

THE POETICS OF CHARACTERS IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S WORKS

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Abstract

This article explores the poetics of characters in the literary works of Kazuo Ishiguro, with particular focus on his novels *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *An Artist of the Floating World*. The study examines how Ishiguro constructs psychologically complex, often unreliable narrators whose inner conflicts and suppressed emotions reveal deeper philosophical questions about memory, identity, and moral responsibility. The analysis is grounded in narrative theory and character typology, tracing how Ishiguro's restrained, minimalist prose contributes to the ambiguity and emotional depth of his protagonists. By examining the interplay between voice, silence, and narrative perspective, the article reveals how the poetics of Ishiguro's characters reflect broader postmodern concerns about truth, fragmentation, and the human condition. Ultimately, the article argues that Ishiguro's unique character construction offers a subtle but powerful critique of historical revisionism, personal regret, and the loss of agency in contemporary life.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, character poetics, unreliable narrator, memory, identity, narrative voice, postmodern fiction.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, has established himself as a master of subtle psychological insight and emotional restraint in contemporary English literature. His characters are often quiet, reserved, and introspective, yet beneath the surface, they embody profound internal conflicts and existential dilemmas. In novels such as *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro crafts narrators whose perceptions of reality are filtered through memory, nostalgia, and emotional suppression. These narrative strategies are not incidental; they are central to his literary poetics and to the thematic architecture of his fiction [2]. Ishiguro's characters are not merely vehicles for plot progression but serve as living embodiments of postmodern uncertainty, historical dislocation, and ethical ambiguity. They are frequently unreliable narrators characters who either cannot or will not fully acknowledge the realities they inhabit. This unreliability is not a flaw but a deliberate poetic technique. It invites the reader to participate in the interpretive process, to question the truth-value of the narrative, and to explore the emotional and moral gaps between what is said and what is left unsaid [3].

The poetics of Ishiguro's character construction lies in his minimalist prose, his frequent use of silence and hesitation, and his deep concern with memory and identity. The tension between



individual perception and objective truth becomes a recurring motif, particularly in the way his protagonists recall and reinterpret past events. These memory-infused narratives reflect the influence of both modernist introspection and postmodern fragmentation, yet they are presented with a unique stylistic discipline that distinguishes Ishiguro's work from that of his contemporaries. This article seeks to examine the literary mechanisms through which Ishiguro constructs his characters and narrators, and how these mechanisms contribute to broader thematic concerns such as loss, regret, self-deception, and the decline of personal agency [8]. By analyzing the poetics of character in his key novels, the study aims to illuminate how Ishiguro's subtle narrative strategies engage readers in ethical reflection, challenging them to confront the fragile boundary between perception and truth.

Literature review

Numerous scholars have explored Kazuo Ishiguro's narrative style, particularly his use of unreliable narrators and minimalist prose to construct psychologically rich characters. Brian W. Shaffer emphasizes the emotional restraint of Ishiguro's protagonists, noting how their subdued expressions mask deeper traumas and unresolved guilt [4]. Similarly, Caroline Wong argues that in *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator Stevens embodies a form of self-imposed emotional repression shaped by social class and duty, resulting in a distorted understanding of both self and history [5].

Sara Upstone analyzes Ishiguro's characters within the framework of postmodern identity, highlighting how memory and temporal disjunction destabilize the narrative voice [1]. Groes and Childs extend this view by focusing on how narrative gaps and silences become active devices in constructing ambiguity and moral complexity [6]. Ishiguro's narratives, as discussed by Lewis, serve as ethical spaces where the unreliability of the narrator compels readers to engage critically with subjective truth [7].

While existing scholarship has examined the psychological and historical dimensions of Ishiguro's characters, fewer studies explicitly address the poetic construction of character the interplay between narrative voice, silence, memory, and form. This article seeks to fill that gap by analyzing character poetics as a distinct aesthetic strategy in Ishiguro's fiction.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, grounded in principles of narratology and literary poetics, to examine character construction in selected works of Kazuo Ishiguro. The primary texts analyzed include *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), all of which feature introspective first-person narrators grappling with memory, identity, and moral ambiguity.

