



# Healing Fragmented Selves through Recollecting Memories in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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## Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* discovers the delicateness and resilience of human subjectivity using the concepts of trauma, memory and identity. The central characters of the novel, who are clones reared as organ donors, experience fragmented selves, dissociation, alienation and disjointed memories. Ishiguro demonstrates how memory serves as a tool for preserving emotional connections, reconstructing identity and fostering ethical awareness in dehumanised dystopian setting through Kathy's unreliable and nonlinear recollections. Kathy recollects her memories of Hailsham, friends and past experiences and it provides her a sense of self and solace despite a predetermined and oppressive existence. Memory is portrayed as a fragile and sustaining element and its role in resisting systematic erasure and affirming the persistence of selfhood are highlighted throughout the novel. Eventually, Ishiguro observes the conventional notions of identity and autonomy, suggests that most fragmented selves can regain moments of wholeness through the act of remembering.

**Keywords:** memory, fragmented self, recollection, autobiographical memory

Kazuo Ishiguro visualises speculative worlds that reflect human anxieties through trauma and memory. Ishiguro's characters struggle with traumatic pasts, marked by forgetting, unstable recollections and the troubling effects of memory that result in uncertain individual identity. Through these struggles, he probes the delicate nature of human subjectivity and uses memories as a companion to his characters to travel on their journey of self-realisation and self-identity. Salman states that Ishiguro's protagonists continuously attempt to overcome emotional void and psychological anxiety by reminiscing about their past (Salman, 2019). Fragmented self refers to a mental state when an individual feels isolated from others. An individual's identity, experiences and memories

are disconnected and lead to internal conflicts lacking the formation of a cohesive whole; their fragmented self struggles with traumatic experiences, leading to alienating feelings and dissociation. As Becky Bahr observes, fragmentation in literature often appears through non-linear narratives, a technique Ishiguro employs in Kathy's narration (Becky Bahr 2024). In *Never Let Me Go*, the characters Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are 'clones'. Kathy narrates the entire story, which exhibits the internal conflicts and sufferings of dissociation she faces in a dystopian society. She is disconnected from her own clone body and feels that the world around her is unreal. This study seeks to examine Ishiguro's portrayal of memory as the basis of subjectivity in *Never Let Me Go*, to consider how



it challenges conventional humanist ideas of identity, autonomy, and recognition, and to highlight the role of recollection in shaping fragmented yet enduring selves.

*Never Let Me Go* is set in a society where oppression, loss of freedom and a sense of hopelessness prevail. Ishiguro's characters are 'clones' and as the protagonist Kathy introduces herself as a 'carer', meaning organ donors to the 'normals'. These clones are made and protected in special institutions, and three to four of their organs are donated to normal people, after which their existence comes to an end. Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, as clones, are denied the chance to live fully human lives. They are created for 'caring', 'donation' and then 'completion'. Their bodies are fragmented through organ harvesting, while their identities are fragmented by the secrecy and the institution's control. Kathy narrates her life story and introduces herself as a thirty-one-year-old carer, about to become 'complete', leaving her role in a few months and decides to recollect her memories. She feels alienated and disconnected from the outside world, and she isolates with the feeling that she is not normal, which is expressed as "normal people outside" (69).

Kathy H narrates her memories, which are characterised by disjointed recollections. Her memories of Hailsham are nonlinear, partial, and often uncertain, serving as a criterion for her recollections. Kathy feels that Hailsham is the most important place, remaining the source of many of her happiest memories. "There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look back so much." (Ishiguro 3) In this quote, Kathy accepts that she should not look back and recollect her memories and feels lucky to have grown up at Hailsham. This novel's form itself embodies fragmentation, suggesting that the self is not a coherent unity but a collage of recollected moments. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur's idea that narrative identity emerges from the act of recollection, where memory links past and present to form continuity of the self (Singer, Jefferson, et. al., 2013). This theoretical framework illuminates Kathy's narration, where fragmented recollections create a sense of self

despite unreliability.

