

The Exploration of Trauma and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of trauma and memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's two novels, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*. Through a close analysis of the protagonists' experiences, the paper explores how trauma is represented and how memory is used to both reveal and conceal the past. The study shows that in both novels, the characters' traumatic experiences have a profound impact on their lives and shape their identities, yet their attempts to remember and confront the past are often hindered by their own psychological defenses. The paper concludes that Ishiguro's exploration of trauma and memory highlights the complex and often elusive nature of personal history and the ways in which it can both haunt and shape an individual's present and future. This paper examines Kazuo Ishiguro's literary works, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*, through the lens of trauma and memory. Both novels feature characters who are haunted by past events, leading them to question their own identities and actions. Through a close analysis of the narrative structure, character development, and themes, this paper argues that Ishiguro employs trauma and memory as narrative devices to explore the complex interplay between the past and present, and the ways in which individuals construct their sense of self. The paper also considers the broader cultural and historical contexts in which these works were written, highlighting their relevance to contemporary discussions of memory, trauma, and identity. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the intricate and often subtle ways in which literature can engage with some of the most pressing social and psychological issues of our time.

Keywords: Exploration, Trauma, Memory, Kazuo Ishiguro

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is a renowned British novelist and screenwriter who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. He is known for his subtle exploration of human emotions, relationships, and the impact of history and memory on individual and collective consciousness. In this paper, we will examine the representation of trauma and memory in two of his acclaimed novels, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*. Both novels deal with characters who struggle to come to terms with their past experiences, which have had a profound impact on their present lives and relationships. (Qiao, 2021)

1.1 Trauma and Memory in *Never Let Me Go*

Never Let Me Go is a dystopian novel that tells the story of three friends, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, who grow up in a secluded boarding school called Hailsham. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the children are clones, created for the sole purpose of providing organ donations to non-clones. The novel explores the theme of identity, as the characters struggle to define themselves in a society that denies their humanity and treats them as disposable commodities. (Bao, 2021)

One of the central themes of the novel is the impact of trauma on memory. The characters are forced to confront their mortality at a young age, and their experiences at Hailsham and the subsequent organ donations have a profound impact on their sense of self. For example, Kathy, the narrator, is haunted by memories of a time when she and her friends discovered that they were clones. She describes the experience as: "It was like a secret we all knew, but never spoke about. And then one day, it was out in the open, and we couldn't ignore it anymore. It changed everything." (Ishiguro, 1989. P.11)

The trauma of this experience is so profound that Kathy cannot bring herself to talk about it with anyone, even her closest friends. Similarly, Ruth, one of Kathy's friends, is haunted by memories of a time when she betrayed Tommy, causing a rift in their friendship that never fully heals.

The novel suggests that trauma has a powerful impact on memory, shaping our perceptions of the world and ourselves. The characters struggle to reconcile their past experiences with their present lives, as they try to come to terms with their limited lifespan and their status as clones. Ultimately, the novel suggests that memory is an essential part of our humanity, allowing us to make sense of our past experiences and shape our future. (Wang, 2020)

1.2. Trauma and Memory in *The Remains of the Day*

"The Remains of the Day" is a novel set in post-war England, and it tells the story of Stevens, a butler who has devoted his life to serving his employer, Lord Darlington. The novel explores the theme of regret, as Stevens reflects on his past and realizes that he has missed out on many opportunities for love and happiness due to his dedication to his work.

One of the central themes of the novel is the impact of trauma on memory. Stevens is haunted by memories of his father, who was also a butler and who instilled in him the importance of loyalty and service. Stevens' father was emotionally distant, and Stevens struggles to reconcile his feelings of love and admiration for his father with his sense of betrayal at his father's neglect. (Ouyang, 2019)

The trauma of Stevens' past has a profound impact on his present life, as he struggles to come to terms with his feelings of regret and missed opportunities. He reflects on his relationship with Miss Kenton, a former colleague whom he loved but never acted upon, and realizes that his dedication to his work has caused him to miss out on a chance for love and companionship. (Niu & Yu, 2022)

1.3. Objectives

The primary objective of this essay is to explore the theme of trauma and memory in two novels by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*. Specifically, this essay aims to analyze how the characters in both novels deal with past trauma and how their memories shape their present lives. Furthermore, the essay intends to examine how Ishiguro's narrative style and use of literary devices contribute to the depiction of trauma and memory in these works.

