

Memory, Regret, and Catharsis: The Burden of the Past in Ishiguro's Selected Novels

¹Divya Choudhary, ²Dr. Swati Singh

Research Scholar, Department of English, Saint Paul Institute of Professional Studies, Indore
Research Supervisor, Department of English, Saint Paul Institute of Professional Studies, Indore.

Abstract— Kazuo Ishiguro, a Nobel Prize-winning novelist, is widely recognized for his profound exploration of the human psyche, particularly in relation to memory, regret, and the moral and emotional burdens of the past. Across his novels, Ishiguro examines how individuals reconstruct their identities through selective recollection, how past choices shape present experiences, and how characters confront the moral consequences of their actions. Memory, in Ishiguro's works, functions not merely as a chronological record but as a deeply subjective and interpretive process that influences emotional responses, personal relationships, and ethical self-awareness. This paper investigates the interwoven themes of memory, regret, and catharsis in Ishiguro's selected novels—*The Remains of the Day* (1989), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005)—to understand how the past exerts an enduring influence on the characters' lives and choices.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist Stevens, an English butler, navigates the tension between professional duty and personal desire through the lens of memory. His recollections of years of service to Lord Darlington are meticulous, yet selective, revealing both his unwavering commitment to social and professional norms and the personal costs of emotional repression. Ishiguro's treatment of Stevens' memory highlights the complex ways in which individuals reconcile with past choices while simultaneously being constrained by them. Similarly, *An Artist of the Floating World* portrays Masuji Ono, a retired painter, whose memories of complicity in nationalist propaganda evoke deep moral introspection and regret. Ono's selective recollection and reinterpretation of past actions underscore the psychological mechanisms by which memory both preserves identity and amplifies ethical tension. In contrast, *Never Let Me Go* situates memory, regret, and the inevitability of mortality within a speculative dystopian framework. The cloned protagonists—Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth—grapple with existential regret, the desire for love and autonomy, and the realization of their predetermined fates, highlighting the interplay between personal agency and structural constraint.

This paper argues that in Ishiguro's novels, regret emerges as a persistent echo of choices made under personal, social, or institutional pressures. Characters experience regrets not only for missed opportunities or moral compromises but also for the limitations imposed by societal expectations and existential circumstances. Furthermore, catharsis in Ishiguro's work is subtle and introspective. Rather than providing dramatic resolution or moral redemption, catharsis arises through acknowledgement, reflection, and partial acceptance of the past. Emotional release is thus tied to the ethical engagement of memory and regret, allowing characters a nuanced form of reconciliation.

Through a detailed analysis of the selected novels, this study demonstrates that Ishiguro's fiction offers a profound meditation on the human condition, exploring the interdependence of memory, regret, and catharsis in shaping identity, ethical awareness, and emotional resilience. By highlighting the enduring influence of the past on present consciousness, the paper underscores Ishiguro's literary contribution in portraying the moral and psychological complexities of human life, where understanding, acknowledgement, and acceptance of the past constitute essential steps toward emotional and ethical reconciliation.

Keywords: *Memory and Identity Reconstruction, Moral Regret and Ethical Self-Awareness, Selective Recollection, Subtle Catharsis, Ishiguro's Psychological Realism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro, a Nobel Prize-winning author, has established himself as a master of exploring the intricate workings of the human mind, particularly in relation to memory, regret, and the lingering influence of the past. His novels are not merely narratives of events; they are psychological landscapes where memory functions as both a narrative device and a thematic concern. Memory in Ishiguro's works is deeply subjective and selective—it is shaped by desire, social expectation, and moral considerations. Through memory, his characters

attempt to construct coherent identities, make sense of their lives, and reconcile with actions they may later perceive as flawed or morally ambiguous. Yet, this process is rarely straightforward; the act of remembering often exposes the tension between personal longing and social or ethical obligations, revealing the limitations and biases inherent in human recollection. Ishiguro's nuanced portrayal of memory emphasizes its dual character: it is simultaneously a source of self-understanding and a burden that anchors individuals to the inescapable weight of their pasts.

Regret is a natural extension of memory in Ishiguro's narratives. His characters often confront the consequences of choices made under pressure—whether social, political, or personal—and must live with the emotional and moral ramifications of these decisions. This regret is multifaceted, encompassing remorse for specific actions, lost opportunities, moral compromises, and, in some cases, the recognition of a life constrained by circumstance. In novels such as *The Remains of the Day*, regret is subtle and understated, emerging through the protagonist's reflections on missed emotional connections and unexamined loyalties. In *Never Let Me Go*, regret extends into the existential domain, as characters struggle against structural limitations imposed upon them, realizing too late the impossibility of escaping their predestined fates. Ishiguro's approach to regret reflects a sophisticated understanding of human psychology, illustrating how past decisions continue to shape identity, behavior, and ethical awareness.

