

Narrative representations of trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*: a literary analysis through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory

Nathania Reva Maslida¹, *Wajiran Wajiran²

¹Student of English Literature Department, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

²Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the representation of trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go (NLMG) through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The research aims to explore how trauma, both personal and collective, is constructed and expressed not only through the novel's content but also through its narrative form. Using a qualitative-descriptive method and a literary analysis approach, the study focuses on key aspects such as non-linear narrative structure, deferred understanding, repetition, and fragmented identity. The data are drawn from close textual reading of the novel, supported by theoretical insights from trauma studies. The findings reveal that trauma in the novel is not conveyed through confrontation or explicit violence, but through silences, narrative gaps, and belated realizations, reflecting Caruth's notion that trauma resists full articulation at the moment of occurrence. Furthermore, the characters' psychological responses, including emotional dissociation, identity tension, and passive acceptance, exemplify the long-lasting effects of trauma that are shaped by systemic oppression. The novel also illustrates how personal trauma is deeply intertwined with collective suffering, normalized by institutional structures. The study concludes that NLMG is not merely a story about trauma but is narratively structured as trauma, offering ethical and affective insights into how literature can bear witness to the unspeakable.

Keywords: Cathy Caruth, Character's identity, Non-linear Narrative, Trauma

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Introduction

The study of trauma in literature is one of the growing critical approaches in humanities studies. Trauma is not only understood as a painful individual psychological experience, but also as a cultural and historical phenomenon that shapes the way individuals and groups remember, feel, and narrate past experiences (Balaev, 2014; Nadal & Calvo, 2018; Ahmed & Babo, 2019). Cathy Caruth, as one of the leading figures in trauma studies, states that trauma often does not present in the form of a complete narrative, but rather appears through repetition, delayed understanding, and silence in the narrative. These concepts open up new spaces in understanding how traumatic experiences are represented in modern literary texts (Caruth & Bojarska, 2010; Cash, 2022).

In Cathy Caruth's theory, trauma is understood as a psychological experience that is not fully absorbed into consciousness when the event occurs, and instead returns to haunt

the individual later in the form of flashbacks, repetitions, or narrative disturbances (Pederson, 2014). Caruth emphasizes that trauma is not merely a mental wound caused by violence or suffering, but rather an "experience that is not fully experienced", an experience that cannot be directly digested by consciousness and thus becomes 'belated,' meaning it is only understood later. Therefore, trauma often cannot be narrated entirely or linearly, but instead emerges in the form of silence, emptiness, or disturbances in language and narrative. This concept shows that deep psychological wounds are stored in memory and shape how individuals speak and tell stories (Ideology, n.d.).

In literary studies, Caruth's trauma approach analyzes how literary texts represent traumatic experiences at both the thematic and structural levels. Literary scholars utilize this theory to interpret works that depict painful memories of the past, the fragmentation of

characters' identities, and unconventional narrative forms. Trauma in literary works is evident not only in the story's content but also in the text itself; for example, through non-linear plots, repetition of events, or fragmented narratives (Bast, 2011; Dewanti & Kurniawan, 2025; Mazumder, 2021; Nayel, 2024). This approach allows for a deeper reading of the psychological and cultural dimensions within the text. It opens up space to understand how literature functions as a medium for bearing witness to the unspeakable trauma.

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the contemporary authors whose works present narratives of consciousness, memory, and loss (Berberich, 2011; Marcus, 2017; Shen, 2024). The novel *Never Let Me Go* (hereafter referred to as *NLMG*) (2005) is one of Ishiguro's works that highlights the struggle for identity and the meaning of life in a repressive social system. In this novel, the characters live in a fictional society where human cloning is a systematic practice to provide organs for the main human population. Although the idea of the story is speculative, Ishiguro's narrative does not emphasize major conflict or rebellion, but relatively quiet personal reflection and contemplation. This makes *NLMG* an appropriate object to analyze through the lens of trauma theory.

The novel's protagonist, Kathy H., is at the center of a non-linear narrative filled with flashbacks. Her experiences from her childhood in Hailsham (Boarding School), her role as a 'carer,' and her preparation to become a 'donor' are conveyed in a quiet narrative that reveals emotional and psychological tensions. The repetition of certain memories, the narrative void of key events, and the delayed realization of her fate reflect the mechanisms of trauma as proposed by Caruth. In this case, trauma is present not as an effect of direct violence, but as a psychological wound that continues to loom in the character's consciousness and memory.