The methodology integrates close reading techniques to identify key narrative strategies such as interior monologue, temporal disjunction, narrative gaps, and stylistic minimalism that contribute to the poetics of character. It also draws on theoretical frameworks from narratology, particularly the concepts of focalization and unreliability, as outlined by Gérard Genette and James Phelan, as well as postmodern literary theory, to contextualize Ishiguro's treatment of voice and identity.



Secondary sources, including critical essays, monographs, and scholarly journals, are used to situate the analysis within current academic discourse. This layered approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how Ishiguro's characters are not only shaped by narrative techniques, but also function as poetic expressions of postmodern subjectivity and moral complexity.

Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Ishiguro's characters are constructed through a combination of narrative silence, emotional restraint, and temporal fragmentation, all of which serve as key poetic devices. In *The Remains of the Day*, the protagonist Stevens's meticulous and formal language conceals deep emotional turmoil, and his reflections on past events are marked by self-censorship and evasion. This stylistic minimalism enhances the sense of psychological repression and moral ambiguity, revealing the limits of personal responsibility.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator Kathy exhibits a calm, detached tone while recounting traumatic experiences of loss and existential displacement. Her use of fragmented memories and digressive storytelling highlights the unreliability of recollection and the fragility of identity. The characters' passivity and resignation become a silent protest against the dehumanizing structures around them.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the narrator's shifting perception of his past and changing societal values demonstrates how personal and collective memory intertwine. Ishiguro's poetics lies not in overt expression but in what remains unsaid. Through these strategies, the characters become sites of ethical tension, inviting the reader to interpret silence, omission, and hesitation as central to their narrative and psychological depth.

Table. Narrative poetics of characters in selected works by Kazuo Ishiguro.

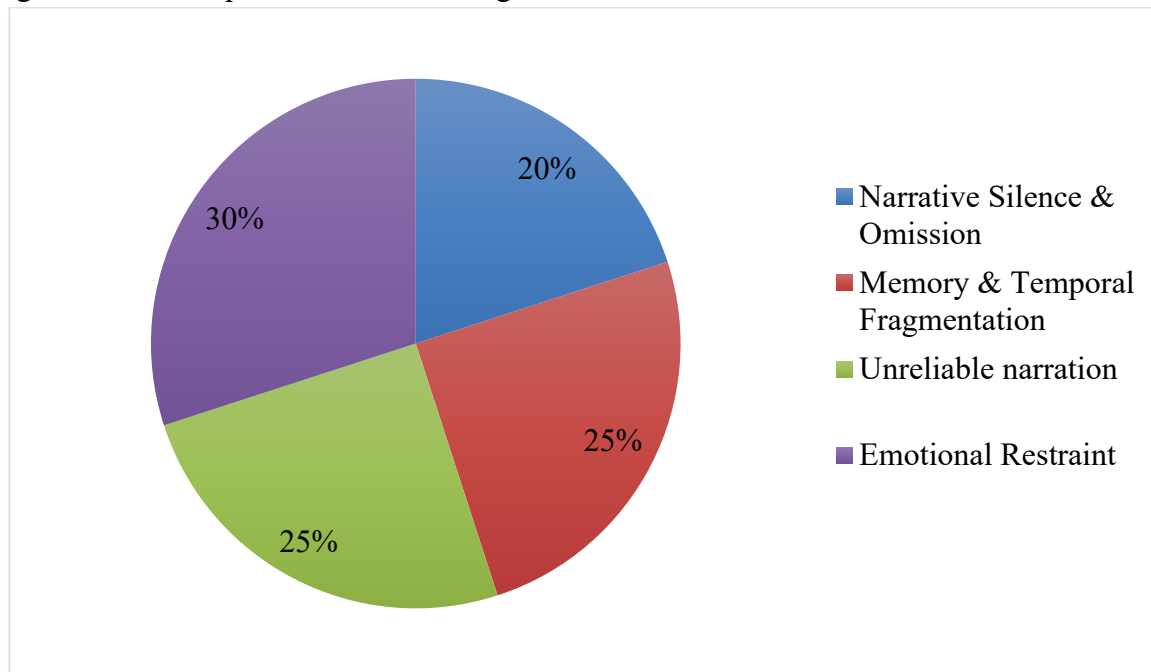
Novel	Narrator Traits	Key Poetic Device	Thematic Function
The Remains of the Day	Reserved, emotionally repressed, self-deceptive	Formal language, narrative gaps	Regret, dignity, denial of truth
Never Let Me Go	Calm, observant, emotionally detached	Fragmented memory, digression	Identity loss, passive resistance, mortality
An Artist of the Floating World	Conflicted, nostalgic, culturally disoriented	Shifting perspective, ambiguity	Cultural guilt, revision of memory, moral failure

