

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE USAGE OF ANALEPSIS AS A
NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S
*NEVER LET ME GO*¹**

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of using analepsis in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go*. As the novel is narrated by Kathy, who takes the reader into an incursion into her past, the use of analepsis is vital for the construction and continuation of the narrative. Two main methodological concepts have been used in elaborating this study, Wolfgang Iser's concept of gradual revelation, which applied in the context of *Never Let Me Go*, points out how Kathy's analepses are revelations of her past, which lack objectivity and only portray a distorted version of the reality of the dystopian society, gradually revealing and alluding to the real extent of the horror. Linked with gradual revelation, Cathy Caruth's theory about repressed traumatic memories is used to understand how Kathy's analepsis, as her traumatic memories have been repressed and not comprehended properly, fails in revealing an accurate version of the dystopian society of *Never Let Me Go*. Kathy's inability to comprehend her trauma generates a domino effect, as she distorts the narrative of the novel, thus offering the

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readers an unreliable frame of reference. This study highlights that analepsis is a narrative technique that not only contextualises and sheds light on specific past events but can also serve as an indicator of what is about to happen in the future. Even with the limited number of instances in which the present is illustrated in the story, as the narrator lives in the present but mostly presents elements of their past, it is only done in direct relation to past events. Additionally, since the timeline does not play a vital role in the book, Kazuo Ishiguro manages to build a significant part of his novel's narrative through flashbacks, setting the past as the cornerstone of the entire book. Flashbacks can also be seen as a doorway to Kathy's memory, as she assumes the roles of both narrator and the main character, making her a particularly peculiar case regarding the reliability of her flashbacks and narration. Kathy's subjectivity can be linked with her nostalgic viewpoint, as her flashbacks portray an idealised version of her childhood and adolescence, a version of the past which is in direct opposition with the reality of the present and the truth of the past. The building of the clone's identity as a concept is strongly dependent on their portrayal in Kathy's flashbacks, as the clones are humanised in Kathy's memory due to her nostalgic viewpoint, but treated as sub-humans in reality; therefore, as their identity is at the crossroads between humans and machines, suffering from both Kathy's subjectivity and the world's afflict reality.

Keywords: dystopian literature; flashbacks; nostalgia; unreliable narrator; fragmented storytelling.

1. Introduction

As most literature tends to analyse and portray a vision of the immediate present of the character, it does so in building the narrative of the novel. Other novels written by Kazuo Ishiguro, such as *The Buried Giant* and *The Remains of the Day*, portray characters who are quick to investigate the past to develop the plot further, ultimately offering more context about the world presented by the narrator. In the world of narrative media, looking into the past can be done through flashbacks. Analepsis in fiction is a narrative technique that can disrupt the chronological progression of the story by shifting to an earlier

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time. By doing so, the authors can offer more insight into the narrative world they create in their novels.

The primary objective of this paper is to analyse the use of flashbacks in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* and highlight their significance to the construction of the fictional narrative in the book. This study aims to give answers to two relevant questions regarding the matter at hand. First, how does Kazuo Ishiguro use flashbacks to shape the reader's understanding of Kathy's world? Obtaining a relevant answer to this question can prove useful in obtaining a better level of knowledge about how Kazuo Ishiguro builds his characters. Second, how important are flashbacks in building the fictional dystopian narrative in *Never Let Me Go*?

Through Cathy Caruth's theory about traumatic memories in literature and narrative structures, a link between memories and trauma can be identified. Cathy Caruth's analysis pointed out that repressed trauma and emotions can be rooted in traumatic memories, with the prime example that confirms the accuracy of this theory being Kathy, the narrator of the novel. Kathy constantly escapes from reality through flashbacks, revealing parts of her and the other characters' pasts to explain the complexity of their present (Caruth, 2016).

Analepsis is a recurrent narrative technique in most of Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. In *The Remains of the Day*, the narrative is based on Stevens' repressed emotions, evincing multiple instances in which certain core memories of the past are brought back into Stevens' mind and in the narrative. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ono's flashbacks can be seen as either a catalyst for her acts of self-justification or as an element which distorts the narrative. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko's fragmented memories of post-war Nagasaki blur the boundary between truth and fiction, suggesting repressed guilt over her daughter's suicide. In *The Buried Giant*, the concept of collective amnesia is explored, which directly relates to memory and utilises recollections to construct the novel's narrative.