Beyond personal trauma, the novel also reveals a broader collective trauma. The clones in the novel experience suffering that is uniform, systematic, and normalized by social institutions. The system that raises them to be donors creates a traumatic experience that is not only felt individually but also communally. However, due to the limitations of language

and oppressive social structures, this collective trauma never gets the space to be truly voiced. Thus, *NLMG* reflects how the system can perpetuate unexpressed collective wounds.

One of the striking aspects of the novel is the fragmentation of the characters' identities due to the traumatic experience (Wajiran & Apriyani, 2025). Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth (Tommy and Ruth are Kathy's childhood friends) exhibit various forms of psychological responses: emotional dissociation, unstable anger, and identity compensation mechanisms. Their identities are formed not in a state of wholeness and freedom, but in power relations that emphasize that they are not fully human (Jamili & Roshanzamir, 2018; Labibah & Wajiran, 2024). In the context of Caruth's theory, this split manifests inner wounds that have not been fully interpreted or integrated into self-awareness.

The narrative structure of the novel also reinforces the reading of trauma. Ishiguro deliberately designs a storyline full of delays, repetitions, and narrative voids. This creates a reading experience that parallels the characters' psychological state: trapped in the past, trying to make sense of unfinished events, and delaying understanding painful realities. This strengthens the argument that *NLMG* is not only about trauma, but also written in a form that represents trauma itself.

For comparison, the following researchers present several publications that have discussed the same object but with several different approaches and mechanisms. The first publication was conducted by Gong (2021), who analyzed personal trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's *NLMG* through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The study highlights how traumatic experiences emerge as repetition and dissociation, reflected in the novel's non-linear narrative and fragmented identities (Gong, 2021). Nadal and Calvo (2018) did not specifically discuss the novel *NLMG* by Kazuo Ishiguro or the representation of trauma through Cathy Caruth's theory. Instead, they emphasized the discussion of trauma in contemporary literature, also highlighting the narrative structure and complexity of trauma representation, as seen in various works (Nadal & Calvo, 2018).

Meanwhile, Balaev (2014) emphasizes trauma as an event that is difficult to grasp directly and emerges through repetition and narrative disruption. This study uses qualitative-descriptive methods and thematic analysis to reveal that the characters' traumatic experiences reflect individual and institutional wounds. Key signs include non-linear narrative structures and fragmented identities, illustrating how the novel's form reflects psychological trauma, thus highlighting the ethical and human dimensions in contemporary literature (Balaev, 2014). Toremans (2003) highlights trauma as an event that emerges through repetition and narrative disruption. This study revealed that the traumatic experiences of the characters in the novel reflect the institutionalized wounds of a person (Toremans, 2003).

The final paper is by Caruth and Bojarska (2010), discussing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, with an emphasis on the manifestation of trauma through repetition, dissociation, and narrative disruption. The analysis shows that non-linear narratives and

fragmented identities in the novel function as markers of trauma, reinforcing the importance of trauma readings in exploring ethical and human dimensions in contemporary literature (Caruth & Bojarska, 2010).

The novelty of this research lies in its intertextual approach to the intersection of personal trauma and collective trauma within the framework of Cathy Caruth's theory. While most previous studies have either highlighted the individual dimension of the character's trauma or focused solely on the bioethical aspects of the novel, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of how systemic trauma, experienced by marginalized groups, can be internalized in the protagonist's personal narrative. Additionally, this analysis emphasizes how the narrative form itself becomes a medium for conveying trauma, not just a means of storytelling. Thus, this research is expected to expand the scope of trauma studies in literature, especially in science fiction works that raise themes of identity, humanity, and power.

Method

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive method with a literature review approach. This approach was chosen because the study focuses on analyzing literary texts, specifically how personal and collective trauma are represented in the novel *NLMG* by Kazuo Ishiguro. This method allows researchers to describe and interpret data in the form of narrative elements, character structure, and trauma representation based on relevant theories, in this case, the trauma theory initiated by Cathy Caruth (Heryliv, 2024; Muzafarova, 2022; Akbar, 2024)

The type of data used in this research is qualitative, in the form of quotations, narratives, and significant passages from the novel that indicate a traumatic experience. The primary data in this study is the novel *NLMG* itself. In contrast, the secondary data are literary theory books, scientific journal articles, and academic publications that discuss trauma theory, especially those related to Cathy Caruth's works. Data collection is done through a close reading technique, which is a careful and

critical reading of the text to find narrative elements related to the theme of trauma.

