unconsoled" by Ishiguro, Mr. Ryder, the protagonist, seems to be an accomplished artist, a renowned pianist, and a public figure, but a clue to his abnormality—that will be discussed later—has been given right in the beginning. Ishiguro writes, "The Support Group is made up of ordinary people from every walk of life brought together by their sense of having suffered from the present crisis. You'll be able to hear first-hand accounts of what some people have had to go through

(Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” The townspeople are deeply troubled because of their apparent impossibility of producing an important musician and Mr. Ryder was asked to come and strengthen their spirits. Later in the novel, the writer becomes an anonymous outsider who doesn't know the setting- the sound of voices, the blues, and the browns of the eyes behind the familiar odd face: someone else's unquestionable presence. However, this other person is strangely absent.

No one knows what crisis has been the reason for suffering in that area but some psychological abnormality and issue of memory loss are detected in the behavior of the protagonist right in the beginning, “After several minutes I had succeeded in remembering all but two of the players, but these last two names remained just beyond the rim of my recall. As I tried to remember, the sound of the fountain behind me, which at first I had found quite soothing, began to annoy me. It seemed that if only it would stop, my memory would unlock and I would finally remember the names (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).”

Right from the outset of the novel, “*The Unconsoled*” the allusions to the loss of memory are intertwined with the dark, foggy, misty, and cold environment. The protagonist's life history weaved with the lack of self-awareness is revealed to the readers through certain events and characters. A world is revealed to us that is full of false lovers, alienated lovers, failed, unsuccessful and unhealthy partnerships, and emotionless relationships. Mr. Ryder mentions the night outside, “its deathly hush, the chill, the thickening mist - was such a contrast to the warm hubbub in the cinema that we both paused on the pavement as though to regain our bearings (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” The life of the city, Mr. Ryder had been a resident and came then to play piano in concert, was very much like the life of a dead city, “We've lost it. Why don't we resign ourselves to being just another cold, lonely city? Other cities have. At least we'll be moving with the tide. The soul of this town, it's not sick, Mr. Ryder, it's dead. It's too late now... Brodsky, Brodsky. It's too late. We're done for now. Let's just be a cold modern city and be done with it (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).”

Mr. Ryder lacks self-awareness and self-recognition and the town seems to have a threatening and claustrophobic environment. Mr. Ryder, while taking Boris to his home mentions, “As we continued to walk together through the dark, I tried once more to remember just what he had said that morning, but to no avail (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” He was holding Boris on his shoulder and made an observation that was again linked to the darkness in the surrounding, “He pressed himself against my body, but said nothing, and when I glanced down at him I saw he was gazing thoughtfully along the darkened street (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” Mr. Ryder's being unable to recognize his past as well as himself gives a surreal touch to the novel. Listening to and then trying to complete the requests of the people of the city while wandering in a fog, he questions why he came to that town.

The author defines it loosely as any increasing entropic process as the life of Mr. Ryder, who finds himself in an odd dream-like trance, is seen. The reason why he came to this town becomes increasingly confusing. It, therefore, takes less attention and is easier to deny and ignore. For a rich life, at any rate, a reflective philosophy of destruction is necessary because each one of us has to deal with our mortality. So, there's a quick introduction to the trauma and synaptic space to non-evil destruction. Traumatic destruction can be separated relatively easily. The destruction of unsafe, neglected buildings, controlled burns to contain the risk of wood fires are also easy to separate from non-evil and non-painful destruction as explained by Joseph LeDoux that the philosophy which explores and probes the different angles of self cannot lead us properly to arrive at a point where we can establish a liaison between the self and brain. The epistemology of actions considers existence as the war of ideas and reflects it. The architectural integrity of the original life was destroyed by band-aid bug fixes and patches. One has to decide painfully to discard it completely and start with a clear brain based on an advanced model of thinking architecture.

The story unfolds the curtains to a dramatic situation where Mr. Ryder, in the beginning, seems to be a stranger in the city, shocks the readers bit by bit when his behavior confirms his years-old intimacy with every character he comes across. Sophie has been his past lover or wife with her son from another person. Mr. Ryder meets the father of Sophie, Gustav just as Bellhop of the hotel showing no signs of familiarity with him. Gustav, on the other hand, clearly exhibits his acquaintance with Mr. Ryder. On the death of Gustav, by the end of the novel, Mr. Ryder condoles his death in these words, "As you know, I had only known him for a few days, but he had been very kind to me, assisting me with my bags and so on (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." Mr. Gustav was his father-in-law but he remembers no other reference of familiarity with him except that he assisted Mr. Ryder with his bags and other things.

Mr. Ryder is selectively amnesiac, narrating the incident when he was sitting with Sophie in a cinema hall, he says, "I too turned back to the screen, but then after a few seconds, certain fragments of memory began to come back to me there in the darkness of the cinema and my attention once more drifted from the film (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." At another place, Mr. Ryder records his deliberation as a trace of selective amnesia as, "Boris had been lying on his front on the carpet nearby, drawing on a sketch pad with a wax crayon. From the little boy's age—he was still very small—I supposed this to be a memory deriving from six or seven years ago, though what room we had been in, in which house, I could not remember (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." Here, he remembers something from his past but is unable to complete the string of this memory.

