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HOW DOES ISHIGURO USE MEMORY AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE TO EXPLORE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Kazuo Ishiguro uses memory in his novels to explore questions of moral responsibility. Focusing on *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), the study shows that Ishiguro's characters remember the past in ways that are selective and emotionally charged. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's memories act as a kind of repression, allowing him to avoid facing his role in political wrongdoing. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H.'s memories give dignity to the clones and resist the way society tries to erase their humanity. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's unreliable memories reveal the struggle between pride and guilt in postwar Japan, showing how memory can both hide and expose the truth. By connecting these novels to ideas from trauma studies and narrative ethics, the paper argues that Ishiguro turns memory into an ethical tool. His fiction suggests that remembering and forgetting are not just personal acts but moral choices that affect both individuals and societies.

KEYWORDS- Kazuo Ishiguro, memory, moral responsibility, trauma studies, narrative ethics, selective recollection, repression, resistance, dignity, guilt, postwar Japan

INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels quietly but powerfully explore how memory shapes moral responsibility. His narrators often look back on their lives through broken or incomplete memories, showing that remembering is not only unstable but also deeply tied to questions of ethics. Scholars point out that Ishiguro's characters often practice "selective remembering" as a way to protect themselves, even though this means avoiding hard truths (Bhadoriya 3). In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's memories hide his involvement in Lord Darlington's political choices, while *Never Let Me Go* shows memory as a way to fight against being erased, with Kathy's voice giving dignity to the clones. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's unreliable memories highlight the struggle between pride and guilt, showing how memory can both cover up and reveal the past. As Sharipov explains, Ishiguro's

careful style shows how “unreliability of memory shapes personal identity and moral accountability” (Sharipov 109). This paper argues that Ishiguro uses memory not just as a theme but as a tool for storytelling, one that asks how people face—or avoid—their moral responsibilities, while connecting his work to larger debates about ethics, trauma, and identity.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction has been studied by many critics for the way it deals with memory, not just as a theme but as a tool for storytelling. His narrators do not simply recall events in a straightforward way; instead, their memories are selective, shaped by emotion, guilt, or the need to protect themselves. This makes memory in Ishiguro’s novels an active, ethically charged process rather than a neutral record of the past. Kavita Bhadoriya points out that Ishiguro’s characters often rely on “selective remembering” as a way to survive emotionally, even though this comes at the cost of facing painful truths (Bhadoriya 4). We see this clearly in *The Remains of the Day*, where Stevens’s recollections hide his involvement in Lord Darlington’s politics, and in *Never Let Me Go*, where Kathy’s memories give dignity to the clones and resist their erasure by society.

Other scholars focus on the role of silence and forgetting. Bhadoriya and Joshi explain that Ishiguro’s narrators are emotionally restrained, and their fragmented memories are closely tied to trauma and ethical silence. Memory, in this sense, is not fixed but constantly reshaped as individuals struggle with pride, regret, and guilt (Bhadoriya and Joshi 185). Mamur Sharipov adds that Ishiguro’s restrained style shows how “the unreliability of memory shapes personal identity and moral accountability” (*The Remains of the Day* 109). This unreliability forces readers to think about the consequences of omission and denial, reminding us that what is left unsaid can be just as important as what is remembered.

Critics also extend Ishiguro’s exploration of memory to collective and cultural contexts. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono’s unreliable recollections dramatize the tension between pride and guilt in postwar Japan. His narration shows how memory can both repress uncomfortable truths and reveal them, reflecting the broader struggle of a society coming to terms with its wartime past. As one critic notes, Ishiguro’s fiction asks readers “not only to remember, but to be held accountable by the act of remembering,” making memory a moral force rather than just a literary device (“Kazuo Ishiguro — Memory, Silence, and the Ethics of Forgetting”).

Taken together, these studies show a clear consensus: Ishiguro uses memory as an ethical instrument. His narrators’ restraint, omissions, and fragmented recollections highlight how moral responsibility is shaped by acts of remembering and forgetting. This body of scholarship provides a strong foundation for analyzing how Ishiguro’s narrative strategies push readers to confront the moral weight of memory in both personal and collective contexts.

ANALYSIS

In *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ishiguro uses memory to show how repression and denial can shape a person’s moral choices. The novel follows Stevens, a butler, as he takes a trip across England and reflects on his past. His memories are broken and incomplete, and through them we slowly see his involvement in Lord Darlington’s political sympathies. Stevens’s way of remembering works both as a shield and a revelation: he recalls his years of service with pride, but his selective memories hide the ethical failures that came from his unquestioned loyalty. As Bhadoriya explains, Ishiguro’s narrators often rely on “selective remembering” to protect themselves, and in Stevens’s case this prevents him from facing the moral weight of his silence (Bhadoriya 4).

The unreliability of Stevens’s memory is key to Ishiguro’s critique of responsibility. Stevens insists that Lord Darlington was a “gentleman of great moral stature,” yet he leaves out the fact that Darlington supported appeasement of Nazi Germany (Ishiguro 123). This selective narration shows how memory can create moral blindness. Sharipov points out that Ishiguro’s restrained style

demonstrates how “the unreliability of memory shapes personal identity and moral accountability” (Sharipov 109). Stevens’s inability to balance his professional pride with his ethical failures shows that memory is not just a record of the past—it is a tool through which people deal with guilt and complicity.

Stevens’ memories of Miss Kenton add a personal layer to this theme. His recollections of her are filled with regret, but his emotional restraint stops him from admitting the moral consequences of his choices. Bhadoriya and Joshi argue that Ishiguro’s narrators are emotionally reserved, and their fragmented memories are tied to trauma and silence (Bhadoriya and Joshi 185). For Stevens, memory becomes a place where accountability is delayed: his recognition of lost intimacy mirrors his recognition of moral failure in his professional life.