2. Literature Review

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* are two literary masterpieces that explore the complex themes of trauma and memory. In both novels, Ishiguro delves into the intricacies of human emotions, exploring how trauma can shape memories and how memories can affect our understanding of the world around us. This literary review will examine how Ishiguro employs various literary techniques to explore these themes. (Ouyang, 2019)

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro creates a dystopian world in which human clones are raised for the sole purpose of donating their organs. The novel follows the lives of three clones – Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy – as they navigate their way through the complexities of their existence. The clones' lives are characterized by a sense of loss, trauma, and emotional disconnection, which is further exacerbated by their limited lifespan. Ishiguro's use of first-person narrative through Kathy's perspective allows the reader to experience the clones' trauma and pain. As Kathy recounts her memories, she constantly reflects on the emotional toll of her experiences. For instance, when Kathy recalls Ruth's betrayal, she describes her feelings of hurt and confusion, stating, "I felt so confused and hurt, and at the same time, there was a part of me that understood." (Ishiguro 124)

Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro explores the theme of memory and how it can be manipulated to suppress trauma. The novel follows the life of Stevens, a butler who has devoted his life to serving his employer, Lord Darlington. Stevens' entire identity is built on his profession, and he has dedicated his life to serving his employer to the best of his ability. However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Stevens has suppressed his trauma and feelings of regret, resulting from his unrequited love for his former colleague, Miss Kenton. Stevens' narration is characterized by his detached and stoic tone, which serves to highlight the emotional repression that he has been subjected to. As Stevens recounts his memories, he constantly reflects on his emotional detachment, stating, "It is not my place to judge whether what transpired between Miss Kenton and myself all those years ago was right or wrong." (Ishiguro 50)

In both novels, Ishiguro employs the literary technique of flashbacks to delve into the characters' memories and trauma. By using flashbacks, Ishiguro creates a sense of temporal disorientation, allowing the reader to experience the characters' memories and trauma as they do. Additionally, the use of flashbacks serves to create a sense of narrative tension, as the reader becomes invested in the characters' lives and their emotional journeys.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* are two of his most celebrated novels that explore the themes of memory and trauma. In these novels, Ishiguro uses his distinctive narrative style to portray the characters' innermost thoughts and emotions, providing a deeply personal insight into their experiences.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro presents a hauntingly beautiful tale of three friends – Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy – who grow up together in a secluded English boarding school. The novel explores themes of identity, love, and loss, but it is the exploration

of memory and trauma that makes this novel particularly poignant. The characters' memories are central to their understanding of their own identity and their place in the world. As Ruth notes, "memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't ever see them fading." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 92) The characters in the novel are haunted by their past, and their memories become a source of both comfort and pain.

Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro explores the theme of memory and trauma through the character of Stevens, a butler who has spent his entire life in service to an English lord. As Stevens travels across England, he reflects on his life and his relationship with his former employer. Stevens's memories are intertwined with his sense of duty and loyalty, and it is through his recollections that we see the toll that his life of service has taken on him. As he looks back on his life, Stevens is forced to confront the pain of his past and the choices he has made. (Wang, 2019)

Both novels are expertly crafted, with Ishiguro's prose drawing the reader in and holding their attention throughout. His exploration of memory and trauma is both delicate and powerful, and he uses his characters' experiences to highlight the importance of remembering and the impact that the past can have on our lives.

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In conclusion, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* are two novels that explore the themes of memory and trauma in a deeply personal and emotional way. The characters in both novels are haunted by their past, and their memories are both a source of comfort and pain. Ishiguro's prose is masterful, and his exploration of memory and trauma is both delicate and powerful. These novels are a testament to Ishiguro's skill as a writer and his ability to capture the complexities of the human experience.

