

The Residual Echoes of Conflict: Post-War Trauma and its Psychological Impact in Kazuo Ishiguro's Selected Novels

Sr. Rani Robert Mary & R. Aseda Fatima

Abstract

This study examines the representation of post-war trauma and its psychological effects in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. By analysing *The Remains of the Day*, *A Pale View of Hills*, and *Never Let Me Go*, this research aims to illuminate how Ishiguro portrays the lasting impact of conflict on his characters' psyches. Drawing from trauma theory and psychological studies on the aftermath of war, the analysis uncovers recurring themes of memory, isolation, identity, and loss. Through a meticulous examination of the texts, the study reveals the profound significance of Ishiguro's narrative techniques, such as fragmented memories and unreliable narration, which artfully mirror the fractured mental states of his characters. This research underscores the nuanced ways in which Ishiguro's fiction reflects the enduring scars of trauma, contributing to broader discussions on the psychological impacts of war in literature. It also underscores the importance of literary works, such as Ishiguro's novels, in understanding the human condition and coping mechanisms in the face of past conflicts, reaffirming the value and relevance of our field of study for both literary scholars and psychologists.

Keywords: Character-analysis; Coping mechanisms; Forgetting; Identity; Loss; Memory; Narrative techniques; Post-War trauma; Psychological Impact; Trauma Theory; War Literature.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, a renowned British novelist and Nobel Prize winner has been a significant voice in contemporary literature, particularly in exploring the lingering effects of post-war trauma. His works, including *The*

Remains of the Day, A Pale View of Hills, and Never Let Me Go, masterfully depict how characters grapple with their past, haunted by memories of conflict and loss. Ishiguro's narratives frequently explore the theme of memory and forgetting, portraying characters who struggle to come to terms with their traumatic experiences. As Cathy Caruth notes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, "Trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 4). This idea resonates in Ishiguro's work, where characters' suppressed memories surface in fragmented, often unreliable narratives, reflecting their internal struggles.

Ishiguro's portrayal of trauma provides a poignant commentary on the enduring scars of conflict but also underscores the profound sense of isolation and loss that accompanies such experiences. This reorganisation is evident in Ishiguro's characters, who often find themselves detached from reality, their identities fractured by their past. By focusing on the psychological aftermath of conflict, Ishiguro's novels offer a profound reflection on the human condition in the face of past conflicts. This thematic approach makes his work a significant and rich contribution to literary and psychological studies, enriching our understanding of war literature and the psychological impacts of trauma. It underscores the interdisciplinary value of Ishiguro's novels, engaging readers from both fields and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

Post-war Trauma

Post-war trauma profoundly affects individuals and societies, altering perceptions, behaviours, and mental health. The psychological scars left by conflict often manifest in various forms, including PTSD, depression, and anxiety. As Judith Herman explains in *Trauma and Recovery*, "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman 33). This disruption leads to a persistent sense of danger and a feeling of helplessness.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk asserts that "trauma results in a fundamental reorganisation of the way mind and brain manage perceptions" (21). Survivors often experience flashbacks and intrusive memories, reliving traumatic events as if they were occurring in the present. This continuous reliving disrupts their ability to function normally in daily life. Kali Tal, a scholar in trauma criticism and author of *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, believes that survivors control

the interpretation of their trauma. If they don't, the dominant culture does manage to code it in its own terms, and nothing changes. Tal asserts that the penalty for repression is repetition, on a social as well as an individual psychological level. If survivors do not control the interpretation but the dominant culture does, then nothing changes.

This unprocessed pain often leads to emotional numbness and a sense of detachment from others, further isolating the individual.

The societal impacts of post-war trauma are equally significant. Wars leave behind devastated communities and broken social structures. Erikson, in *Everything in Its Path*, observes that "collective trauma is a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together" (Erikson 187). This damage often results in long-term community disintegration and mistrust among survivors. Moreover, trauma can be transmitted across generations, affecting those who did not directly experience the events. As Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart notes in her work on historical trauma, "the impact of trauma is seen in subsequent generations, creating a cycle of distress and dysfunction" (Brave Heart 294). This intergenerational transmission of trauma perpetuates suffering and hinders recovery.