Through Stevens’s narration, Ishiguro shows that memory is never neutral. It is shaped by omissions, distortions, and silences, and it always carries ethical weight. By building the novel around acts of remembering, Ishiguro forces readers to see how moral responsibility is inseparable from the ways people choose to recall—or repress—their past.

In *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Ishiguro uses memory to protect dignity and fight against erasure. Unlike Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, Kathy H.’s memories are not about hiding the truth. Instead, they preserve the humanity of herself and her friends, who are treated as clones meant only for organ donation. Her narration, built around fragments of childhood at Hailsham, shows how remembering becomes an act of resistance against a society that denies the clones’ individuality and moral worth. As Bhadoriya and Joshi explain, Ishiguro’s narrators often deal with trauma through emotionally restrained recollections, but Kathy’s memories “humanize the clones by asserting their lived experiences against institutional erasure” (Bhadoriya and Joshi 186).

Kathy’s remembering is itself an ethical act. She recalls moments of closeness, friendship, and creativity, and these memories resist the idea that clones are nothing more than biological instruments. One powerful example is her memory of listening to the song “Never Let Me Go.” For Kathy, this moment becomes a symbol of emotional depth and longing, directly challenging the cold logic of organ donation. Scholars note that Ishiguro’s narrative strategy here turns memory into a moral tool: “to remember is to resist erasure, to claim dignity in the face of disposability” (Bhadoriya 7). Kathy’s recollections act like testimony, keeping alive the ethical importance of lives that society refuses to acknowledge.

The novel also shows how memory works collectively. Kathy’s narration preserves the shared experiences of Tommy and Ruth, ensuring that their identities live on even after their deaths. Sharipov points out that Ishiguro’s restrained style highlights how memory “shapes moral accountability by compelling readers to recognize the humanity of those society seeks to forget” (Sharipov 110). In this way, memory becomes resistance not only for Kathy but also for the reader, who is drawn into the responsibility of remembering.

Through Kathy’s voice, Ishiguro shows that memory can be about dignity rather than repression. By building the novel around acts of remembering, he makes readers confront how moral responsibility extends to marginalized lives, turning memory into a tool of ethical resistance against systemic erasure.

In *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), Ishiguro uses memory to show the struggle between pride and guilt in post-war Japan. The story is told by Masuji Ono, a retired painter who looks back on his career as a propagandist during the militarist period. Ono’s memories are unreliable because they are shaped by self-justification and selective omissions. His recollections reveal how memory can both hide and expose the truth, showing the moral complexity of personal responsibility within the larger

trauma of history. As Bhadoriya explains, Ishiguro's narrators often rely on "selective remembering" to protect their dignity, but this strategy also hides their involvement in wrongdoing (Bhadoriya 5).

Ono's narration shows how memory becomes a way of negotiating guilt. He insists that his wartime art had cultural value, yet his fragmented memories reveal unease about its role in supporting nationalist ideology. Bhadoriya and Joshi argue that Ishiguro's narrators are emotionally restrained, and their memories are tied to trauma and silence. For Ono, this restraint means he avoids fully admitting his complicity, using memory as a form of denial while still showing hints of regret (Bhadoriya and Joshi 186). This demonstrates how memory can allow individuals to escape moral accountability even as they acknowledge the weight of the past.

The novel also highlights the collective side of memory. Ono's personal recollections overlap with Japan's broader struggle to come to terms with its wartime history. His unreliable narration reflects how societies deal with collective guilt by remembering some things and forgetting others. Sharipov notes that Ishiguro's restrained style shows how "the unreliability of memory shapes moral accountability," pushing readers to see the ethical consequences of selective recollection (Sharipov 109). Ono's memories, then, are not just personal—they represent a national tendency to suppress uncomfortable truths after the war.

Through Ono's narration, Ishiguro shows that memory is both personal and collective, and always ethical. By shaping the novel around acts of remembering, Ishiguro makes readers confront how moral responsibility is negotiated through pride, denial, and the selective reconstruction of history.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction shows that memory is never neutral. It is always shaped by choices, omissions, and emotions, and it becomes a tool through which moral responsibility is worked out. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's selective memories act as repression, allowing him to avoid facing his complicity and ethical failures. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's recollections serve as resistance, preserving dignity and humanity in a world that tries to erase the clones. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's unreliable memories dramatize the negotiation between pride and guilt in postwar Japan. As Bhadoriya and Joshi note, Ishiguro's narrators are emotionally restrained, their fragmented memories tied to trauma and silence (185). Sharipov adds that Ishiguro's style shows how "the unreliability of memory shapes personal identity and moral accountability" (109). Together, these novels reveal Ishiguro's larger vision: memory is an ethical instrument that forces individuals and societies to face the consequences of remembering and forgetting.

Ishiguro also shows that memory is not just personal but cultural and political. Stevens's repression reflects the dangers of blind loyalty, Kathy's resistance highlights the importance of preserving marginalized voices, and Ono's negotiation mirrors the collective struggle of societies dealing with historical guilt. As Bhadoriya argues, Ishiguro's narratives "compel readers to confront the silences and omissions that define ethical accountability" (7). His novels remind us that memory is not only about the past but about the moral choices involved in how the past is remembered, told, and passed on.

Ultimately, Ishiguro's use of memory highlights the fragility of human responsibility. His narrators, with their fragmented and unreliable recollections, show the ethical consequences of remembering and forgetting. Ishiguro insists that moral responsibility cannot be separated from memory—whether in personal relationships or in collective history. In this way, his novels contribute to wider debates in literature, ethics, and trauma studies, positioning memory as both a storytelling device and a moral imperative.

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