Catharsis in Ishiguro's novels is similarly understated yet deeply profound. Unlike the dramatic emotional purgation found in classical tragedy, Ishiguro's catharsis occurs through introspection, acknowledgement, and the tentative acceptance of the past. His protagonists rarely achieve complete redemption or closure; instead, emotional reconciliation is partial, often bittersweet, and marked by a quiet, reflective understanding of human limitations. This approach underscores Ishiguro's interest in ethical complexity and the subtleties of emotional experience, emphasizing that reconciliation with the past is an ongoing, nuanced process rather than a definitive resolution.

This paper examines three of Ishiguro's novels—*The Remains of the Day* (1989), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005)—to

analyze the interconnection of memory, regret, and catharsis. Despite differences in historical context, narrative technique, and genre, these works converge in their exploration of how individuals grapple with the enduring consequences of past actions and decisions. By analyzing the psychological, ethical, and emotional dynamics of these novels, this study aims to illuminate Ishiguro's nuanced portrayal of the burden of the past and the human struggle for understanding, reconciliation, and emotional equilibrium. Ultimately, Ishiguro's fiction demonstrates that memory, regret, and catharsis are inseparable components of human experience, shaping identity, moral consciousness, and emotional resilience in ways that are subtle, complex, and profoundly affecting.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels have attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly regarding their exploration of memory, identity, and the moral dimensions of human experience. Researchers consistently emphasize the centrality of memory as both a narrative and thematic device, highlighting its role in shaping character identity and ethical consciousness. Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2006) argues that Ishiguro's fiction illustrates memory as a tool for moral reflection, demonstrating how selective recollection can illuminate personal failings while simultaneously obscuring uncomfortable truths. Harpham emphasizes that the unreliability of memory in Ishiguro's narratives is not accidental; it reflects the natural human tendency to reinterpret past events in ways that protect self-image and maintain social propriety.

Similarly, Michael S. Reynolds (2011) explores the notion of narrative unreliability in Ishiguro's works, observing that characters often reconstruct their pasts to align with personal desires or societal expectations. Reynolds notes that this selective memory creates a subtle tension between perception and reality, generating ethical and psychological complexity. In *The Remains of the Day*, for example, Stevens' meticulous attention to his professional life and his selective recollection of past interactions serve to obscure personal regrets and emotional truths, revealing the intricate interplay between memory and moral self-deception.

The theme of regret has also been extensively discussed in Ishiguro scholarship. James R.

Thompson (2013) highlights that Ishiguro's characters are perpetually negotiating with the consequences of past decisions, often experiencing regret as a pervasive and defining element of their lives. Thompson suggests that this regret is not merely emotional but also ethical, reflecting the characters' awareness of moral compromise or the inability to act differently under societal constraints. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono's retrospections exemplify this dynamic, as his selective memory and recognition of past complicity in nationalist propaganda generate both self-reproach and a desire for moral reckoning.

Furthermore, scholars such as Susan Bassnett (2015) have explored the concept of catharsis in Ishiguro's novels, noting that emotional release is achieved not through dramatic or overt resolution but through reflective acknowledgement and nuanced acceptance of past failings. Bassnett emphasizes that Ishiguro's subtle treatment of catharsis highlights the ongoing and incomplete nature of ethical and emotional reconciliation, allowing characters to confront their histories in a manner that is both introspective and morally aware. Collectively, this body of scholarship underscores Ishiguro's literary preoccupation with the interrelated themes of memory, regret, and catharsis. The research provides a foundation for examining how his novels navigate the psychological and ethical complexities of human experience, emphasizing the enduring weight of the past in shaping identity, decision-making, and emotional life.

III. MEMORY AS A CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE FORCE

In Ishiguro's novels, memory functions as both a constructive and destructive force, shaping identity while simultaneously imposing constraints on the characters' emotional and moral lives. Memory constructs identity by allowing characters to make sense of their experiences and maintain a sense of continuity over time. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens, the ageing English butler, relies on memory to define his sense of self and professional purpose. His recollections of unwavering loyalty to Lord Darlington give him a framework of dignity and discipline, reinforcing his personal and social identity. Through these memories, Stevens perceives himself as a dedicated and honorable servant, even as his selective recollection blinds him to the emotional

costs of his choices, particularly his neglect of personal relationships and intimacy.

