

## Euthanasia: A Crime or Purgatory? Rethinking Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Family Supper* and Karyn Kusama's *The Invitation*.

Dr. Pratyush Ranjan Padhee

Assistant Professor

Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Chhattisgarh, Raipur

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### Abstract

This paper traverses through the question whether mercy-killing is justified or is it an unethical practice of a heinous crime full of unjustified emotional sufferings associated with loss. In the purview of this observation the present paper discusses Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *A Family Supper* and Karyn Kusama's 2015 thriller movie *The Invitation* in the context of the Japanese idea of *Seppuku* or 'Honor-killing'. Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *A Family Supper* and Karyn Kusama's movie *The Invitation* are taken into account for the study of the basic argument made in this paper. The movie *The Invitation* talks about a group of people who are engaged in self-proclaimed suicide through cult practice. Killing in any form is illegal and ethically wrong which breaks the sanctity of life as a whole. This study juxtaposes how fictionally the short story and the movie have represented murder under the pretext of dignity, cult and salvation. On the other hand, *A Family Supper* is a phenomenal work though it received very less appreciation in the mainstream. This short story was first published in 1982 in the journal *Firebird 2*. *A Family Supper* entails the story of a father who invites his children for a dinner in his Tokyo home where the plot is mostly built over the mother's mysterious death by eating fugu fish but the deceptive narrative certainly strikes suspicions of murder by the father. Moreover, as the plot develops the narrative structure evokes suspicions regarding the evil intention of the father by poisoning supper. *The Invitation* tells the story of Will (the protagonist) and his former wife Eden's traumatic past regarding the death of their son which comes in flashbacks to their memory. The plot of the movie is set in a dinner party held in a Hollywood posh house where some invited guests were having a union party. To everyone's disturbance in both of the masterpieces mercy-killing is used for coming to terms with the angst of past grief and guilt. Though the characters seem quiet and composed on the surface, internally all of them undergo a very immense wave of suffering. The hosts of both of these suppers have had deep inclination towards death by poisoning which pronounces their internal conflict which has its roots in their past.

**Key words:** Euthanasia, Fugu fish, Hara-kiri, suicide, purgation, lost hope, spiritual transformation.

- I am the beginning, middle, and end of creation. (10.34)

- Lord Krishna, Bhagavad Gita

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Life is a gift of God. Sometimes living here can be painful and daunting. Yet the only way to end the sufferings of life is to get through the pain with acceptance. Loss, guilt, shame are some of the unsettling conditions that affect the human psychology heavily. Some people find death as the only way to end their suffering which reflects their lack of bravery. Acceptance of the hard-hitting reality can be the ultimate way to live life. Finding catharsis in suffering through death pronounces mental instability and timidity. Euthanasia (εὐθανασία) denotes good (*eu*) death (*thanatos*) which was originally not related to any physician-assisted dying but considered as a preferable choice at the end of one's life. Francis Bacon had coined the term. Nevertheless, self-assisted death in any form is highly prohibited. In the medieval period and early modern age, euthanasia was generally restricted, and it was only at the beginning of the sixteenth century 'mercy killing' was openly discussed and supported by some philosophers and ethicists. However, the debate never stopped regarding its practice when someone finds no solace in life under terrible suffering but death. Euthanasia can be of various types such as;

1. **Active Euthanasia**— Active euthanasia is an intentional killing most often by force. For example; Injecting a person with a lethal dose of drugs.

2. **Passive Euthanasia**– It is a death by the withdrawal of the treatment that is essential to maintain life. For example- removal of life support system, etc.
3. **A living Will** – It is a written manuscript in which the person states that if they do not recover after a certain period then they should be removed from life support.

Besides its legal usage in countries like Belgium and Amsterdam its practice is clearly deniable in many religions as well. According to Hinduism and Buddhism, mortal life is a part of a continuing cycle in which we take birth, live, die, suffer, and are reborn time and again. So, according to them, suffering has some value attached to it, and therefore, shortening life interferes with the law of karma. Thus, taking one's life on one's own term is no way justified, be it under the medically prescribed terms or whatsoever. The role of doctors and every human being should be to help the living not to assist death under any circumstances. Hope is a great tool at such a high time when all possibilities are obstructed. Hope should be kept intact only in the belief that life revives and there are many witnesses to such examples. Nevertheless, one is supposed to be hopeful because a few have recovered after staying many years in a coma.