Flashbacks should be seen as narrative techniques that can be helpful in better understanding the characters, not only regarding their actions, but also in how they are portrayed within

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the fictional narrative universe they inhabit. As Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are all presented to the readers through a narrow lens, belonging to the main character, Kathy, the readers are challenged to fill in the narrative gaps and propose their own reading of the events described.

2. Research methodology

As this paper analyses the usage of analepsis in the narrative setting of *Never Let Me Go*, two main concepts have been identified and used to develop this study. Wolfgang Iser's concept of gradual revelation and Cathy Caruth's theory about the relationship between trauma and the construction the narrative.

The concept of gradual revelation, explored by Wolfgang Iser in her work *The Implied Reader*, will be employed in the analysis. The concept of gradual revelation, in direct association with reading literature, argues that the text can deliberately omit information, allowing the reader to uncover or even create meaning from the gaps in the book's narrative (Iser, 1974). This theory will be applied to the narrator of *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy, as most of her flashbacks tend to have an increased level of subjectivity, allowing readers to explore the unclear parts of the story.

Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth's book, argues that traumatic memories or experiences are not fully processed at the time of their occurrence, as they are repressed and only emerge later in the life of an individual (Caruth, 2016). This theory will be used while referring to Kathy's memories of the past through her flashbacks, as her flashbacks are mostly non-linear and fragmented, leading to the assumption that her traumatic experiences of growing up and living as a clone have not been totally processed yet.

3. Literature review

The use of analepsis in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* can be illustrated through various layers of interpretation. This

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study identifies five major topics related to analepsis: narrative, nostalgia, trauma, identity and othering.

Regarding the relationship between narrative and nostalgia, the consensus in the field of literary interpretation of Kazuo Ishiguro's works is that the main character's relationship with flashbacks has therapeutic effects for Kathy. For the relationship between narrative and nostalgia, Yasemin Baysal's study *Memory, Loss, and Nostalgia in Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go and Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* makes a comparison between the dystopian societies presented in both books, emphasising the notion of dystopian regimes, both when it comes to the suppression of clones by humans or the theocratic suppression of women. The study also argues that Kazuo Ishiguro uses Kathy's flashbacks as a comforting escape for her, since through her nostalgic viewpoint, Kathy romanticises her memories of Hailsham. Her remembrance of the past allows Kathy to piece together parts of herself, reconstructing the narrative. "Through the types of nostalgia, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's devotion to herself to seek and care for her fellows, healing old wounds, and reinforcing the bonds of friendship can be seen as the characteristics of restorative nostalgia owing to the reconstruction of the lost home." (Baysal, 2023, p. 36).

Another study which links Kathy's style of narration with her nostalgic viewpoint has been written by Asami Nakamura. The study *On the Uses of Nostalgia in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go*, argues that Kazuo Ishiguro employs nostalgia to explore the past, ultimately coming to terms with it, as flashbacks serve to access memories that have yet to be fully processed. Through her narration, Kathy manages to adjust the narrative in such a way that she uses nostalgia therapeutically, facing her past as a way to gain the strength necessary to live her future (Nakamura, 2021). Also, in her 2013 study *Recollecting Memories, Reconstructing Identities: Narrators as Storytellers in Kazuo Ishiguro's When We Were Orphans and Never Let Me Go*, Silvia Caporale argues that Kazuo Ishiguro's narrators are presenting memories of the past as to connect fragmented memories into the construction of identity (Bizzini, 2013), paving out the way to recovery from traumatic experiences yet to be processed from the

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past. The study also argues that Kathy's narration can be therapeutic, as it frames a romanticised version of the past, while discrediting the traumatic events and memories contained within it; with this, Kathy can process her trauma better (Bizzini, 2013). Kathy's status as an unreliable narrator is also explored by Veronika Fišerová in her thesis, *The Role of the Past, Memory, and History in the Works of Kazuo Ishiguro*. Veronika Fišerová emphasises the central role of memory in the narratives created by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novels (Fišerová, 2008). Through her analysis, Veronika Fišerová argues that Kazuo Ishiguro's works do not present an objective perspective of the past, as the characters in his books tend to idealise it, thereby avoiding their inherent traumatic experiences (Fišerová, 2008).