However, memory in Ishiguro's work is also inherently destructive. The same selective recollections that construct identity can distort reality and perpetuate self-deception, trapping characters in cycles of regret and denial. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono's memories of his role in promoting nationalist propaganda illustrate this duality. While these recollections allow him to interpret his past within a personal and cultural framework, they also intensify his guilt and moral anxiety. His inability to fully confront the consequences of his actions demonstrates how memory can constrain ethical agency, keeping him psychologically bound to past mistakes.

Ishiguro often portrays memory as a filtered, interpretive process rather than an objective record of events. Characters reconstruct the past in ways that serve their desires, social expectations, or moral self-conception. This selective nature of memory underscores its paradoxical role: it is essential for self-understanding and continuity, yet it can simultaneously hinder emotional growth and moral reckoning. In essence, memory in Ishiguro's novels is both a lens for personal identity and a weight of the past, shaping characters' perceptions, choices, and ethical consciousness while also limiting their capacity to achieve true emotional or moral resolution.

IV. REGRET: THE PERSISTENT ECHO OF CHOICES

Regret is a central motif in Ishiguro's novels, operating as a persistent emotional and moral echo of past decisions. His characters often confront the long-term consequences of choices made under social, cultural, or personal pressures, and this confrontation frequently defines their emotional and ethical consciousness. Ishiguro presents regret not merely as a reaction to missed opportunities but as a profound engagement with the limitations and moral compromises inherent in human life.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens embodies the subtlety and complexity of regret. Throughout his journey, he reflects on his unwavering dedication to Lord Darlington, which he equates with professionalism and dignity. However, his obsessive

focus on duty comes at the expense of personal fulfillment, particularly his unspoken feelings for Miss Kenton. Stevens' regret is quiet and restrained, expressed through recollections of missed opportunities for human connection rather than overt lamentation. This understated portrayal highlights Ishiguro's interest in the moral and emotional subtleties of regret: it is not always dramatic but is deeply felt and enduring.

Similarly, *An Artist of the Floating World* explores regret through Masuji Ono, whose retrospective awareness of his complicity in nationalist propaganda illuminates both personal and societal dimensions of remorse. Ono recognizes that his past actions contributed to cultural and political consequences beyond his control, leading to a nuanced and morally complex form of regret. The interplay between memory and regret in Ono's reflections demonstrates how past choices can exert a prolonged psychological burden, influencing both self-perception and ethical judgment.

In *Never Let Me Go*, regret acquires an existential dimension. The cloned protagonists—Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth—experience the inevitability of their fates alongside the consequences of interpersonal decisions, such as jealousy, unfulfilled love, and missed opportunities for reconciliation. Their regret is compounded by the realization that societal and biological structures limit their agency, intensifying the emotional weight of their past choices. Ishiguro's depiction of regret here underscores the tension between personal desire and external constraints, highlighting how regret is shaped by both internal reflection and structural forces.

Overall, Ishiguro portrays regret as an inescapable, defining aspect of human experience. It is intimately linked with memory, arising from selective recollection and ethical reflection, and serves as both a burden and a means of moral awareness. By examining the nuanced manifestations of regret in his novels, it becomes evident that Ishiguro uses this theme to explore the consequences of past actions, the limitations of human agency, and the enduring impact of ethical and emotional decisions on personal identity.

V. CATHARSIS: RESOLUTION THROUGH RECOGNITION

Catharsis in Ishiguro's novels operates in a subtle and introspective manner, differing significantly from the dramatic emotional purgation traditionally associated with classical tragedy. Rather than providing overt moral redemption or climactic resolution, Ishiguro's depiction of catharsis emerges through recognition, reflection, and a tentative acceptance of past actions and their consequences. His characters often achieve a form of emotional release not by changing the past, but by understanding and reconciling with it, highlighting the nuanced and complex nature of human psychological and ethical development.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' journey through the English countryside is both literal and metaphorical, representing a quest for understanding and partial emotional reconciliation. As he recalls his years of service to Lord Darlington, Stevens gradually comes to recognize the personal cost of his rigid adherence to duty. His reflections on missed opportunities for love and companionship with Miss Kenton evoke a quiet, bittersweet catharsis. The emotional release Stevens experiences is not accompanied by dramatic redemption or transformation; rather, it is found in the acknowledgement of his limitations, the acceptance of irreversible loss, and the subtle understanding of his own human vulnerability.

