The Ethics of Memory and Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18323512

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction offers a profound exploration of memory as an ethical force that shapes personal identity and collective moral consciousness. His narratives foreground characters who engage in selective remembrance and strategic forgetting in order to preserve dignity, emotional stability, and social belonging. However, this self-protective relationship with memory often results in moral evasion and ethical blindness. This paper examines the ethical implications of memory and forgetting in The Remains of the Day, An Artist of the Floating World, and Never Let Me Go. Through an analysis of individual and institutional memory, the paper argues that Ishiguro presents memory as a moral responsibility rather than a neutral psychological function. By exposing the dangers of self-deception and collective amnesia, Ishiguro's fiction challenges readers to consider the ethical necessity of honest remembrance in the formation of identity.

Keywords: Ethics of Memory, Identity, Moral Responsibility, Forgetting, Kazuo Ishiguro

Introduction

Memory occupies a central position in Kazuo Ishiguro's fictional universe, functioning not merely as a recollection of past events but as an ethical framework through which individuals and societies construct identity. Unlike traditional narratives that treat memory as a source of nostalgia or trauma alone, Ishiguro foregrounds memory as a site of moral negotiation. His characters are often unreliable narrators who carefully curate their memories to sustain a sense of dignity, coherence, and emotional survival. In doing so, they expose the ethical consequences of selective remembrance and deliberate forgetting.

Ishiguro's novels repeatedly pose unsettling questions: What do individuals owe to their past selves and to others harmed by their actions or inactions? Is forgetting a necessary coping mechanism or an act of moral cowardice? Can identity remain authentic if it is built upon denial

and repression? These questions are especially significant in post-war contexts, where personal memory intersects with national guilt, historical responsibility, and collective trauma.

This paper examines how Ishiguro presents memory as an ethical responsibility in The Remains of the Day (1989), An Artist of the Floating World (1986), and Never Let Me Go (2005). By analyzing the ways in which his characters negotiate guilt, complicity, and moral accountability, the paper argues that Ishiguro critiques the comfort of forgetting and emphasizes the ethical necessity of confronting uncomfortable truths. Through personal narratives and institutional structures, Ishiguro demonstrates how memory shapes identity and how ethical failure often begins with self-deception.

Memory, Guilt, and Moral Evasion in
The Remains of the Day

In The Remains of the Day, memory functions as both refuge and prison for Stevens, the English butler whose life has been defined by unwavering professional loyalty. Stevens narrates his past through a lens of restraint and decorum, carefully avoiding emotional exposure. His recollections are structured to preserve his belief in dignity as absolute devotion to duty. However, this selective narration gradually reveals an ethical void beneath his polished self-image.

Stevens' refusal to critically assess his service to Lord Darlington, a man complicit in fascist sympathies, exemplifies moral evasion. Stevens repeatedly insists that political matters lie beyond his professional responsibility, thereby absolving himself of ethical accountability. Memory, for Stevens, becomes a tool of justification rather than reflection. He suppresses moments of doubt and reinterprets events to align with his self-concept as a loyal servant.

The ethical failure in Stevens' memory lies not in ignorance but in deliberate emotional detachment. His recollection of dismissing Jewish maids under Lord Darlington's orders is narrated with unsettling calmness. Even decades later, Stevens frames this act as a professional obligation rather than a moral transgression. Ishiguro thus exposes how memory, when stripped of ethical interrogation, enables individuals to distance themselves from injustice.

Furthermore, Stevens' emotional repression, particularly in his relationship with Miss Kenton, reflects the ethical cost of denying personal truth. His inability to acknowledge love mirrors his refusal to confront moral complicity. By the novel's end, Stevens' realization that he has sacrificed both moral agency and emotional fulfillment arrives too late. Ishiguro presents this belated awareness as a quiet tragedy, underscoring that ethical identity cannot be sustained through denial alone.

Negotiating Guilt and Self-Justification in
An Artist of the Floating World

An Artist of the Floating World presents a more overt engagement with guilt and historical responsibility through the character of Masuji Ono, a retired painter in post-war Japan. Ono's narrative reflects a society grappling with the aftermath of militarism and national defeat. Unlike Stevens, Ono openly acknowledges his past involvement in nationalist propaganda, yet his confessions are fragmented, hesitant, and frequently qualified.

Ono's memory operates through partial admission and strategic self-exoneration. He oscillates between accepting responsibility and minimizing his influence, often portraying himself as a minor participant rather than a driving force. This ambivalence reflects the ethical tension between personal guilt and collective denial in post-war Japan. Ono's attempts to protect his family's social standing, particularly during marriage negotiations for his daughter, further motivate his selective remembrance.

