



Memory, Trauma and Ethical Silence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This research paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the complex relationships between memory, trauma, identity, and ethical accountability in the novels of the renowned contemporary British author Kazuo Ishiguro. A defining characteristic of Ishiguro's literature is that his narrators are often emotionally reserved, their memories are fragmentary, and their ethical dilemmas are morally ambiguous. Rather than viewing memory as a static historical record, the author presents it as a living process where individuals construct their identities and attempt to cope with their pride, regret, moral sorrow, and pain.

Along with this, trauma and ethical silence are two crucial pillars of Ishiguro's literary universe. Trauma here is not merely the result of profound and adverse circumstances, but also the culmination of repressed emotions and moral conflicts. Characters often face this trauma in isolation and evade the truth. The research paper primarily focuses on three novels: *The Remains of the Day* (1989) [1], *Never Let Me Go* (2005) [2], and *Klara and the Sun* (2021) [3]. Through qualitative textual analysis and theoretical frameworks such as Trauma Theory, Ethical Criticism, and Narrative Theory, it is established that these three concepts are interconnected and form the foundation of Ishiguro's world.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, Memory, Trauma, Ethical Silence, Identity, Trauma Theory, Narrative Theory, Contemporary British Fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary British literature has always strived to understand the psychological and ethical aspects of human experiences. Kazuo Ishiguro, born in Nagasaki, Japan in 1954 and raised in Britain, displays a unique blend of Eastern sentiments and Western narrative traditions in his writing style. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017, praised for uncovering the deep abyss hidden beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world.

In Ishiguro's fiction, memory is portrayed as a selective process. As Pierre Nora [4] (1989) stated, memory is not a static historical document but a living process that evolves based on present circumstances. Ishiguro's protagonists reinterpret their memories to maintain their identities and justify themselves, turning memory into an instrument of self-deception. In the context of trauma, drawing upon Cathy Caruth's book *Unclaimed Experience* [5] (1996), it is highlighted that trauma cannot be confronted immediately; it is always represented through the fragmentation, silence, and repetition of memories. Ishiguro employs this storytelling technique, where his characters remain continuously affected by the psychological impact of past events.



Ethical Silence is another crucial aspect of this research. In Ishiguro's novels, silence does not merely signify a lack of dialogue; rather, it is a complex psychological response to moral guilt, fear, and emotional pain. According to Dominick LaCapra [6] (2001), individuals who fail to confront their trauma are forever trapped between denial and recognition, preventing them from healing emotionally. Silence here assumes the dual role of a survival mechanism and a moral failure.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various scholars have researched Ishiguro's literature from multiple perspectives. This research paper primarily synthesizes ethical and psychological frameworks. The key points of the literature review are as follows:

Brian W. Shaffer [7] (1998): In his book *Understanding Kazuo Ishiguro*, he explained that Ishiguro's narrators are untrustworthy because they alter their memories to hide their pride and shame. Stevens from *The Remains of the Day* is the prime example of this.

Barry Lewis [8] (2000): He discussed the significance of Ishiguro's storytelling strategies and ambiguity. According to him, Ishiguro leaves readers in a state of dilemma so they can identify the hidden truths amidst fractured narratives themselves.

Cathy Caruth (1996) & Dominick LaCapra (2001): The principles of these two prominent figures in trauma theory help in understanding the psychological state of Ishiguro's characters. LaCapra's concept of 'acting out' and 'working through' illustrates how characters are unable to overcome their pain and continuously live within it.

Martha C. Nussbaum [9] (1990): Based on ethical criticism, she noted that literature awakens our moral imagination and empathy. Ishiguro's silent characters compel readers to question responsibility and loyalty.

Contemporary Research: Recent studies have examined *Never Let Me Go* through the lens of bioethics and cloning, and analyzed *Klara and the Sun* in the context of post-human ethics and Artificial Intelligence.

3. RESEARCH GAP & OBJECTIVES

Research Gap: Although separate studies have been conducted on memory, trauma, and ethics in Ishiguro's novels, a comprehensive comparative study of the interconnections between these three concepts (Memory, Trauma, and Ethical Silence) and their combined impact remains exceptionally rare. This research paper bridges this gap and demonstrates how these three are interconnected literary devices that shape character identity.

Research Objectives:

- To analyze the representation of memory in the selected novels.
- To examine the psychological impact of trauma on the protagonists.
- To observe the role of ethical silence in identity formation and moral responsibility.
- To explore the mutual connections between memory, trauma, and emotional repression.
- To conduct a comparative analysis of these themes across *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Klara and the Sun*.
- To evaluate Ishiguro's contribution to contemporary literary discourse.

4. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED NOVELS

A. The Remains of the Day (1989)

This story follows an English butler, Stevens, who is so dedicated to his duty and dignity that he completely suppresses his moral responsibilities and emotions. His blind loyalty to his employer, Lord Darlington, prevents him from seeing the moral failing of his employer being a Nazi sympathizer. Stevens presents his past memories as if he did everything right, but his selective memory and silence attempt to conceal the trauma of his internal remorse and lost love (for Miss Kenton).

B. Never Let Me Go (2005)

This dystopian novel depicts the lives of cloned individuals whose primary purpose is to donate their bodies for organ transplantation. The main narrator, Kathy H., reminisces about friendship, love, and loss through her memories. The most crucial aspect here is that the characters do not raise their voices against this painful and unjust fate. Their peaceful surrender and ethical silence reflect a societal moral decline that strips away humanity and normalizes exploitation.

C. Klara and the Sun (2021)

Set in a futuristic era, this novel portrays the age of Artificial Intelligence. Klara is an Artificial Friend (AF) designed to accompany children. Klara's perspective, her empathy, and her silence highlight human emotional vulnerabilities and loneliness. Klara's sacrifice and her memories raise questions about whether humanity and morality are confined solely to biological nature or extend beyond it. This novel presents the author's enduring focus—morality and emotional pain—within a new technological era.

5. METHODOLOGY & CONCLUSION

Methodology: A qualitative research approach has been utilized in this study, grounded in text-based and comparative literature analysis. Employing an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, it deeply studies the primary texts by interconnecting principles from Memory Studies (Pierre Nora), Trauma Theory (Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra), and Ethical Criticism (Martha Nussbaum).

Conclusion: The primary conclusion of this research paper is that memory, trauma, and ethical silence cannot be separated in Ishiguro's literature. While memory functions to preserve identity and conceal the truth, trauma reflects their fractured internal psychological world, and ethical silence represents their fear or evasion of moral responsibility. According to Ishiguro, individuals can only achieve true self-realization and moral development when they honestly confront their past and establish an honest dialogue with it. This research paper provides a new and comprehensive direction to the ongoing discussions surrounding Ishiguro's literature.

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