In collecting data, researchers recorded and classified quotations or parts of the text that showed symptoms of personal trauma, collective trauma, fragmented character identity, and non-linear narrative structure. The data was then categorized based on predetermined aspects, such as narrative repetition, story emptiness, delays in character understanding, and the relationship between individual trauma and social systems. The researcher also noted the situational and symbolic context of each part of the text to ensure accurate interpretation (Kyrylchuk et al., 2023; Praphan, 2024).

The data analysis process was conducted using content analysis techniques based on trauma theory. The researcher interpreted the meaning of the text by linking the novel's findings to key concepts from Cathy Caruth, such as belatedness, deferred understanding, repetition compulsion, and trauma as a missed experience. The analysis was conducted thematically, identifying

trauma patterns and organizing them systematically and coherent argumentatively. The aim is to explain how trauma shapes the narrative structure and psychology of the characters in the novel (Raza & Habib, n.d.).

To maintain the validity of the data, this study used theoretical triangulation techniques, namely by comparing Cathy Caruth's theory with the views of other trauma experts and

relevant previous research results. Additionally, validation was achieved through re-reading the data and comparing interpretations with secondary sources from scientific publications to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the analysis. In this way, the research results are expected to be academically reliable and contribute to developing trauma studies in modern literature.

Results and Discussion

Cathy Caruth's approach is particularly relevant in reading *NLMG*, which presents trauma not through explicit physical violence but through blocked consciousness and delayed disclosure. Ishiguro constructs the narrative as 'a quiet yet disturbing retrospection', which reflects the existential trauma of the clones realizing their fate slowly (Khadem, 2014; Leys, 2012). In this analysis, the

Representation of Trauma

Ishiguro uses a non-linear, repetitive narrative structure to represent trauma. As the narrator, Kathy often revisits memories of her childhood in Hailsham, but rarely lucidly discusses her impending suffering. This demonstrates Caruth's mechanism of 'compulsion to repeat', where traumatized individuals unconsciously return to past moments to try to process unspoken experiences. Retrospective narratives that are hesitant and hollow in explaining key events, such as the transition from student to "carer" and "donor," reflect wounds that cannot be fully told.

The characters in the novel exhibit signs of identity fragmentation, a common symptom of traumatic experiences. Tommy experiences outbursts of anger and frustration when he feels that his future has been determined, while Kathy displays ambiguous resignation. Both characters exhibit responses that reflect traumatic psychology, ranging from denial and

Non-linear narrative

In terms of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the non-linearity of the narrative reflects the way trauma works in the human mind. This experience cannot be fully processed when it occurs and only resurfaces later in the form of flashbacks, repetitions, or interruptions in

researcher categorizes several issues into sub-chapters: representation of trauma, non-linear narrative, identity tension, and the relationship between personal and community trauma. The researcher presents these issues in accordance with the content of the novel used as the object of this study.

false hope (such as the belief in the possibility of a donor delay due to true love) to fatalistic acceptance. Caruth notes that trauma often brings out the 'conflict between knowing and not knowing', and this is reflected in how the characters seem to know their fate, but delay complete understanding of it.

A critical aspect of Caruth's theory is that trauma requires the reader or listener to acknowledge the incompleteness of testimony. In *NLMG*, Ishiguro creates a world where victims do not really have a full voice. There is no great rebellion, no systemic denial, just memories and reflections. This is where Caruth places ethics: the reader's job is to hear the unheard, to understand that trauma is not always present in the form of full testimony, but in the silences and gaps of narrative. The novel offers no resolution, instead inviting readers to reflect on the systemic horrors that have been normalized and not fully realized by the victims.

narrative time. *NLMG* opens not with a clear description of a dystopic world or the fate of a character, but with Kathy's quiet but ambiguous retrospective voice. Kathy's narration does not follow a chronological timeline, but moves back and forth between the present and the past. This reflects the main character's attempt to understand her traumatic

experiences, which have not yet been fully interpreted. As expressed in this statement. "it's a bit odd me telling you about it now"