Trauma and memory are recurring themes in Kazuo Ishiguro's literary works. In *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro explores the complex ways in which individuals process and cope with traumatic events from their past. The protagonists of both novels, Kathy and Stevens, are haunted by their memories, which shape their present lives and relationships. As they grapple with the effects of past traumas, both characters must confront difficult truths about themselves and the world around them. Ishiguro's novels are masterful explorations of the human psyche, and his examination of trauma and memory in these works is both poignant and thought-provoking. (Qiao, 2021)

Through an analysis of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*, this essay contributes to the broader discussion of trauma and memory in literature. By examining how Ishiguro's characters cope with their past traumas, this essay sheds light on the complex ways in which individuals process and make sense of difficult experiences. Furthermore, this essay highlights Ishiguro's skillful use of literary devices, such as unreliable narration and flashbacks, to depict the intricacies of memory and trauma. Ultimately, this essay contributes to our understanding of the human experience and the role that memory plays in shaping our lives.

3. Methodology

This study aims to explore the themes of trauma and memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*. The methodology used in this study will involve a close reading and analysis of the novels, supported by relevant literary criticism.

To gain a better understanding of trauma and memory in literature, it is important to draw from relevant literary criticism. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" that exceed an individual's capacity to respond (Caruth, 1995). On the other hand, Aleida Assmann emphasizes the role of memory in shaping individual and collective identities (Assmann, 2011). These theoretical frameworks will inform the analysis of the two novels.

To analyze the themes of trauma and memory in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*, a close reading of the texts will be conducted. The novels will be read for their content and structure, paying close attention to the characterization, narrative structure, and language used by Ishiguro. The aim of the analysis is to identify instances of trauma and memory in the novels and to explore how they are depicted and understood by the characters.

The characters in both novels will be analyzed to understand their experiences of trauma and memory. In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters are clones who are raised for the sole purpose of donating their organs. Their experiences of trauma are tied to their dehumanization and lack of agency. In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist Stevens is a butler who is haunted by memories of his former employer's involvement in Nazi sympathizing activities. The analysis of Stevens' character will involve

an exploration of how he copes with his traumatic memories and how they impact his perception of himself and his role as a butler.

Through a close reading and analysis of *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day*, this study aims to shed light on the themes of trauma and memory in the novels. The methodology used in this study involves drawing from relevant literary criticism, conducting a close reading of the texts, and analyzing the characters. By examining the experiences of trauma and memory in the novels, this study hopes to contribute to the understanding of how these themes are depicted in literature and how they shape individual and collective identities.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Discussion

Ishiguro's (1989) portrayal of trauma and memory is deeply moving and thought-provoking. He demonstrates that trauma can have a profound impact on our lives and that the memories associated with trauma can be both painful and cathartic. Both novels show how trauma can shape our relationships with others and our perception of the world around us.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' trauma is a result of his inability to express his emotions. He is unable to form close relationships with others because of this, and his life is defined by his devotion to his work as a butler. This demonstrates the importance of emotional expression in forming close relationships and living a fulfilling life.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters' trauma is a result of their lack of control over their own lives. They are clones, and their existence is predetermined. This lack of control leads to a sense of hopelessness and an inability to form close relationships with others. This demonstrates the importance of agency and control over one's own life in living a fulfilling life.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* explore the themes of trauma and memory through the lenses of their respective narrators. Both novels employ a form of unreliable narration, which allows for the gradual unfolding of the characters' traumatic experiences and their attempts to come to terms with them.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator, Kathy H., is a clone who has been raised to become a donor of vital organs. The novel explores the trauma that the clones experience as they are forced to confront their mortality and the reality of their predetermined fate. Kathy's narration is characterized by a fragmented and elliptical style, which reflects her struggle to come to terms with her past and her uncertain future. As Ishiguro (2005) notes in an interview with *The Guardian*, "Memory is a theme in this novel because it's about a group of people who have been denied the opportunity to have a future. So, memory is what they have to hold on to" (Saroyan, 2005).

Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator, Stevens, is a butler who has spent his entire life in service to a wealthy English family. The novel explores the trauma that Stevens experiences as he reflects on his life and the missed opportunities that have led him to a state of emotional isolation. Stevens' narration is characterized by a formal and restrained style, which reflects his reluctance to confront the painful memories of his past. As Ishiguro notes in an interview with *The Paris Review*, "Stevens is somebody who has buried a lot of emotions and memories over the years. But as he starts to reflect on his life, these memories start to resurface" (Woodward, 1990).