Among the authors who analysed the structure of trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopia, the prevalent line of interpretation positions trauma as a pre-existent element in building the narrative, as the effects of past trauma influence the quality of Kathy's narrative. For example, Alexandra Mitrea's scientific paper, *Remembering the Traumatic Wound in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction*, the dimensions of trauma are examined, with the study highlighting how the first-person narrators in these works struggle to come to terms with their traumatic past (Mitrea, 2018). Trauma is also explored in Jihan Jaafar Waham's paper *The Exploration of Trauma and Memory in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go and The Remains of the Day*, as the author discusses the complexity of the relationship between trauma and memory as narrative devices to explore the connection between the past and the present (Waham, 2023). The study also highlights the importance of characters confronting their past by exploring their traumatic memories (Waham, 2023). Another central theme of the article concerns the fragmented and elliptical nature of Kathy's narration, something which is reflective of her difficulties when it comes to fully processing the traumatic memories (Waham, 2023).

The concept of othering stands as another important element in regards to how the dystopian society of *Never Let Me Go* has been constructed. In his 2017 article *The Othering in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go*, Matava Vichiensing argues

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that' through Kathy's memories, the clones are portrayed as the other, with the process of othering taking place on multiple levels. The study highlights that the othering process has significant societal consequences (Matava, 2017).

4. Results

Analepsis is an integral part of the concept of gradual revelation, which, as Wolfgang Iser noted in his book, involves the deliberate omission of certain aspects in the presentation of past events in flashbacks (Iser, 1974). In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's flashbacks do not appear in chronological order, as there are multiple instances in which a flashback takes place within another flashback. Nonetheless, Kathy's flashbacks can be contextualised and put into chronological order by the reader, and, in doing so, Kathy's narrative is built through the revelation of the truth about the clones and the society they live in. Something interesting to note in Kathy's flashbacks is the interruption of gradual revelation, as there are instances in which, through flashbacks, an important piece of information is explicitly provided for the benefit of the reader. A prime example of this would be Miss Lucy's outburst, when she addressed the elephant in the room, namely, the clone's purpose and predetermined lives: "Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 58).

As mentioned earlier, through Kathy's narration, her flashbacks often reveal her unreliability as a narrator, as she explicitly admits that some of her memories might not be accurate. "Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 58). Given her subjective narration, Kathy's flashbacks are biased by nostalgia and trauma, which makes it likely that her description of the society in the dystopian world is not entirely accurate. The lack of objectivity in her flashbacks can be interpreted through the framework of Cathy Caruth's theory (Caruth, 2016), as Kathy's traumatic memories are still repressed,

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with her having the ability to only remember the good times of her youth because of nostalgia.

Although there are many revelations, the information Kathy offers about what is to come after the events presented in the book hints at a grim future for her: "I won't be a carer any more come the end of the year, and though I've got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest—to stop and think and remember." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 30). Since Kathy's future as a clone is predetermined from the moment of her creation, the only two possibilities for the way her life unfolds are starting to donate early on in adulthood or being a carer and delaying the overwhelming fate of donations to a later stage in her life. With Kathy's life as a carer soon to be over, it means that she will become a donor. Thus, the reader is once again informed about the harsh reality of the clones' situation, adding another layer of understanding to the dystopian society created by Kazuo Ishiguro in his novel.

Kathy also selectively remembers Hailsham as idyllic, as she provides a subjective view of the institution. Kathy's perception of Hailsham was shaped by her childhood years and the relationships she formed there. Hailsham represents a vital part in Kathy's development, an institution depicted in the dystopian society as the least-worst place for a clone to grow up in: "Hailsham was considered a shining beacon, an example of how we might move to a more humane and better way of doing things." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 30). Kathy and Tommy, through their discussion with Miss Emily and Madam, can find out that they were some of the lucky clones, living in a place like Hailsham, being privileged enough to grow up like natural-born children do. Based on this, it is clear why Hailsham is so important to Kathy, being the place where she grew up and had the best memories of her childhood, while also being unaware of the privileged life she was living there. Kathy's perspective also relates to her memories of the other clones and caretakers at Hailsham, as most of the flashbacks presented in the novel feature multiple characters from Hailsham, especially Ruth and Tommy. With Ruth and Tommy's deaths and Kathy on her way to becoming a donor, Hailsham's closing marks the

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disappearance of the idealised reality of Hailsham, as the last connection to her past fades away: "I thought about Hailsham closing, and how it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man's fist. Once that happened, there'd be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more." (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 143).

Kathy's identity and that of the other characters are also constructed through flashbacks. The fact that Kathy is an unreliable narrator is closely linked with the subsequent contractedness of identity, as identity is only an illusion she creates to get away from a fate that cannot be changed. Kathy's flashbacks portray the concept of dying as a clone as nothing more than the natural course of life, as there is not a single moment in the narration when she tries to escape or question the system. With their future denied, the characters revert to happy memories that can be seen as a means of escape from the overwhelming reality of the dystopian society.