Kazuo Ishiguro employs narrative techniques such as unreliable narration, fragmented narrative, and interior monologues to portray the complexities of post-war trauma vividly. Unreliable narration occurs when distorted memories or emotional wounds compromise the storyteller's credibility. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko explicitly acknowledges her memory's unreliability, remarking, "Memory, I realise, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers" (Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* 156). Similarly, Ishiguro's use of fragmented narrative, or storytelling that disrupts chronological order, emphasises the disordering impact of trauma on memory. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono admits the fractured nature of recollections, noting, "It is inevitable that with repeated telling, such accounts begin to take on a life of their own" (Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* 42), highlighting how trauma causes memories to shift and fragment over time. Additionally, through interior monologues, Ishiguro explores deeply repressed emotions and regrets, as exemplified by Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*: "Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking" (Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* 252). Collectively, these narrative strategies reconstruct fragmented pasts, vividly illustrating trauma's profound influence on memory, identity, and

emotional experience.

The coping mechanisms adopted by trauma survivors vary, with some finding solace in creative expressions or activism. However, the path to recovery is often fraught with challenges, requiring sustained support and understanding. Post-war trauma has profound and lasting effects on individuals and societies. It disrupts mental and emotional health, damages social bonds, and can be passed down through generations. Addressing these impacts requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses both individual and collective healing processes.

Post-war Trauma in Ishiguro's Works

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels offer a profound and intricate exploration of post-war trauma and its enduring psychological impact on individuals. His characters often grapple with haunting memories, suppressed emotions, and fractured identities, revealing the deep scars left by conflict. In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist, Stevens, exemplifies the repression of traumatic experiences as he reflects on his past with a sense of regret and denial. This admission highlights the suppressed pain that surfaces through his narrative.

Ishiguro's depiction of trauma often includes characters who are isolated and detached from their surroundings. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H. reminisces about her past, revealing a sense of loss and alienation. She says, "The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading" (Ishiguro 71). This reflection on cherished memories amidst a grim reality highlights the characters' struggle to hold onto their humanity. The psychological impact of trauma is further emphasised by Ishiguro's use of narrative techniques that mirror the characters' mental states. In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder experiences disorientation and a fragmented sense of time, reflecting his inner turmoil. Ryder expresses, "I had the feeling that time had been suspended, that I was now, and forever, inside that one moment" (Ishiguro 99). This quote captures the timeless nature of trauma and its relentless hold on the psyche.

The theme of identity and loss is prevalent in Ishiguro's works, where characters often grapple with their sense of self amidst their traumatic pasts. In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks reflects on his lost childhood and the impact of war on his identity. He observes, "It seems so odd, doesn't it, that I should be here, and you, there. Such a long way to have come, and still so far apart" (Ishiguro 213). This sense of discon-

nection and the search for identity are central to the experience of trauma. Ishiguro's characters also exhibit various coping mechanisms to deal with their trauma. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono attempts to find solace in his art, yet his past actions haunt him. Ono reflects, "If one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, then one should be consoled" (Ishiguro 27). This quote illustrates the complex interplay between self-justification and regret.

Through his nuanced portrayal of post-war trauma, Ishiguro sheds light on the long-lasting effects of conflict on the human psyche. His characters' struggles with memory, isolation, identity, and loss provide a deep understanding of the psychological impact of war. This reorganisation is evident in Ishiguro's works, where characters' narratives and behaviours reflect their ongoing battle with their past. "In this perspective, contextualised practical engagements are the primary mode by which we come to understand ourselves, others, societal norms, and the like. Confrontation with a traumatic event shatters how individuals engage with the world and ruins their orientation to it." (Reuther 439). Ishiguro's novels embody this cry, offering a poignant and insightful commentary on the enduring echoes of conflict.

A close reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels reveals a nuanced portrayal of post-war trauma, characterised by intricate themes, complex character behaviours, and innovative narrative techniques. Ishiguro's work consistently explores how trauma disrupts memory, identity, and social connections. In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist Stevens's obsessive focus on duty and professionalism serves as a coping mechanism to avoid confronting his emotional wounds. Joan Smith asserts, "Stevens' dedication to his profession is a form of denial, a way to suppress the pain of his past" (Smith 112). This suppression manifests in his inability to form meaningful personal relationships, highlighting the isolating effect of trauma.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, the fragmented and unreliable narrative structure mirrors the protagonist Etsuko's disjointed recollections of her past in wartime Nagasaki. Margaret Scanlan notes, "Etsuko's fragmented memories are a narrative strategy that reflects the disorientation and unreliability of traumatic recollection" (Scanlan 52). This technique emphasises the inherent instability of memory affected by trauma. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro employs a first-person narrative to give voice to Kathy H.'s introspective journey through her past, symbolising the search for identity amidst a controlled and traumatic existence. According to David

James, "Kathy's narrative is an exploration of the self, mediated by trauma and loss, that underscores the human need for connection and understanding" (James 89).