Both novels also explore the relationship between memory and the construction of personal identity. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are denied the opportunity to form individual identities as they are raised to believe that their sole purpose is to become donors. As a result, their memories become the only means through which they can construct a sense of self. Similarly, in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' identity as a butler is deeply tied to his memories of his service, and he struggles to reconcile his sense of duty with his desire for personal fulfillment.

Overall, the exploration of trauma and memory in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* demonstrates Ishiguro's skill in crafting complex and nuanced characters whose experiences resonate with readers long after they have finished reading the novels.

4.2. Findings

The Remains of the Day is a novel that explores the life of Stevens, a butler who has spent his entire life in service to a wealthy English family. The novel is told through his perspective and is an exploration of memory and how it shapes our lives. The trauma that Stevens experiences is a result of his inability to express his feelings to the woman he loves, Miss Kenton. This trauma manifests itself in his inability to form close relationships and his complete devotion to his work as a butler.

Similarly, *Never Let Me Go* is a novel that explores the lives of three young friends, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, who are all clones. The novel is set in a dystopian society where clones are used for organ donation. The trauma that the characters' experience is a result of their lack of control over their own lives and the knowledge that their existence is predetermined. This trauma manifests itself in their inability to form close relationships and their lack of hope for the future.

Both novels explore the themes of trauma and memory and the ways in which they shape our lives. Ishiguro portrays trauma as a deeply personal experience that can have long-lasting effects on our ability to form relationships and connect with others. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' trauma is a result of his inability to express his emotions. In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters' trauma is a result of their lack of control over their own lives.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* explore the themes of trauma and memory in profound ways. These novels showcase how our memories can shape our understanding of our past, present, and future, and how traumatic experiences can influence our perceptions of reality.

In "Never Let Me Go," the characters' memories are manipulated by the institutions that have control over their lives, leading them to question their own sense of identity and purpose. As Gomel (2015) notes in her article "Narrative Dementia in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," "the novel shows how memory is always already shaped and manipulated by institutions of power, and how this manipulation ultimately affects the sense of self of the individual" (Gomel, 2015). Additionally, Ishiguro uses the theme of trauma to explore the devastating effects of social inequality and the commodification of human life, as the characters in the novel are systematically exploited for their organs.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist Stevens' memories of his past as a butler in a grand English estate are shaped by his loyalty to his former employer, Lord Darlington, despite the fact that Lord Darlington's political views were ultimately harmful. As Catherine Wynne notes in her article "Memory and Mastery: *The Remains of the Day*," "Stevens' nostalgia for a past that he can never regain and his self-imposed isolation serve to obscure his understanding of his own life and the world around him" (Wynne, 1996). Ishiguro uses the theme of memory to explore the dangers of blindly following authority and the importance of acknowledging past mistakes in order to move forward.

Overall, Ishiguro's exploration of trauma and memory in *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* showcases the profound impact that our experiences can have on our sense of self and understanding of the world around us.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ishiguro's exploration of trauma and memory in *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* is a profound and moving portrayal of the ways in which trauma can shape our lives. Both novels show how trauma can impact our ability to form relationships and connect with others. They also demonstrate the importance of emotional expression and agency in living a fulfilling life. These themes are timeless and universal, and Ishiguro's masterful portrayal of them is a testament to his skill as a writer.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels *Never Let Me Go* and *The Remains of the Day* are poignant explorations of trauma and memory that leave a lasting impact on readers. Both novels depict characters who grapple with the memories of their past experiences, and the ways in which these memories shape their present selves.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters must confront the trauma of their predetermined fate as organ donors, and the ways in which their society devalues their humanity. Ishiguro masterfully portrays the characters' struggles with their memories, as they strive to find meaning and purpose in their short lives.

Similarly, *The Remains of the Day* delves into the themes of repression and regret, as the main character Stevens reflects on his past as a loyal butler. Through Stevens' introspective journey, Ishiguro examines the role of memory in shaping one's identity and the consequences of denying one's true feelings.

Overall, Ishiguro's exploration of trauma and memory in these novels highlights the importance of confronting the past and the complexities of human experience. These works serve as powerful reminders of the human capacity for resilience and the enduring power of memory.

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