This table illustrates how Ishiguro uses subtle yet powerful poetic strategies—such as unreliable narration, elliptical storytelling, and controlled understatement—to develop emotionally rich, ethically ambiguous characters. These features are not accidental; they are part of Ishiguro's deliberate aesthetic of restraint, where meaning often lies between the lines. Across all three novels, Ishiguro's character construction emphasizes interiority over action, allowing readers to witness the slow unraveling of self-perception through memory and introspection. The narrators' silence and hesitation are not mere absences but narrative tools that generate ethical tension and emotional resonance. This strategy compels readers to question the reliability of the narrator and to engage critically with what remains unspoken.



Ishiguro's minimalist style marked by understatement and repetition creates an atmosphere of quiet disquiet, where emotional truths emerge subtly. Ultimately, his character poetics function as a mirror to the reader's own processes of reflection, judgment, and moral inquiry. Moreover, the emotional distance maintained by Ishiguro's narrators enhances the universality of their struggles, making their personal dilemmas resonate with broader human experiences. This understated narrative voice invites empathy, not through dramatic confession, but through quiet introspection, allowing readers to uncover meaning in what is omitted rather than explicitly declared.

Figure. Dominant poetic devices in Ishiguro's character construction.



The pie chart illustrates the dominant poetic devices used in Ishiguro's character construction. It visually demonstrates that emotional restraint and narrative unreliability are the most prominent techniques, followed closely by temporal fragmentation and narrative omission, all of which contribute to the unique poetics of his fictional characters.

The findings underscore Kazuo Ishiguro's mastery in using minimalism and ambiguity to deepen the emotional and ethical dimensions of his characters. Rather than relying on overt exposition or dramatic conflict, Ishiguro crafts characters whose inner lives unfold gradually through silence, hesitation, and unreliable recollections. These strategies align with postmodern concerns about fragmented identity, subjective truth, and the instability of memory. The narrators' emotional restraint enhances their credibility while simultaneously drawing attention to what is left unsaid an absence that speaks volumes about regret, loss, and moral uncertainty.

This poetics of understatement positions the reader as an active interpreter, required to fill in gaps and question the narrator's perspective. In doing so, Ishiguro's characters function not just as individuals within a story but as ethical mirrors that reflect the dilemmas of modern existence. His unique narrative technique redefines character construction as an interactive and philosophical experience.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction exemplifies a refined poetics of character that challenges traditional narrative expectations. Through emotionally restrained narrators, fragmented memories, and carefully crafted silences, Ishiguro constructs characters whose inner conflicts resonate beyond the page. This study has shown that his characters are not passive storytellers, but active sites of moral inquiry, whose unreliability and introspection force readers to engage with ambiguity and doubt.

By employing minimalism and narrative omission, Ishiguro invites deeper reflection on themes such as identity, memory, and ethical responsibility. These techniques transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, offering a universally relevant exploration of human fragility and the search for meaning. Ultimately, Ishiguro's characters are not merely products of plot but poetic embodiments of modern existential concerns.

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