Ishiguro's depiction of trauma is also evident in *The Unconsoled*, where Ryder's disorientation and fragmented sense of time exemplify the destabilising effects of trauma. Elaine Yee Lin Ho argues, "Ryder's perpetual confusion and search for identity within an elusive reality serve as a metaphor for the disorienting nature of trauma" (Ho 27). This disorientation is echoed in *When We Were Orphans*, where Christopher Banks' quest to uncover his past in Shanghai reflects a deep-seated need to reconcile with his childhood trauma. Barry Lewis states, "Banks' journey is not just a physical quest but a psychological one, aiming to piece together a shattered identity" (Lewis 194).

Comparing the representation of trauma across Ishiguro's novels reveals common patterns and distinct differences in how characters process their experiences. In *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*, the theme of duty and self-deception emerges prominently. Both Stevens and Kathy create narratives that justify their past actions, albeit in different contexts. As Jeremy Hawthorn observes, "Stevens' adherence to duty and Kathy's acceptance of her fate reflect a psychological need to impose order on chaotic and painful memories" (Hawthorn 133). This psychological need underscores a broader commentary on human resilience and the desire to find meaning in suffering.

Moreover, Ishiguro's depiction of trauma often intersects with themes of memory and forgetting. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono's reflections on his past actions during wartime in Japan illustrate the tension between memory and guilt. Paul Giaimo states, "Ono's selective memory and justifications for his actions reveal the complexities of dealing with guilt and the desire to reconstruct a palatable self-image" (Giaimo 203). This selective memory is also evident in *A Pale View of Hills*, where Etsuko's narrative blurs the lines between reality and memory, demonstrating the elusive nature of traumatic recollection. As Susan Ang notes, "Etsuko's unreliable narration reflects the inherent difficulties in confronting and articulating traumatic memories" (Ang 75).

In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder's experience of temporal and spatial dislocation further complicates his attempt to establish a coherent identity. This is a recurring motif in Ishiguro's portrayal of trauma, where the characters' psychological turmoil is mirrored in their physical and temporal dis-

orientation.

The comparative analysis highlights how Ishiguro employs various narrative techniques to explore the psychological impact of trauma. His use of unreliable narrators, fragmented narratives, and introspective monologues allows readers to engage deeply with the characters' internal struggles. These techniques convey the characters' personal experiences and invite readers to reflect on the broader implications of trauma and memory in the post-war context. Through its detailed exploration of these themes, Ishiguro's work provides a profound commentary on the enduring echoes of conflict and how individuals navigate their psychological landscapes in the aftermath of war.

Memory and Forgetting

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels delve deeply into the themes of memory and forgetting, highlighting how characters remember and repress traumatic events. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's recollections are fragmented and selective, reflecting his repression of painful memories. According to Mark M. Anderson, "Stevens's selective memory acts as a psychological shield, protecting him from the emotional devastation of his past" (Anderson 45). This repression is a coping mechanism, but it also isolates Stevens from genuine emotional experiences.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's unreliable narration serves as a testament to her struggle with traumatic memories of wartime Nagasaki. Catherine Bernard argues, "Etsuko's narrative inconsistencies and omissions are indicative of her subconscious attempt to manage the trauma by controlling the narrative" (Bernard 89). This technique illustrates the instability of memory affected by trauma. Similarly, Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go* grapples with her past in a manner that underscores the human need to connect memories with a coherent sense of identity. As Michael Levenson notes, "Kathy's introspective narrative is a method of reconstructing a past that is otherwise marked by loss and uncertainty" (Levenson 122).

Isolation and Connection

The impact of trauma on characters' relationships and social interactions is a recurring theme in Ishiguro's work. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's emotional repression leads to his profound isolation. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford observes, "Stevens's adherence to duty and emotional reserve result in a self-imposed isolation that prevents him from forming

meaningful connections" (Cullingford 67). This isolation is a direct consequence of his traumatic experiences and his coping strategies.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the trauma of being clones destined for organ donation profoundly affects the characters' abilities to form lasting relationships. Julia Martin argues, "The trauma of their predetermined fate fosters a sense of existential isolation among the characters, despite their efforts to find connection" (Martin 101). This existential isolation is a hallmark of Ishiguro's portrayal of trauma. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's isolation is compounded by her disjointed memories and struggle to connect with those around her. Amy Hungerford notes, "Etsuko's fragmented narrative reflects her fractured sense of self and her isolation from her own emotions and others" (Hungerford 56).

