



MEMORY MEETS EMOTION IN KEN LIU'S SHORT STORY "MONO NO AWARE"

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Abstract : *Contemporary narrative theory looks at how today's stories respond to a world that is constantly changing and increasingly uncertain. It pays attention to narration that feels fragmented, flexible and shaped by technology, memory and shifting identities. As a result, contemporary storytelling becomes a space where people can explore emotional, cultural, and personal experiences in new forms. Among these contemporary trends, Attachment Theory has become an important way to understand how characters form emotional bonds in uncertain and shifting environments. Ken Liu's "Mono No Aware" reflects these concerns by showing how modern attachment has moved beyond the mother infant bond to include emotional, cultural and lifelong connections shaped by the shifting realities of contemporary life. This paper examines how "Mono No Aware" engages with contemporary narrative techniques through its shifting timelines, emotional depth, and memory-based structure. By applying modern Attachment Theory, the study highlights the story's exploration of identity, resilience and inherited values. Ultimately, the paper shows how Liu's narrative reflects the evolving concerns of contemporary storytelling in a rapidly changing world.*

Keywords— Attachment theory, Contemporary narrative, Modern attachment, fragmented.

Contemporary literary theory originates from a clear understanding that literature cannot be studied in isolation, setting aside the emotional, psychological, cultural and social factors that influence people's lives. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, there was a big transition in how literary theory was developed. "The ideas from different fields like psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender studies and cognitive science are identified to understand how literature depicts and creates inner experiences & emotions" (Barry 34). Traditional theories present strict, rigid ways of looking at literature that focussed only on structure. However, contemporary theories highlight on the elements like personal feelings, memories, identity, trauma, emotions and human interrelatedness that attribute meanings to stories.

Theories such as psychoanalysis, attachment theory, trauma theory and affect theory show that characters in literature are not just tools for narrating a story but are actual people shaped by their early relationships, their memories and their unresolved sadness. "Contemporary theory also recognizes that life is often broken, fleeting and full of emotions, making literature a place where personal memories meet shared experiences" (Eagleton 112). Therefore, literary texts, especially modern short stories become spaces where feelings like connection, loss, moving away and staying alive are explored not through big political messages, but through personal and emotional reactions, making literature closely rooted in reality and divulging into the psychological experiences of individuals.

The present study is based on Attachment Theory, that establishes the relationship between emotional connections & its affectations on an individual's ability to form relationships, manage emotions, form memories and deal with loss. "Attachment continues to shape adult emotional regulation and relational expectations" (Mikulincer and Shaver 18). The theory proves to be useful in analysing literature because it evaluates characters not just as imaginary people, but as beings with emotional intelligence that shape their current actions based on past experiences.

The literature of the present deals with displacement, trauma and impermanence, that shape human life. The foundations of Attachment theory was laid by John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist & psychoanalyst who worked in developmental psychology and stressed the importance of early bonds between caregivers and children. John Bowlby in his work **Attachment and Loss** says, "Attachment is not a secondary need, but a key human requirement for survival and emotional balance" (52). Attachment Theory helps examine how memory and emotion work together to keep identity and sense of responsibility alive.

Bowlby's work served as an inspiration to Mary Ainsworth, who studied how different emotional responses and behaviours in relationships led to four main types of attachment: "secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized" (Ainsworth et al. 89). These types of attachment, once developed, keep influencing adult relationships and how people handle emotions. Through her famous Strange Situation experiment, Ainsworth demonstrated how early interactions between a child and caregiver shape patterns of trust, dependency, and emotional regulation. Her findings emphasised that attachment is not merely a childhood phase but a foundational framework that continues to guide intimacy, conflict resolution, and self-perception throughout life.

The researchers like Mary Main and Peter Fonagy later, took the theory further into adult psychology and how people form their sense of self through stories: "They suggested that people have 'internal working models' of attachment that shape how they remember, understand, and feel about their experiences over time" (134). These ideas help in the analysis of literature, as characters often behave based on these internal emotional patterns instead of following rational thinking.

The writers of literature explore how attachment affects people, even if they do not acknowledge it. "Trauma disrupts narrative continuity and reshapes memory into a recurring emotional presence" (Caruth 4). Writers like Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, Toni Morrison, and Jhumpa Lahiri have written about how early emotional connections, loss and memories shape who we are and how we feel about right and wrong. Ishiguro's book *Never Let Me Go* shows how attachment, loss and emotional strength play out in a bleak, futuristic world. Morrison's *Beloved* looks at how traumatic memories and broken connections can affect both individuals and groups.