Through flashbacks, the clones' humanity is highlighted in contrast to society's denial of it. Kathy is portrayed as a genuine and kind person. These qualities are particularly important considering the clones' profession; they are empathetic, as they are aware of the benefits the clones bring to the humans, as it is implied during the novel that the donation represents an integral part of society. "I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 152).

The reality of the clones is closely linked to the immorality of the society in which they live. As there are multiple ways in which the clones are deceived from a young age into thinking they are humans, the creators are trying not to inflict any trauma on the clones: "All children have to be deceived if they are to grow up without trauma" (Ishiguro, 2005). Through caring about art, personal relationships and school, the clones are prevented from thinking about their fate. Kathy's flashbacks are filled with moments of joy associated with their childhood at Hailsham, memories which are not stained by the afflicted reality they live in.

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As Kathy's flashbacks depict her reality, it becomes apparent that her subjectivity in relation to her memories and interpretation of past events differs in perception from the reality of the dystopian society. In flashbacks, the concept of love is explored throughout Kathy's childhood and adolescence, as she has romantic feelings towards Tommy and ultimately becomes embroiled in a love triangle with Ruth and Tommy. After Tommy's third donation, Kathy and Tommy realised that, despite their love for each other, they would not be able to spend more time together, as Tommy was preparing for his fourth and final donation. The flashbacks offer a rose-tinted image of love in the clones' world, which is later proven to be completely false. Tommy's hypothesis of the system's preferential treatment toward clones who have fallen in love, taking the shape of a prolonged pre-donations stage in their lives, proves to simply be an unrealistic hope.

5. Conclusions

Kazuo Ishiguro constructs the book's dystopian narrative through analepsis, highlighting the unreliability of Kathy as a narrator and exposing how unproblematic a dystopian society can be when portrayed from a subjective perspective.

The general truth of the novel's narrative viewpoint lies in the absence of any other perspective, with Kathy's status as an unreliable narrator prompting the reader to question the idealised portrayal presented by Kathy.

Flashbacks obscure *and* expose the truth of the society portrayed in *Never Let Me Go*. Through flashbacks, Kazuo Ishiguro creates a controlled dystopian fictional society based on Kathy's subjective memories. As Kathy's flashbacks do not include the traumatic experiences of growing up and living as a clone, her perspective builds the narrative around gradual revelations that slowly appear throughout the novel, as elements of objective chaos disrupt Kathy's subjective approach to her memories. Kathy's flashbacks are shielding the reader from discovering the dehumanising reality of the dystopian society, protecting an illusion which ultimately collapses in the closing

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stages of the novel, when all details about the clones' life and purpose are directly revealed to Kathy and Tommy, leaving them stunned in the face of the dystopian reality. Also, through gradual revelation, an interpretation can be made about Kathy protecting the readers by offering them a slower and more methodical way into the dystopian society, as a lighter version of the reality of the clones' situation is mostly presented throughout Kathy's flashbacks.

Kathy's subjectivity when it comes to the memories displayed by her flashbacks can be attributed to her repressed traumatic memories. As Kathy was unable to process her traumatic memories from her younger days, her tendency to only remember the good parts of her life when looking into the past can be attributed to her still having repressed traumatic memories, which can be linked with Cathy Caruth's theory, which states that traumatic memories, which emerged from traumatic events, are repressed. Because of this, Kathy's storytelling lacks the objectivity needed to portray the reality of the dystopian society. Nostalgia also plays a role in Kathy's approach to her past experiences, as her flashbacks mostly contain childhood memories from Hailsham. These memories are romanticised due to their context and childhood innocence. The use of nostalgia appears in direct correlation with Kathy's trauma, as Kathy's inability to comprehend her trauma focuses her narration into presenting the idyllic version of her past, a distorted past presented by Kathy due to her circumstantial trauma.

Kathy's flashbacks also showcase the clones' humanity, as they form friendships, develop bonds and relationships, experience emotions, and think about the past and the future. Considering that subjectivity is a human trait, Kathy becomes a prime example of the humanity the clones develop, constructing a dystopian universe based on her memories.

Ultimately, Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go* makes Kathy's analepsis the central piece of its narration, developing the dystopian society in direct correspondence with Kathy's memories, resulting in a subjective and biased viewpoint into the fictional dystopian society of the novel.

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