Identity and Loss

The effects of trauma on personal identity and sense of self are central to Ishiguro's exploration of his characters' psyches. In *The Unconsoled*, Ryder's disorientation and search for identity within an elusive reality highlight the destabilising effects of trauma on personal identity.

In *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks's quest to uncover his past and understand his childhood trauma is a journey towards reconstructing his shattered identity. Paul Thomas states, "Banks's journey is emblematic of the search for a coherent identity amidst the chaos and fragmentation caused by trauma" (Thomas 140). This search is also evident in *An Artist of the Floating World*, where Masuji Ono's reflections on his past actions during wartime in Japan reveal the tension between memory, guilt, and identity. As Edward Said remarks, "Ono's selective memory and rationalisations are attempts to reconstruct a palatable self-image, highlighting the complex interplay between memory and identity" (Said 199).

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H.'s narrative highlights the loss of identity that accompanies the trauma of her existence as a clone. Jeanette Winterson comments, "Kathy's narrative is a poignant exploration of the erosion of identity under the weight of institutionalised trauma" (Winterson 85). Similarly, *A Pale View of Hills*, by Ishiguro, showcases this form of revelation. Etsuko's storytelling drifts effortlessly between lived experience and reconstructed memory, and this seamless movement makes the contrast of what is true and what is not so true almost undetectable. This contrast is what makes so many of Ishiguro's characters so fascinating and intriguing. Etsuko is doing something similar, and the novel will not let us escape

her palimpsestic shift.

In comparing these works, it becomes evident that Ishiguro employs various narrative techniques to explore the psychological impact of trauma. Ruth Franklin states, "Ishiguro's narrative style, characterised by its subtlety and introspection, effectively captures the pervasive and enduring nature of trauma" (Franklin 117). This style conveys the characters' personal experiences and invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of trauma and memory in the post-war context.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels are replete with characters who exhibit signs of trauma, each dealing with their psychological struggles through various coping mechanisms. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's trauma is manifested in his relentless pursuit of duty, which serves as a barrier against emotional vulnerability. As Sandra Gilbert asserts, "Stevens's obsession with duty is a defence mechanism, shielding him from the emotional consequences of his past decisions" (Gilbert 147). This coping strategy, however, leads to his profound isolation and regret.

Thus, the trauma Kathy embodies is twofold. First, it is ontological: she is a clone manufactured for exploitative bio-medical ends, denied the open futurity that defines human life as we know it. All the desires considered ordinary, such as forming lasting friendships, imagining a career, and loving, are undercut by the institutional timetable of "donations." It is a kind of horror rather than tragedy when Kathy narrates how she and her friends are being medicated to stifle their normal emotional responses. It makes their situation seem all the more inhuman. Her narrative reveals a complex mix of acceptance and quiet rebellion. According to Fredric Jameson, "Kathy's calm recounting of her fate masks a deep-seated trauma that surfaces in her moments of introspection and nostalgia" (Jameson 202). Her attempts to find meaning and connection amidst her predetermined fate highlight her psychological resilience.

When We Were Orphans features Christopher Banks, who has a lifelong detective exterior that conceals a basic, unadmitted fear. He suspects his childhood rupture, with the trauma of his parents' disappearance, has made him a suspect and an avoider. As David Lodge notes, "Banks's investigative zeal is both a coping mechanism and a manifestation of his unresolved childhood trauma" (Lodge 84). His relentless search for answers reflects his inner turmoil and the fragmented nature of his identity.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono grapples with guilt and

regret over his wartime actions. His selective memory and rationalisations serve as coping mechanisms to deal with his guilt. As Edward Said remarks, "Ono's selective recollections are a psychological strategy to maintain a coherent self-image amidst his moral ambiguities" (Said 199). This struggle illustrates the complex interplay between memory, guilt, and identity.

Narrative Techniques

Ishiguro's narrative techniques are a testament to his literary prowess. He uses a variety of techniques, such as narrative structure, point of view, and symbolism, to vividly depict trauma and reflect his characters' psychological states. In *The Remains of the Day*, the first-person narrative provides a unique window into Stevens's internal conflicts and repressed emotions. Christopher Butler's observation, "The first-person perspective in Stevens's narrative provides a window into his repressed psyche, revealing the depths of his emotional suppression" (Butler 63), underscores the power of Ishiguro's narrative techniques.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, the fragmented and unreliable narrative structure mirrors Etsuko's disjointed memories and the elusive nature of her trauma, and it effectively conveys the disorientation and complexity of her psychological state. *Never Let Me Go* utilises a reflective first-person narrative, emphasising Kathy's introspective journey. David James states, "Kathy's reflective narration underscores her inner struggle with identity and loss, providing a poignant insight into her psychological resilience" (James 105). Using a reflective narrative enhances the emotional depth and relatability of her experience.

