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Unreliable Memory and Fragmented Identity In Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction

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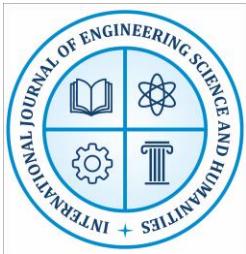
Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction presents memory as an unstable and subjective process that plays a decisive role in shaping personal identity. His narrators rely heavily on recollection to construct coherent narratives of the self, yet these memories are selective, emotionally filtered, and often unreliable. This paper examines how unreliable memory contributes to fragmented identity in Ishiguro's novels, with special reference to *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *When We Were Orphans*. It argues that Ishiguro employs memory not merely as a narrative device but as a psychological and ethical mechanism through which characters evade guilt, repress trauma, and sustain fragile identities. Through restrained narration and fragmented structure, Ishiguro reveals the instability of selfhood and the moral consequences of self-deception.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Unreliable Narration, Fragmentation, Kazuo Ishiguro

Introduction

Memory is central to the understanding of identity in modern and postmodern literature, particularly in narratives concerned with trauma, repression, and moral ambiguity. Rather than functioning as a transparent record of past events, memory is increasingly understood as a subjective reconstruction shaped by emotional need, psychological defense, and social conditioning. Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction exemplifies this modern conception of memory by presenting narrators who depend upon recollection to create stable self-identities, even as those recollections remain incomplete and distorted.



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Ishiguro's characters often occupy historical moments of crisis—post-war England, post-imperial decline, or speculative dystopian futures—where the past carries moral and emotional weight. His narrators attempt to reconcile personal dignity with uncomfortable truths, frequently resorting to selective memory as a means of emotional survival. However, this reliance on unreliable memory leads to fragmented identities marked by repression, denial, and disillusionment.

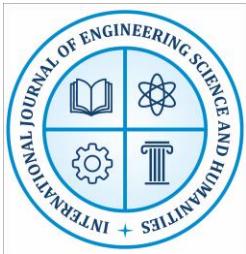
This paper explores the relationship between unreliable memory and fragmented identity in Ishiguro's fiction, focusing on *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *When We Were Orphans*. It argues that Ishiguro uses memory as a narrative strategy to expose the fragility of selfhood and the psychological costs of avoiding moral responsibility. Through first-person narration and non-linear structure, Ishiguro compels readers to recognize the gaps between memory, truth, and identity.

Unreliable Memory And Narrative Technique

A defining feature of Ishiguro's fiction is his use of first-person narrators whose authority is gradually undermined. These narrators do not deliberately lie; instead, they reveal their unreliability through omissions, contradictions, and emotional restraint. Memory in Ishiguro's novels unfolds in fragments rather than chronological order, mirroring the psychological instability of the narrators themselves.

The act of remembering becomes interpretive rather than factual. Characters reconstruct the past in ways that protect them from emotional pain or moral discomfort. This technique aligns with Paul Ricoeur's assertion that memory is inseparable from forgetting, as recollection always involves selection and interpretation. Ishiguro exploits this instability to reveal how identity is constructed upon uncertain foundations.

By withholding information and allowing realizations to emerge gradually, Ishiguro places the reader in an active interpretive role. The reader must discern truth from silence, recognizing that identity in these narratives is less a fixed essence than a fragile narrative sustained through memory.



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Fragmented Identity In The Remains Of The Day

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens constructs his identity around the ideal of professional dignity. His memories of service to Lord Darlington are carefully curated to affirm his belief in loyalty and restraint. Stevens recalls his past with meticulous attention to professional detail while suppressing emotional experiences and moral doubt.

Stevens' unreliable memory is evident in his refusal to critically examine Lord Darlington's political affiliations. He insists that political judgment lies beyond his professional responsibility, thereby absolving himself of moral accountability. This selective recollection allows Stevens to maintain a coherent sense of self while ignoring ethical implications.