On the other hand, coming to the Japanese context if we shed light on '*Seppuku*', it is a ritual form of ending one's own life that was considered honorable among the feudal Japanese Samurai class. Traditionally, the act consisted of stabbing oneself in the abdomen with a short sword to ensure a slow and agonizing death. For the Japanese people it is culturally regarded as a preferable alternative to preserve one's honor on the verge of defeat. *Hara-kiri* means stomach-cutting in Japanese where the word '*hara*' refers to stomach and '*kiri*' refers to cutting. *Seppuku* is no longer practiced in Japanese society in today's contemporary postmodern world yet this present study pays a closer attention to Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *A Family Supper*, which has undertones of *Hara-kiri* or cultural affect and implications to ritual suicide. In this short story a Japanese father calls his children for a supper to his Tokyo home. Thus, his son and daughter who lives in California comes down to Tokyo to their father's house. Surprisingly, the siblings struggle with the grief of their dead mother which is ambiguously vivid in the silence and reluctant communication of the family. They have come home after a couple of years of their mother's death. Kikuko, the daughter and the narrator (her brother) shares their childhood memories while going out for a smoke break as the father's presence did not encourage relaxed conversations. The father undoubtedly represents the traditional, authoritarian Japanese man who is supposed to be the guiding-head of the family. As the narrator says; "My father was a formidable-looking man with a large stony jaw and furious black eyebrows". (Ishiguro 1) He even says he was particularly proud of the samurai blood that runs through his family which has certainly an undercurrent adherence to the suicide of Mr. Watanabe; (his business partner) and murder of his wife. Like other Ishigurian fictions this short story is also very carefully narrated because one has to read in between the lines to grasp a good hold of what it implies. The father narrates oddly about the suicide of his business partner Watanabe with respect to the collapse of his firm and adds that he didn't wish to live with 'disgrace'. This certainly pronounces the Japanese idea of keeping the respect and dignity at the price of one's life. The story reaches its climax when the father offers the fish to his children as part of the supper. Undoubtedly, every reader is aware of the immense tension Ishiguro has managed to contrive in this scene. As the title of the short story suggests, supper is a trope here which implies at the upcoming slow death of three of them much to the dismay of the readers. Because it is said at the beginning of the story that it was the fugu fish that killed the mother. Surprisingly, the father serves fish to his children without revealing what fish it was that evokes an uncanny suspicion. Moreover, his stance on Watanabe's suicide remains ambivalent but his narrative regarding Watanabe's suicide seems to encourage the decision of killing himself was right to protect his dignity.

Adding to this, his response to his wife's death was somehow susceptible when he says to his son that his mother's death was not accidental while taking a tour of his house. He says; "I hadn't meant to tell you this, but perhaps it's best that I do. It's my belief that your mother's death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments". (Ishiguro 4) These lines are quite contrary to the initial narrative which says that the mother died of eating fugu fish in a function only in an attempt not to offend her friend by her refusal. Hence the narrative structure somehow has a concealed reference to the strict father's encouragement of Watanabe's suicide and also murder of his wife by him which he says was not accidental rather planned. It also paves light to the reading of all these narratives that he might have killed her to free her out of her misery as he says she had many worries and disappointments without spilling the beans. (Quite opposite to what the the narrative says) If closely analyzed, the story of Watanabe's family-killing can be a projection of the father's own crime in order to displace his guilt of his wife's murder. To Freud, Displacement works as a defense to channelize unwanted memories. In that light, I believe that the father appears to switch unwanted memories into story telling. Probably it is through Watanabe's story he might have been planning his own family's mass suicide. The ending of the short story where the father serves them tea is mysterious. Because tea after dinner can be digestive but the father never reveals which fish, he has served to his kids. Kikuko doesn't come back with the tea when she

was asked to prepare tea after the supper and it certainly raises doubt in the reader about the probable death of Kikuko in the kitchen. Because the father might have served fugu fish to his kids in order to save a face out of his guilt, nobody knows. Moreover, it even raises more suspicions about the murder of the mother by her husband with the same fugu fish. It is certainly believable that he is projecting his guilt and lie in weaving the false narrative of Watanabe and his wife's death for which he is responsible. The cinematic light and dark effect regarding the showcase of the mother's picture that was hung in the wall is beautifully narrated which makes the milieu very uncomfortable and leaves the characters out of place in their own home. The 'well' can have spectral undertones here. The ghost of the mother can be a metaphor here for the grief, guilt and melancholic noir mood of the narrative what never stopped haunting the house.