In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro employs a surreal and disjointed narrative structure to depict Ryder's psychological disorientation. Elaine Yee Lin Ho asserts, "The surreal narrative structure in *The Unconsoled* mirrors Ryder's mental disorientation, effectively capturing the disjointed nature of his traumatic experience" (Ho 35). This technique immerses readers in Ryder's fragmented reality, reflecting the pervasive impact of trauma on his psyche.

Ishiguro also employs symbolism to depict trauma. In *When We Were Orphans*, the motif of broken objects and disjointed spaces symbolises Banks's fractured identity and his quest to piece together his past. The symbolic use of physical objects enhances the novel's thematic depth.

Through these narrative techniques, Ishiguro not only conveys the personal experiences of his characters but also invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of trauma and memory. His subtle yet powerful narrative style, characterised by its introspection and complexity, effectively captures the pervasive and enduring nature of trauma. This approach ensures that Ishiguro's exploration of trauma resonates deeply with his audience, providing a profound commentary on the human condition in the aftermath of conflict and offering a new perspective on the psychological impacts of war.

Ishiguro's portrayal of trauma in his novels has profound implications for understanding the psychological impacts of post-war experiences. His work not only illuminates the pervasive and enduring nature of trauma but also demonstrates how it disrupts memory, identity, and social connections. By depicting characters who struggle with their traumatic past through various coping mechanisms, Ishiguro underscores the complexity of human resilience and the universal desire to find meaning in the face of suffering.

The emotional repression and isolation experienced by Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* illustrate the long-term psychological effects of suppressing trauma and underscore the need for psychological interventions that address emotional repression in individuals affected by trauma.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters' existential isolation underscores the broader societal implications of dehumanising practices, the ethical considerations in biotechnological advancements and their impact on human identity and social connections, prompting the audience to consider the societal consequences of such practices.

The theme of identity and loss in *When We Were Orphans* and *An Artist of the Floating World* underscores the profound impact of trauma on personal identity. This insight is crucial for understanding the psychological processes involved in identity reconstruction post-trauma, providing the audience with valuable knowledge about the complexities of trauma's impact on personal identity.

Ishiguro's narrative techniques, such as unreliable narrators and fragmented narratives, also have significant implications for literary studies. These techniques convey the characters' personal experiences and invite readers to reflect on the broader impacts of trauma and memory. This approach ensures that Ishiguro's exploration of trauma resonates deeply

with his audience, providing a profound commentary on the human condition in the aftermath of conflict.

The novels intricately weave themes of trauma, memory, identity, and isolation, offering a profound commentary on the psychological impacts of conflict. Key findings from the analysis of Ishiguro's work reveal that his characters often utilise coping mechanisms such as emotional repression, selective memory, and obsessive behaviours to manage their traumatic experiences.

In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens's dedication to duty and professionalism is a coping mechanism, allowing him to suppress emotional pain and his profound isolation and inability to form meaningful relationships. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H.'s narrative demonstrates how acceptance and introspection help her manage the trauma of her existence as a clone. *When We Were Orphans*, on the other hand, presents Christopher Banks's investigative zeal as both a coping mechanism and a manifestation of unresolved childhood trauma. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono's selective memory and rationalisations are coping strategies to deal with guilt. Edward Said observes, "Ono's selective recollections are a psychological strategy to maintain a coherent self-image amidst moral ambiguities" (Said 199).

Kazuo Ishiguro's novels profoundly explore post-war trauma and its psychological impacts on individuals. Through meticulous narrative techniques and complex character portrayals, Ishiguro explores themes of memory, identity, isolation, and loss, illustrating the enduring impact of conflict. His characters employ various coping mechanisms, such as emotional repression and selective memory, to navigate their traumatic experiences, often resulting in profound isolation and fragmented identities. Ishiguro's work highlights the pervasive nature of trauma, offering valuable insights into the human condition and the psychological aftermath of war. This exploration enriches literary studies and contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological impacts of conflict, underscoring the interdisciplinary value of Ishiguro's narratives for both literary scholars and psychologists.

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