Kathy's decision to 'go back' to a memory not because of its place in time but because it eventually came to mean a lot underscores the idea that meaning emerges belatedly. This 'deferred understanding' is central to trauma theory, in which the individual struggles to make sense of past events that were overwhelming, confusing, or emotionally suppressed at the time. Kathy constantly recalls her childhood in Hailsham, yet each memory does not come as a complete or linear recollection, but rather as snippets that often seem inconsequential or cryptic. For example, Kathy recounts an incident about paintings and art galleries, then moves on to memories of her conversation with Miss Lucy without completing the previous storyline. This pattern demonstrates the intrusion of traumatic memories that come unexpectedly and out of narrative control, as described by Caruth. Such a structure reflects the traumatized subject's failure to construct a complete life story.

Kathy's narrative is full of repetition of certain events or reflections, but without significant development. She repeatedly returns to her relationships with Tommy and Ruth and seemingly simple memories such as toys, tapes, or small interactions in the dorm room. However, this repetition exposes an unresolved inner wound, demonstrating the compulsion to repeat as described in psychoanalysis. In addition, there is a conspicuous narrative void: important facts,

Identity Tensions

The main characters in *NLMG*, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, live in traumatic existential uncertainty. They are clones created solely to be organ donors. However, this realization does not come fully and directly, but is formed slowly, ambiguously, and full of denial. As a result, the characters live in deep identity tension: they want to be treated as fully human, but are never really recognized by the social system. This tension between "who they are according to themselves" and "who they are according to the system" is at the core of their identity crisis.

including their identity as clones, the organ donation system, and sudden death, appear only vaguely and are delayed, rather than presented directly.

One of the most powerful manifestations of the concept of belatedness in the novel is how Kathy and her friends only slowly understand the meaning of their existence. Despite hearing about "donor" and "carer" for a long time, they do not immediately connect the terms with their biological destiny. The revelation of this truth is not presented as a dramatic shock, but rather as a slow and ambiguous recognition, reflecting that trauma is often not realized until long after the event. Their understanding is deferred, and even after understanding, the narrative does not turn to resistance, but rather to silent contemplation and passive acceptance.

By constructing a narrative through fragmentary flashbacks, unconscious repetition, and delayed revelation, Ishiguro not only conveys a traumatic story but also mimics the way trauma works in human consciousness. The non-linear narrative in *NLMG* is not just an aesthetic choice, but a medium to represent trauma that cannot be expressed directly. In this context, the reader is positioned to experience disorientation and delayed understanding alongside the characters, creating a powerful ethical and affective effect as proposed by Caruth: that our task is to listen not to resolve the wound, but rather to realize that the wound is not finished being told.

Kathy, as the main narrator, exhibits symptoms of emotional dissociation, a condition in which the individual is detached from painful emotions or reality. Although she recounts a tragic past, her narrative style is calm, neutral, and even flat, with no expressions of anger, deep fear, or open rebellion against the system that oppresses her. This is not due to ignorance, but rather due to the trauma that drove her into a form of psychological coping through emotional distancing. In other words, Kathy "layers" trauma through an almost affectless storytelling style, a survival strategy that reflects Caruth's dissociation.

Tommy is the character who most clearly exhibits emotionally unstable behavior in response to existential pressure. He experiences outbursts of anger, unexplained frustration, and feels excluded when the system does not appreciate his efforts to express himself through art. When she finally realized that there was no "delay" or hope for a longer life, she experienced emotional devastation. Her reaction shows that trauma not only shapes consciousness but also manifests itself in the body and emotions. As Caruth describes, trauma can "wound without realizing it" and emerge through affective disturbances that are difficult to control.

Ruth exhibited a different defense mechanism: she tried to conform to social expectations and often manipulated her image to appear more valuable or "normal". She seems to go to great lengths to show that she has control over her life, even when it is clear that she has no absolute freedom. When she finally

Link between Personal Trauma and Collective Trauma

In *NLMG*, personal trauma emerges in the form of the existential experiences of the characters, especially Kathy H., Tommy, and Ruth, who slowly realize that their lives have been predetermined to become organ sources for non-cloned humans. This experience does not come as a dramatic shock, but is internalized in a retrospective narrative that is calm and repetitive. Kathy, as the narrator, experiences personal trauma in the form of losing friends, love, and a future. She harbors inner wounds that she cannot fully articulate. This trauma corresponds to Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is not simply a horrific event, but rather the inability to understand and integrate the experience into consciousness fully.