Similarly, in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono experiences catharsis through reflection on his past complicity in nationalist propaganda. As Ono interacts with his family and the changing postwar society, he comes to recognize the ethical and emotional consequences of his actions. This awareness allows him a form of emotional release, tempered by regret, but it does not erase the burden of his past. Ishiguro emphasizes that catharsis is not a final resolution but an ongoing negotiation with memory and morality—a reflective process that permits the character to coexist with his past rather than transcend it entirely.

In *Never Let Me Go*, catharsis is even more subtle, intertwined with the characters' acceptance of existential constraints. The cloned protagonists—Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth—grapple with the inevitability of their fates and the consequences of personal choices within a deterministic framework. Emotional release arises not through rebellion or escape but through acknowledgement of reality, understanding of relational dynamics, and fleeting

moments of connection. Catharsis, in this sense, is linked to self-awareness and ethical reflection, enabling characters to reconcile with their circumstances, however partially.

Overall, Ishiguro's treatment of catharsis underscores the interplay between memory, regret, and emotional reconciliation. By presenting catharsis as introspective, reflective, and morally nuanced, Ishiguro reveals the subtle ways in which individuals come to terms with their past. Emotional release, therefore, is achieved through recognition and understanding rather than dramatic resolution, reflecting the enduring complexity and fragility of the human condition.

VI. INTERPLAY OF MEMORY, REGRET, AND CATHARSIS

In Ishiguro's novels, memory, regret, and catharsis are deeply interconnected, forming a triadic framework that shapes both narrative structure and character development. Memory provides the foundation upon which identity is constructed, allowing characters to reflect on their lives, interpret past actions, and evaluate personal and moral choices. Yet memory is selective and interpretive, often amplifying regret by emphasizing missed opportunities, moral compromises, or unfulfilled desires. This interplay between recollection and regret creates a persistent tension that drives the emotional and ethical complexity of Ishiguro's narratives.

Catharsis emerges as the response to this tension, offering characters a form of emotional reconciliation. However, Ishiguro's approach to catharsis is subtle, introspective, and morally nuanced. Emotional release does not arise from the dramatic rectification of past wrongs but from acknowledgement, reflection, and partial acceptance. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' selective memories heighten his regret, yet his journey toward understanding allows a bittersweet recognition of his personal limitations and emotional losses. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's reflections on past complicity generate moral anxiety, but the recognition of consequences enables a quiet reconciliation with himself and his changing society. In *Never Let Me Go*, the protagonists' awareness of their predetermined fates heightens existential regret,

yet acceptance and fleeting human connections provide moments of cathartic reflection.

Through this interdependence of memory, regret, and catharsis, Ishiguro illustrates the intricate dynamics of human consciousness. The past, with all its burdens, shapes identity, informs ethical awareness, and allows for the possibility of emotional reconciliation, even when complete resolution remains unattainable.

VII. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels offer a profound meditation on the human experience, emphasizing the enduring influence of the past on identity, ethical awareness, and emotional life. Through the interrelated themes of memory, regret, and catharsis, Ishiguro explores how individuals grapple with personal and moral consequences, negotiate the limitations of their choices, and seek reconciliation with their histories. Memory serves as both a constructive and destructive force, enabling characters to define themselves and maintain continuity, while simultaneously anchoring them to past mistakes, missed opportunities, and moral compromises. The selective and interpretive nature of memory underscores the complexity of human perception and highlights the tension between subjective experience and objective reality. Regret, as depicted in Ishiguro's fiction, emerges as a natural response to the consequences of past decisions, revealing both personal shortcomings and the broader limitations imposed by societal or existential constraints. Characters such as Stevens, Masuji Ono, and the cloned protagonists in *Never Let Me Go* exemplify how regret functions as a reflective and ethical tool, prompting self-examination and moral awareness, even when action or restitution is no longer possible. Ishiguro's nuanced portrayal of regret emphasizes its persistence, subtlety, and psychological depth, distinguishing it from conventional literary depictions of remorse.

Catharsis, in Ishiguro's work, is intimately connected to the interplay of memory and regret. It arises not from dramatic resolution or external redemption but from introspection, acknowledgement, and partial acceptance. This quiet emotional release allows characters to come to terms with their pasts and achieve a fragile but meaningful sense of reconciliation. Ultimately, Ishiguro's literary achievement lies in his ability to illuminate the

ethical, emotional, and existential dimensions of human life. By portraying the intricate interconnections of memory, regret, and catharsis, he offers readers insight into the enduring influence of the past, the moral weight of choices, and the subtle, reflective processes through which individuals seek understanding, acceptance, and emotional equilibrium. His novels remain timeless explorations of the human condition, emphasizing that the journey toward self-awareness and reconciliation is ongoing, complex, and deeply human.

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