Thus, this study questions this conflicting dilemma that if ever the father plans such a murder of his kids by serving food delicacies in order to prevent his honor, or guilt attached to his wife's death, is it anyway justified? A food can be a slow burn process of killing someone. Who knows he might have killed his own wife in the same way and may be planning the same for his kids with the belief that he might redeem them all from the grief of their mother's death? Ishiguro as a brilliant craftsman of evoking suspense in his works leaves these certain gaps to his readers unresolved. Hence this present study firmly believes that it is basically the murder of the mother that leads to the Japanese man's guilt and his idea of inviting his children for supper is nothing but a plan of a ritual murder which adheres much to the Japanese culture of Hara-kiri. Because the narrative very vividly tells that the parents were disappointed and worried about something without disclosing the reason. It can be assumed that it was the generational gap where the children's attachment to the West and the guilt attached to the parents regarding the upbringing of their kids account to their familial issues. This particular incident can be acknowledged more specifically in the light of an exchange Kikuko makes with her brother. She says;

"Mother never really blamed you, you know,' she said, in a new voice.  
'She always used to say to me how it was their fault, hers and Father's, for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they'd been with me, and that's why I was so good.'" (Ishiguro 3)

#### **DEATH WRAPPED UP IN DINNER: KARYN KUSAMA'S MOVIE THE INVITATION:**

In pursuant to this discussion a movie called *The Invitation* (2015) directed by Karyn Kusama calls for attention here pertinent to how food is used in Ishiguro's short story to end life. Just like *A Family Supper* this movie also uses food as a trope for death. Will is the protagonist of the thriller movie who can be seen killing a coyote at the starting of the film while driving to his friend's place where they were invited. He was left with no option but to kill the coyote which was hit and run by his car. The movie is very disturbing as the characters appear to be undergoing the grief and trauma of their past. Will is haunted by his dead son in the same house where he and his new wife have been invited. He is flooded with disturbing and unnerving flashbacks. The ghostly ambience can be read as the guilt, grief and trauma of losing his son. Moreover, the cold and uncomfortable atmosphere is aggravated even more when the host couple of the party starts counseling about the benefits of a 'self-chosen death'. Although the protagonist with a shy and reserved visage seems weird and abnormal he is the only normal character in the movie. The rest invited people accept and entertains the host's idea of death which is claimed to free one from the guilt and pain of the past. Everyone in the invited group of people had lost a loved one in the past. And they have been invited to the luxurious place for a dinner only in the host's intention of poisoning them all. However, Will the lead actor suspects something negative regarding their open support to the idea of self-chosen death. It basically shows that the group is involved in practicing some sort of cult in the hope of redemption. Unsettling memories of loss of a loved one prevails the narrative in flashbacks all out of the blue. The host says the cult practice demands mercy killing in order to strip away the guilt, pain and grief of their loss which appears certainly weird to the protagonist. The ambience of the room was visibly eerie and strangely polite. Even Will's new wife suspects something was wrong in that place. The dinner was meant for a ritualistic suicide which was poisoned. Will's suspicion rises and confirms when one of the character falls flat unconsciously on the floor after sipping wine. This particular scene approves the audience that the dinner was poisoned and the group has planned a mass suicide that evening through grief-counseling. The cult member uses the character's suffering and pain against them to redeem them. The film employs a brilliant framework of subtle tension and unnerving lighting in its cinematography. Eden, (Will's x-wife) in the past had attempted suicide and will is disturbed by the flashbacks of that memory. The plot gradually reveals that their son had died of a road accident. The mercy killing of the coyote on their drive is a subtle metaphor of the movie which evolves suspicion regarding the upcoming mass murder of the invited group as well. Will can be seen still overcoming the grief of that trauma. The audience eventually learns that Will and Eden lost a son due to a freak accident. Both entered a horrid state of grieving, splitting up and going their separate ways due to the pain. This film raises the uncomfortable emotion and anxiety of the audience. Hence the present research