The personal trauma of the characters cannot be separated from the broader collective trauma of the dystopic social system that creates, raises, and exploits the clones. This collective trauma does not just afflict the individual, but also afflicts the entire group, the clones who are humanized in body and mind, but dehumanized socially and politically. The system works silently, normalizing suffering through institutions like Hailsham. In the

admits her guilt for separating Kathy and Tommy, it marks a crack in the identity she has been building. Ruth tries to create the illusion of control to avoid deeper psychological wounds. This is in line with Caruth's concept that trauma often drives victims to create false narratives to cover up unspeakable wounds.

NLMG is not only the story's setting but also shapes the characters' inner structure and psychological actions. Caruth states that trauma not only resides in the past but continues to live in the present, disrupting identities, narratives, and interpersonal relationships. Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth show how identities formed in extreme oppression become fragile, divided, and conflicted. They never really "have" a future, and as a result, they develop complex ways, both conscious and unconscious, to survive in a world that does not recognize their human value. Trauma becomes both the existential basis and psychological prison of their identity.

context of Caruth's theory, this collective trauma is not only passed down vertically (from the system to the individual) but also spreads horizontally as part of an unspoken shared experience.

It is essential to note that the individual traumas of Kathy and her friends are not isolated, but are inextricably linked to the collective narrative of their community. They experience loss, anxiety, and alienation not just as personal experiences, but as part of the lived reality of an entire generation of clones. Their process of understanding self-identity always goes hand in hand with understanding the inevitability of collective fate. This is where Caruth emphasizes the importance of reading trauma not only in terms of the individual, but also in terms of history and community. Thus, *NLMG* shows how personal trauma narratives function as a mirror of unrecognized collective wounds.

The narrative in this novel illustrates how collective trauma often lacks a platform to express itself. There is no rebellious movement or explicit discourse of resistance; instead, the system of oppression continues in a repetitive cycle. Kathy and the other characters keep repeating memories, losses, and false hopes, without breaking out of the pattern. This

reflects what Caruth's theory calls 'repetition compulsion', where unresolved trauma will continue to repeat itself on an individual and social scale. The inability to give voice to collective trauma becomes a double wound experienced by the characters: they not only suffer, but also lose the language to name that suffering.

Through a mix of personal and collective trauma, Ishiguro conveys a broader message about humanitarian ethics and social awareness. Readers are invited to sympathize

with individuals like Kathy and reflect on the systems that create systemic suffering for certain groups. In Caruth's perspective, reading trauma also means acknowledging what cannot be fully told, and understanding that historical wounds do not always come in the form of a complete narrative. *NLMG* is thus not only a science fiction narrative, but also a metaphor for the structural injustices rooted in our collective unconscious. Trauma in this novel connects personal experiences with broader social wounds that keep recurring without healing.

Conclusion

Using Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework, this study has demonstrated how *NLMG* by Kazuo Ishiguro can be read as a profound literary embodiment of trauma. Through non-linear narration, fragmented identity, and deferred understanding, the novel reflects trauma in its content and form. Kathy's retrospective storytelling, filled with repetition, omissions, and temporal dislocations, mirrors the mechanisms of trauma described by Caruth, particularly the compulsion to repeat and the belated emergence of meaning. The psychological responses of the characters, ranging from dissociation to identity instability, further exemplify how trauma manifests both internally and socially, disrupting personal identity and narrative coherence. Moreover, the novel illustrates how personal trauma is inextricably tied to systemic and collective trauma, showing the deep entanglement

between individual suffering and normalized institutional violence.

The implications of this analysis suggest that trauma literature must be approached not solely through thematic interpretation but also through formal and structural analysis. *NLMG* invites readers to engage ethically with the unspeakable, fragmented nature of trauma, highlighting the limitations of language in bearing witness to systemic suffering. Future research might explore comparative studies with other dystopian or trauma-focused narratives or integrate interdisciplinary perspectives such as bioethics, memory studies, or affect theory. Ultimately, Ishiguro's work challenges us to confront how trauma is remembered and silenced, repeated, and embedded within the very structures of narrative and society.

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