Writers of science fiction like Ted Chiang and Ursula K. Le Guin, also study how memories and emotions connect people, with respect to time and space. All these narratives show that themes like attachment, memory and emotion come up a lot in modern literature, especially in stories about change and survival. Among the assorted group of writers, Ken Liu outshines as a prominent writer as he blends imagination with deep emotional aspects. His writings evoke empathy as technology is used just as a setting for real human feelings instead of becoming the primary subject in focus.

Ken Liu is a Chinese-American writer, translator and lawyer who delves deeply into emotional & speculative stories. Born in 1976 in Lanzhou, China, he later moved to the United States, a journey that shapes much of his writing. His stories gently brings together science fiction, fantasy, history, and personal memory. He became widely known after his story, "The Paper Menagerie" that won major awards like the Hugo and Nebula. His works explore loss, time, and human connection. Liu also wrote the epic fantasy series, *The Dandelion Dynasty*, inspired by East Asian history. Beyond writing, he translates Chinese science fiction, helping stories cross languages and cultures.

Among Liu's works, "Mono No Aware" stands out because it skillfully combines memory and emotion into a science fiction story. The story's title is inspired by a Japanese concept known as *mono no aware*, which reflects a profound awareness of the transient nature of things and a gentle sorrow when something temporary concludes. The unique aspect of the story lies in the deep emotional bond between the protagonist, Hiroto, and his father. It illustrates that memories are not merely about reminiscing with nostalgia but also about how they fortify a person emotionally and guide them in making sound decisions. Hiroto learns the essence of *mono no aware* from his father, and he internalises this knowledge that aids him in making wise choices, even when he is alone and facing difficulties.

The story follows Hiroto as he is part of a huge spaceship carrying the last of humanity to a new star system. When the ship starts to break down badly, Hiroto thinks about the lessons his father taught him about change and being emotionally aware. These memories are mixed with the present happenings, creating a story where the past and present feel linked emotionally. "Memory functions as a bridge between personal identity and cultural continuity" (Assmann 37). The calm and thoughtful way in which the story is written lets readers really get into Hiroto's feelings, making the emotional part of the story just as important as the survival of the mission.

The existing scholarship on *Mono no Aware* largely focusses on cultural aesthetics, impermanence and philosophical beauty. The concept is often treated as a traditional Japanese aesthetic rather than an emotional experience. A closer examination of Hiroto's emotional psychology remains largely absent in critical discussions. An analysis of attachment and its influence on Hiroto's decisions is notably limited. This lack of point of view lines the connection between personal loss and emotional continuity. The present study addresses this gap by foregrounding memory and attachment as central emotional forces.

The scholarly article written about the concept *Mono No Aware* show that it has mostly been talked about through ideas like cultural beauty, humanistic science fiction and the philosophy of impermanence. The existing criticisms describes on *Mono No Aware* as a Japanese idea of beauty or on Liu's work in modern speculative fiction. However, these discussions do not delve into the feelings of attachment that affect Hiroto's emotions and the decisions he makes. The review does not look in what way memory helps keep emotions sustainable even during the times of great loss.

Even though "*Mono No Aware*" is praised for its emotional power and cultural meaning, it has not been closely studied using Attachment Theory, especially how memory and emotion work together. This research seeks to explore how Hiroto's recollections of his father contribute to his emotional resilience, guide his ethical decisions, and help him come to terms with the concept of impermanence. It will also consider how these reflections influence his interactions with others. "Grief does not sever attachment but transforms it into an internalized emotional relationship" (Klass 22). Additionally, the study will examine the impact of these memories on Hiroto's personal growth.

The main objectives of the study is to look at how memory works as a powerful emotional force driven by attachment in the short story “Mono No Aware”. It seeks to explore how attachment theory can clarify the reasons behind the characters' actions and intense emotions and to demonstrate how modern speculative fiction can be more comprehensively understood through the lens of psychology. Additionally, the study aims to highlight the interplay between memory and identity and to investigate the impact of cultural context on emotional attachment.

The study uses a qualitative and analytical method, looking closely at the text of “Mono No Aware” and using ideas from attachment theory. The research combines literary analysis with psychological ideas to offer a detailed and thoughtful reading of the story. By doing so, it highlights the intricate relationship between narrative elements and psychological themes. Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of emotional connections within the narrative. Ultimately, it provides a nuanced understanding of the story's underlying messages.

Rooted in developmental psychology, this theory explains how early relationships shape an individual's sense of security and connection. Attachment theory states that emotional bonding is biologically innate. John Bowlby in his work *Attachment and Loss* says, “Attachment behaviour is an integral part of human nature” (3). These bonds ensure emotional security and survival. Attachment develops gradually over time through care and dependence. Early bonds influence emotional responses in later stages of life and the innate bonding underlies all attachment behaviour. This innate emotional bonding is prominently evident in the short story.