Ishiguro uses Ono's unreliable narration to demonstrate how memory becomes a means of negotiating shame. Ono revises past events, questions his own recollections, and attributes his actions to youthful idealism or historical circumstance. These narrative strategies allow him to retain a sense of dignity while avoiding full moral reckoning. The ethics of memory here are inseparable from social pressure, as Ono's identity is shaped by the community's desire to move forward without confronting painful truths.

Despite moments of apparent remorse, Ono never fully confronts the consequences of his actions. His narrative reflects a broader cultural tendency toward collective amnesia, where responsibility is diffused and accountability diluted. Ishiguro does not offer redemption through confession alone; instead, he suggests that ethical integrity requires sustained self-examination and acknowledgment of harm. Ono's unresolved guilt highlights the insufficiency of partial memory in restoring moral identity.

Institutional Memory and Ethical Blindness in
Never Let Me Go

While The Remains of the Day and An Artist of the Floating World focus on individual memory, Never Let Me Go extends Ishiguro's ethical inquiry to institutional and systemic forms of forgetting. Set in a dystopian England, the novel explores a society that sustains itself through the exploitation of human clones bred for organ donation. Memory in this context is carefully curated to ensure compliance and emotional stability.

The clones' education at Hailsham emphasizes personal memories, creativity, and emotional bonds, yet deliberately excludes any framework for ethical resistance. Kathy H.'s narration is calm, reflective, and understated, mirroring the tone of earlier Ishiguro protagonists. However, her memories reveal how institutional control over knowledge shapes identity and moral perception. The clones accept their fate not because they lack intelligence, but because their memories have been structured to normalize injustice.

The ethical failure in Never Let Me Go lies primarily with the society that chooses not to remember the clones as fully human. By isolating the clones and limiting public awareness, the larger community engages in collective ethical blindness. Memory becomes a mechanism of control, offering comfort without empowerment. Even the guardians, who believe they are acting humanely, participate in a system that denies moral agency to the clones.

Kathy's acceptance of her destiny underscores the devastating effectiveness of institutional memory manipulation. Unlike Stevens and Ono, Kathy does not repress guilt; rather, she has been denied the possibility of ethical outrage. Ishiguro thus critiques a society that prioritizes convenience and longevity over moral responsibility. The novel suggests that ethical identity cannot exist where memory is engineered to suppress empathy and accountability.

Collective Memory, Historical Responsibility, and Identity

Across these three novels, Ishiguro consistently links memory to collective identity and historical responsibility. Whether in post-imperial Britain, post-war Japan, or a dystopian future, societies construct narratives that soften guilt and preserve stability. These narratives rely on selective memory, emphasizing progress while minimizing complicity.

Ishiguro's treatment of collective memory resonates with Paul Connerton's assertion that societies remember in ways that serve present needs. In Ishiguro's fiction, this selective remembrance results in moral stagnation. Characters inherit narratives that discourage critical reflection, reinforcing identities built on denial. The ethical danger lies not in forgetting itself, but in forgetting without accountability.

Importantly, Ishiguro does not present memory as a path to easy redemption. His characters' recollections are often painful, incomplete, and unresolved. Yet the act of remembering honestly—however belatedly—emerges as an ethical necessity. By confronting the discomfort of memory, individuals may reclaim moral agency, even if reconciliation remains impossible.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction offers a compelling meditation on the ethics of memory and identity. Through understated narratives and unreliable narrators, he exposes how selective remembrance and strategic forgetting enable individuals and societies to evade moral responsibility. In The Remains of the Day, Stevens' loyalty becomes a shield against ethical judgment. In An Artist of the Floating World, Ono's partial confessions reveal the insufficiency of self-justification. In Never Let Me Go, institutional control of memory sustains systemic injustice.

Collectively, these novels argue that identity formed through denial is inherently fragile and ethically compromised. Ishiguro suggests that while forgetting may offer emotional comfort and social stability, it exacts a profound moral cost. Ethical identity, his fiction implies, requires the courage to remember honestly, to acknowledge complicity, and to accept responsibility for past actions.

By positioning memory as an ethical obligation rather than a passive mental process, Ishiguro challenges readers to reflect on their own relationship with history, guilt, and responsibility. His fiction ultimately affirms that true dignity lies not in emotional restraint or social conformity, but in moral awareness grounded in honest remembrance.

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