His emotional repression, particularly in his relationship with Miss Kenton, further contributes to his fragmented identity. Stevens remembers moments of intimacy only obliquely, often redirecting attention to trivial professional concerns. As the narrative progresses, moments of hesitation and contradiction reveal the emotional emptiness beneath his composed exterior.

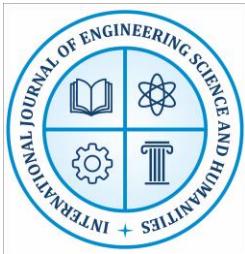
By the end of the novel, Stevens' realization of loss—both moral and emotional—exposes the cost of unreliable memory. His identity, constructed upon denial, is revealed as incomplete and deeply compromised. Ishiguro thus demonstrates how memory-based self-deception results in psychological fragmentation.

Memory And Emotional Repression In Never Let Me Go

Never Let Me Go presents memory as a mechanism of emotional survival within a dystopian framework. Kathy H.'s narration is calm, nostalgic, and understated, masking profound trauma and loss. Her memories of Hailsham, friendships, and small comforts create an illusion of normalcy that sustains her sense of self.

The clones' acceptance of their fate is made possible through controlled memory and limited knowledge. Kathy remembers her past without questioning the ethical injustice of her existence. This restraint reflects not ignorance but conditioning, revealing how memory can be shaped by institutional power.

Kathy's identity is defined by emotional containment rather than resistance. She recalls loss with quiet acceptance, demonstrating how unreliable memory suppresses grief and moral outrage. The



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fragmentation of identity here is subtle but profound, as Kathy's selfhood is shaped within boundaries designed to prevent rebellion.

Ishiguro's portrayal of memory in *Never Let Me Go* exposes the ethical implications of emotional repression. Identity formed through constrained memory lacks agency, illustrating how control over remembrance can limit the possibility of moral awakening.

Illusion And Identity Collapse In When We Were Orphans

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks' identity is rooted in distorted childhood memories. His belief that solving the mystery of his parents' disappearance will restore order to the world reflects an obsessive dependence on memory. Banks' recollections are shaped by fantasy, nostalgia, and unresolved trauma.

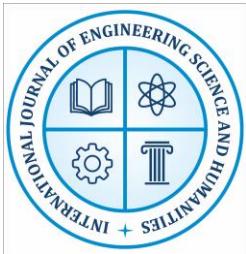
As Banks revisits Shanghai, his memories clash with reality, leading to disorientation and narrative instability. His detective persona collapses as he confronts the unreliability of his childhood perceptions. Memory here becomes a source of illusion rather than coherence.

Banks' fragmented identity is the result of unresolved grief and idealized memory. His refusal to accept uncertainty leads to psychological breakdown, revealing the destructive potential of obsessive remembrance. Ishiguro uses Banks' collapse to demonstrate how identity built on unreliable memory cannot withstand confrontation with truth.

Comparative Perspectives On Memory And Identity

Across these three novels, Ishiguro presents memory as both necessary and dangerous. Stevens uses memory to preserve dignity, Kathy uses it to survive emotionally, and Banks uses it to impose order on chaos. In each case, unreliable memory sustains identity while simultaneously undermining it.

The fragmentation of identity in Ishiguro's fiction reflects modern anxieties about selfhood, history, and moral responsibility. His characters reveal that identity is not a stable essence but a narrative shaped by remembrance and forgetting. When memory is distorted, identity becomes fragile and incomplete.



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Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction demonstrates that memory plays a decisive yet unstable role in identity formation. Through unreliable narration and fragmented structure, he exposes the psychological and ethical consequences of selective remembrance. While unreliable memory offers emotional protection, it results in fragmented identities marked by repression and moral evasion.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' self-deception leads to emotional and ethical loss. In *Never Let Me Go*, controlled memory produces quiet resignation and limited agency. In *When We Were Orphans*, obsessive memory results in illusion and collapse. Together, these novels reveal that identity constructed through unreliable memory is inherently fragile.

Ishiguro ultimately suggests that confronting the truth of memory, however painful, is essential for ethical and emotional wholeness. His fiction challenges readers to reflect on the narratives through which they remember, forget, and define themselves.

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