Autobiographical memory helps Kathy maintain continuity of self, stabilising her identity during times of grief and isolation. As she recollects her autobiographical memory with a self-introduction, "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years." (Ishiguro 3) The recollection process is not wholly hopeful, as Kathy's memory is selectively unreliable and has lapses and repressed truths. In her narration, she merges her individual memories with her own interpretations and skillfully links the past and present experiences and memories to identify herself. Although the narration is unreliable, Kathy is not sure of her memory and openly admits that "I might have some of it wrong" (Ishiguro 13), "I don't remember exactly" (Ishiguro 25), "the way I remember it" (Ishiguro 138).

Kathy spends a large portion of the book thinking back on her history and attempting to understand how her life relates to her friends and her job as a donor. Even after revisiting her memories, she still feels as though her destiny was predetermined. Throughout her story, she regularly refers to herself using collective pronouns like "we" and "us," implying that even in her memories, she sees herself as a member of a group rather than as an independent person.

The clones are dehumanised in that dystopian setting, but memory serves as a force that helps them to continue to exist with humanity. They are viewed as commodities, produced in labs and brought up in remote establishments like Hailsham, apart from the general public. They are further alienated from what it is to be human by the absence of conventional human interactions, such as parents and family bonds. Hillenbrand points out that this self-respect and sense of self-worth, the innermost armament of the soul, lies at the heart of humanness; to be deprived of it is to be dehumanised, to be cleaved from, and cast below, mankind (Hillenbrand 182). The clones battle with their sense of individuality and value throughout.



Clones are only appreciated for their bodies, in contrast to normal people, who are valued for their personalities, feelings, and goals. The scientific, clinical terminology employed to characterise their existence serves to further this objectification. Words like “donors” and “completion” cover up the harsh truth of their situation. The notion that the clones themselves accept their loss of choice is maybe the most painful part of their dehumanisation. Wei states that Clones are moulded as humans but are dehumanised by humans, because what human beings are driven by is the interest in sacrificing clones’ lives to prolong their own lives (Wei 459).

Kathy’s memories of Ruth and Tommy are fragmented, but a bond is preserved to resist the dehumanising utilitarianism of the donation system. The fragmentation of bodies metaphorically relates to a disruption of identity and fragmented memory. Recollecting memories is considered one of the few means left to reconstruct something of a self beyond the body. The novel shows that fragmented memory generates a fractured self, but one still capable of human attachment and ethical resonance (Abbasi 65).

Kathy’s memories become her solace and pave a way to reconnect with a lost community and to reaffirm her sense of self. “The memories I value most, I don’t see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won’t lose my memories of them.” (Ishiguro 280). Kathy’s statement encapsulates the theme of the power of memory and serves as a means of preserving personal history and emotional connection. Kathy holds on to her memories because they are the only things left from the past that shaped who she is and where she fits in. Throughout the novel, Kathy submerges herself in the recollections of Hailsham, its teachers, and her relationships, allowing her temporary healing amid continuous turmoil. Reminiscence connects her to the lost friends Tommy and Ruth, whose physical absence is bridged by remembering shared moments, hopes, and disappointments. The fragmented nature of Kathy’s memory reflects her fractured identity, still searching for completeness. Memory provides solace and also a subtle resistance to oblivion, allowing even the most fragmented selves moments of wholeness.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro presents memory as a force that shapes subjectivity in a dehumanised world where human identity is denied and unrecognised. Kathy’s unreliable and fragmented recollections echo the instability of self, yet it also provides continuity, belonging and resistance against dehumanisation. The novel demonstrates that memory is not fixed but it is a process of narrative reconstruction, where past and present mingle with each other to create meaning. Ishiguro establishes the conventional humanist assumptions of recognition and autonomy and memory’s capacity to uphold attachment, grief and ethical connections, by portraying clones whose lives are reduced to their biological utility. The recollections of memories of the clones preserve dignity and trace a humanity that survives systematic dissociation, even though they are alienated and their bodies are fragmented. Thus, Ishiguro’s treatment of memory reaffirms the possibility of self-identity even in the most fractured conditions of existence.

Thus, *Never Let Me Go*, reveals identity as a dependent, fractured act of recollection rather than supporting humanist ideals of coherent and autonomous self. The recollected memories of the characters are often painful but quietly reconciling. Their loss is not erased in their memories but allow them to weave their fragmented lives into a questionable sense of coherence. Memory appears as a site of vulnerability and a practice of survival which shapes the self even in the face of dispossession. Ishiguro, therefore, validates that remembering is not merely a journey to the past, but a process through which human endures.

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