Hiroto's bond with his parents in *Mono No Aware*, reflects innate emotional attachment that he shares with them. Despite Earth's destruction, emotional ties persist through the memory of the characters. Memory plays a prominent role in this short story although it seems to be futuristic. Hiroto senses his parents' presence through recorded consciousness. His inner voice suggests, “they are still with me”. This reflects attachment as instinctive, not learned. Liu portrays emotional bonding as something that endures, even in the face of extinction.

A secure base provides emotional safety and reassurance. John Bowlby in his work *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* say, “A secure base from which to explore and to which to return” (11). It also reduces anxiety during uncertainty. It can be of an age group, but each and every person needs a person who gives them secure attachment when an individual not get this, it eventually leads to depression. It can therefore be deduced that the loss of the secure base creates distress.

The character Hiroto views his parents' relation as emotional secure bases. Their recorded minds offer guidance even after death. His mother's presence feels reassuring: we are here, watching. This emotional security allows Hiroto to face cosmic loss. The attachment figure acts as emotional support. “Secure attachment promotes confident exploration.” (Ainsworth et al. 23). Throughout the story, he goes back to past, gets comfort from his parents' words and then returns to the present. Physical protection is the primary need in his place. Therefore, he uses memory to replace physical protection. The secure base becomes psychological.

One of the key behaviours identified in attachment theory explains how individuals respond to feelings of insecurity or threat. Proximity-seeking is the desire to stay close to attachment figures. John Bowlby in his work *Attachment and Loss* says, “Proximity to the attachment figure is sought in times of stress” (39). It intensifies during stress or fear. Proximity may be emotional rather than physical. This behaviour continues into adulthood. It reflects the need for connection and helps individuals regulate their emotions during distress. The strong proximity seeking behaviour offers strength and security to any particular bond. When this need for closeness is not met, the individual experiences heightened insecurity.

Hiroto seeks emotional closeness to his parents through memory. Physical proximity is impossible, but emotional attachment remains. He listens to their stored voices repeatedly. His behaviour suggests: don't let them fade. His memory serves as a substitute for presence. Proximity becomes an essential tool for emotional survival. When an overwhelming loss happens, all the comforting memories provide solace to the individual. All the emotional proximity helps him endure isolation in space. Attachment, again is entirely depicted through emotional attachment. “Emotions circulate between bodies and shape relational attachments” (Ahmed 119).

Separation anxiety occurs when attachment figures are lost. John Bowlby in his work *Separation* says, “Separation anxiety is a response to the loss of an attachment figure” (27). It involves fear and emotional distress. The loss that is experienced by an individual disrupts emotional stability. Persistent separation affects his/her well-being by exposing them to constant struggles. It reveals attachment depth. Individuals may experience any grief, longing and emotional withdrawal that pushes them to the periphery. This separation anxiety may appear anywhere for a person. In that sense, he/she tends to approach for a newer relationship.

Hiroto experiences separation anxiety after losing his parents physically. The vastness of space intensifies his grief. He internally resists the loss: they shouldn't be gone. The probes amplify emotional absence that he experiences and his grief becomes prolonged. Liu portrays loss as deeply destabilising through Hiroto's struggles to accept the truth. He represents, memory as a painful remainder rather than a comfort. All his emotional isolation deepens his sense of vulnerability. Cut off from human touch and reassurance, he clings to fragments of the past as substitutes for presence. In doing so, Liu highlights how unresolved attachment can transform grief into a lingering emotional void rather than a path toward healing.

Internal working models are mental frameworks shaped by attachment. They influence trust and emotional expectations. They display how positive bonds foster security and loss reshape relational beliefs. These models guide responses to grief. They persist subconsciously. These affect how any individual takes out any kind of emotion. “Emotional resilience often emerges from secure

early attachments” (Cyrulnik 63). However, early relation some time shape the attachments. This particular working models influence one’s behaviour in any circumstances.

Hiroto believes emotional bonds do not end with death. “What we love, we carry with us, even when it is gone” (Liu 252). His inner belief echoes: love continues through remembrance. This belief guides his response to loss. Attachment patterns remain intact. Liu presents memory as emotional continuity. The protagonist relies mainly on memory for remembrance. All his attachment is rooted in the early relation with his parents. Loss does not give any space for emotional independence.

The short story, “Mono no Aware” portrays attachment as an enduring emotional bond that survives physical loss. Hiroto’s dependence on memory reflects the persistence of internal working models shaped by early relationships. Separation anxiety deepens his vulnerability and prevents emotional detachment. Memory functions as both comfort and burden, sustaining love while intensifying loss. Liu presents remembrance as emotional continuity rather than closure. Thus, attachment remains central to identity despite irreversible separation.

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