believes that in both cases Ishiguro and Kushama have used supper as a slow poison wrapped up with sumptuous delicacies. In *A Family Supper* and *The Invitation* the father and the host utilizes food as a proper way of death in order to appear unintentional. The bible says; “No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death.” God has the final say over death ( *54–56; Hebrews 2:9, 14–15; Revelation 21:4*). Euthanasia and assisted suicide are man’s attempts to usurp that authority from God which is totally unethical. Euthanasia speaks volumes about the pervasive spiritual vacuum. This post-modern time is undergoing a spiritual void and many people go through the alienation.

To Indian Vedic scriptures, *Maha Samadhi* alludes to a kind of suicide in which one meditates alive and leaves his life. The approach and motivation of *Maha samadhi* is to evolve from suffering not to end or escape it. On the other hand, suicide is similar to murder and quite opposite to *Maha Samadhi*. There are many such examples of yogis practicing *Mahasamadhi* and Swami Vivekananda also had left his body in his own desire. Human soul is as good as any other soul existing in a living body. When some living being is killed, the soul in it experiences torture. This torture is the greatest sin and avoiding such torture is the greatest among the good deeds. Our Vedic scriptures describes *Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah* which translates to non-violence is the greatest moral virtue. I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa. 46:9b–10). A number of other Scriptures say the same thing and are meant to assure and comfort us. Even in Bhagavat Geeta, Lord Krishna says; I am the source of all material and spiritual worlds. Everything emanates from Me. Hence to find the purpose of life is to carve out the purpose of God itself. And humans were created with the intent of abundant living, growth, happiness and contentment.

## II. Conclusion

This present research strongly opposes the concept of mercy killing in Ishiguro’s short story in particular and suicide (*Hara-kiri*) in general as an unjustified way to achieve salvation and peace. Killing anybody including oneself in any form does not free one out of its misery rather it adds to more problems. As discussed earlier in this paper killing is ethically, religiously and morally a wrong practice under any circumstances. It shouldn’t be encouraged or promoted. Hence in this light, it is Ishiguro’s impressive short story which has encouraged the present study to carve out the cliché related to *Hara-kiri* and mass murder through this study. Killing cannot free one from the guilt and angst of unwanted memories. In the discussed stories poisoned wine and food are served with delicacies just to appear unintentional in the act of murder. Trauma of past can never be recovered through any form of suicide, be it a mass suicide or individual death. Moreover, I strongly believe that such an act mirrors the mental perversion of the persons concerned may it be the Japanese father in *A Family Supper* or the characters of the movie *The Invitation*. The endeavor of the present research is to inspire awareness in the contemporary society in an attempt to find some better ways to deal with guilt, shame or any negative emotion leading to death which is an excruciating crime. Dying with dignity is not a feat of bravery rather one should live with dignity amidst any adversity or loss. The purpose of life is to attain peace, happiness and self-realization. A reason for waking up in the morning and going to work can guide life’s decisions, influence behavior, shape goals, offer a sense of direction and create meaning. One must continue to evolve from the inevitable pain of life which is unavoidable. The discussed stories in this paper connect the dots of the alienation and spiritual hollowness of modern human. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century most of the humans lack a sense of meaning in their lives amidst the stress of work and familial responsibilities. The true liberation of soul can only be achieved through the liberation of mind and body from the pain. And for reaching this spiritual stage, one needs discipline and practice of the art of letting go. By letting go I certainly mean one should learn the skill of dusting off the pain of past and cleanse the present with an attitude of looking forward which may lead to Moksha/redemption. Nevertheless, the characters in Ishiguro’s *A Family Supper* and Kusama’s movie undergo this existential crisis from which they can’t evolve or grow but fall into the trap of suicidal escape. Hence the aim of life is to sacrifice the carnal desire and attachments not the sacrifice of one’s life in the form of suicide or self-inflicted death. Human being must discover their purpose of life and make necessary amendments needed for leading a good life.

*Learning how to live takes a whole life.* (Seneca the Younger)

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