Mr. Ryder had been the child of a disturbed family. His father and mother were always on their toes. Hailing from a broken family, he had an earnest desire to see his father and mother together. This wish, in the back of his mind, gave him amnesiac fantasies that his parents were coming to attend his concert. Catherine Malabou, in her “Ontology of Accident: Destructive Plasticity” describes this situation as,

Something shows itself when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal, creative plasticity gives neither access nor body: the deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers herself. (Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, 2012)

The Greek word Trauma means “wound”. It refers to an injury that is inflicted on the mind, not the body. Freud, in *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, suggests that the breach in mind’s experience of the world, self, and time unlike the wound on the body that is healable and quite simple, is experienced too unexpectedly, too soon, to be perfectly known and unavailable to consciousness unless it is imposed repeatedly in the dreams and tedious actions of the survivor (Freud, 1984). Trauma is not locatable from the original event but its unassimilated nature, for its being unknown at first place rather when it revisits the survivor after some time.

Mr. Ryder was a trauma-inflicted soul. His unhappy past with his parents that culminated in their breakup left him broken from inside in silence. Under the intermittent fits of trauma, he had been having a fantasy of his reunion with his parents since the time unknown. “Do you realize what tonight is? My parents, they're coming tonight. That's right! They're coming at last, tonight! They may well be there at this very moment! ... I might not even get as far as the piano. Or my parents might leave, the moment they start to turn on me (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” Sophie tries to convince Mr. Ryder that his parents had never turned on him. She has had lived years with him, she knows every episode which has developed the drama of Mr. Ryder’s life. “Look, calm down,' Sophie said. 'It'll be all right. They never turn on you. You always say they'll turn on you and so far no one, not a single person in all these years, has turned on you... (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” Not ready to get convinced, he replies to her “But don't you understand what I'm saying? This isn't just any night. My parents are coming. If they turn on me tonight, it will be... it will be (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995).” Sophie tries her best to drag Mr. Ryder to the open sky of reality but fails.

Miss Stratmann who was the in-charge of planning Ryder's concert, on his inquiring about his parents, studied Mr. Ryder carefully in the dawn light and said that she and her office mates were very excited to receive his parents but it was only Mr. Ryder from whom they heard about his parents' plan to attend his concert. She informs him that for the past three days, she and her staff were trying to contact them and ascertain their whereabouts. She had been contacting the concerned people at the airport, railway station, and bus stops along with all considerable hotels in the town but to no avail. Neither anybody saw them, nor heard about them. She asked Mr. Ryder whether he was sure of their arrival (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995). "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena ((ed), 1985-86)." Mr. Ryder has drowned so deep in his traumatic illusion which is, actually a delusion, and is so comfortable in the abandonment of his old self and sculpting into a new self that has taken a flight from reality that he does not want to listen to the truth which people around him are trying to make him believe. He tells Miss Stratmann, "They must be here somewhere. Besides, I heard them. When I stopped the car in the woods, I could hear them coming, their horse and carriage. I heard them, they must be here, surely, it's not unreasonable (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." She throws a counter-question on him, "But you said they came by rail. Did anyone help them with their luggage? (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." Mr. Ryder again tells her the fake fact that is created by his new self and exists in his imaginary world only "Oh, the railway porters would have immediately gone about helping them. Taken all the luggage out to the taxi, then the taxi driver would have seen to it after that. They'd have been driven to their hotel and that would have been that. I'm sure they didn't have to even think about their luggage (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." Mr. Ryder cannot take his parents off his mind, "My parents are quite right. I've a great deal left to learn (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)." Finally, Sophie gives him her word, "Your parents? Listen, my advice is to forget about your parents altogether for now (Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 1995)."

What would our existence be like to become indifferent? According to Mr. Ryder's life and hardships, this issue is in a contemporary intellectual and socio-political environment that deals with the tropes of sustainability in a particular way. The novel is against an ontological context, which is increasingly understood through the unpredictable precocity of the political questions of ethics that dominate many contemporary social theories and orbit the kinds of transformation that can survive a subject. However, it assumes that Mr. Ryder can survive against the background of transformation. Ishiguro raises an ongoing ontological query regarding Mr. Ryder's durability in this beautiful and insightful written novel by exploring sudden explosive splits of the tissue of experience. In his early life, but particularly during his time of

self-interrogation, he explored ideas. The novel's protagonist is interested in incidents of disruptive plasticity, creating a non-relational self-rupture and subsequent modes of ignorance, disregard, and anonymity.

The novel's characters are the targets of destructive plasticity, destructive plasticity indicates not only people suffering from brain damage, brain disorders, or assaults, like brain-degenerative disease, including Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, but also people coping with post-traumatic stress disorder. Malabou's work is evil — it makes monsters, although destructive plasticity has creative powers.

2. Conclusion

The novel is a satire on the idea of creativity, and meditation between identity, memory, and expectation. During the course of the novel, Mr. Ryder became deeper into his relationships with the people he met, many of whom he seems to have known before, as Mr. Ryder became more and more misled as to why he came and who he is actually. He is not aware of himself and his self-awareness. Although the theory reflects on who suffers from destructive plasticity, that is, those that are traumatized without a remedy, as is Mr. Ryder, the novelist's thoughts appear to be the result of his un-healable trauma. Mr. Ryder is so readily distinguished from those who are victims of destructive plasticity and those who are considered normal and healthy because they are characterized in the course of their destruction. The story reflects Mr. Ryder's life, not as an unforeseen failure rather as a sense of progressive transition prevails. The lifetime of Mr. Ryder, where constant growth in age and contact with fellow citizens changes the very nature of his thoughts and habits of thinking is a testimony of the fact that self is not static; it is plastic. The theory of plasticity gives way to such destruction of the selves which embody the construction of the new selves. Sometimes, the construction of new selves feels like a blessing that allows the injured selves to live in their comfort zones. Applied plasticity is an offshoot of the theory of plasticity can do wonders in transforming the personae and life quality of human beings. It always keeps the venues of constructive destruction or a better and bright future open for the afflicted and traumatized souls.

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