



Unreliable Narrator and Embedded Narratives in the Fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract:

This study aims at examining the two narrative techniques of an unreliable narrator and embedded narratives in Ishiguro's depiction of friendship and his characters' quest for identity. This can be displayed in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (NLMG). It will also be applied to some short stories of Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* of which the following stories "Crooner", "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Nocturne" will be chosen. Dzhumaylo has praised Ishiguro for his unique use of "the so-called English boarding school fiction as a 'platform' for science-fiction dystopia" in *NLMG*. In contrast to utopia, the dystopian novel often predicts a future that is either pessimistic or full of horror through what is going on in recent times. Lochner emphasizes, "Literary dystopia is to caution against false optimism and the devastating effects of a scientific utopia by projecting present developments imaginatively into the future"(225).

Keywords: Unreliable Narrator; Embedded Narratives, Quest for Self, Dystopia.



Quest for Self, Dyst An unreliable narrator is a characteristic of a narrative discourse in which the narrator "misreports, - interprets or –evaluates" (Shen 1). Genette observes the meaning of an unreliable narrator regarding the implied author in Booth's "Distance and Point of View". He says, " the distinction between implied author and narrator—a narrator who is dramatized or undramatized and reliable or unreliable" is in proposing "a richer tabulation of the forms the author's voice can take"(Booth 43). In other words, when the narrator's speech and actions are not consistent with the implied author, he can be regarded as unreliable. Thus, an unreliable narrator is the narrator of the story whose intents and viewpoints are widely far away and different from that of the real writer or implied author. Moreover, S/he does not have a full understanding of all the events he perceives.

In this way, in the literary works under study, unreliable narrators can be examined easily since the narrator exposes a lot of viewpoints of the characters. These unreliable narrators often emphasize themselves and their lives either to tell truth or to repress the dark memories of their past.

The unreliable narrator has often been referred to in the preface of the older novels



of the 18th century. The real author declares that the motives and feelings of the narrator are not representative of his/her own. However, in contemporary texts, there is not an explicit expression of such difference. Gérard Genette points out that the narrator can rely on the first person to "designate himself "(97). However, Haruki defines the unreliable narrator as someone "whose ideas, opinions, or sense of values do not agree implicitly or explicitly with those of the author, the implied author, or the work as a whole (44). Thus, the reader must narrow such a gap between the narrator and the author.

Ishiguro's *NLGM* (2005) can be regarded as an example of an unreliable narrator. It was written in the genre of science fiction. It focuses on the theme of identity to discover the loss most of the characters feel throughout the novel. It is categorized as a dystopian novel. *NLGM* takes place in England in the late 1990s where medical and scientific discoveries are 'so rapidly [and thus] there [is not] time to take stock, [and] to ask sensible questions' (Ishiguro, *NLGM* 257). It depicts how humanity is lost because of harsh scientific discoveries and that of the 1990s cruelty in England where "colonies of children are being cloned" (Robbins 291). Another characteristic of a dystopian novel is that it is run by an external authority. As Black points out, Hailsham's students are encouraged to think that they are in an economy of "egalitarian circulation", while their economy is that of "brute extraction" (796). In *NLGM*, Kathy uses the pronoun "they" to refer to this authority as in "...



they want me to go on for another eight months..."(Ishiguro 8).

NLMG tells the story of three teenagers called Kathy H, Tommy D, and Ruth. It describes the lives of its heroes in three different stages: at Hailsham, at the Cottages, and after being an adult as a carer for organ donors. First, Hailsham is related to the clones' childhood. Drag sees that Hailsham guardians "serve the role of [the students' respective substitutes [parents and a family home]" (169-70). However, Ishiguro draws a dimly imaginary setting in Hailsham where its students are described as ampules of organ transplantation. Snaza also puts it "What the guardians at Hailsham protect is the 'donations', [which] is a giving of organs" (224). However, Cooper sees the clones, especially Kathy and her fellow students, as imprisoned by both the prison fences and Hailsham's exploitative system. Moreover, Onstad shows how it is most frustrating to see the paradox of Hailsham's students that are "so expensively educated and taught to think for themselves, yet so fully accepting of their fate" (80). They are even reluctant to know what happens to their fellow clones after being carers and donors.

Second, the Cottages can be regarded as the place where the students became independent and can use different mediums such as "television" and "big glass front" to get their experience (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 80). In the Cottages, the clones have to "look after each other" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 95). There is a Keffer who is "this grumpy old guy who



turned up two or three times a week in his muddy van to look the place over"(Ishiguro, *NLMG* 80). Moreover, he "didn't like to talk to [the clones]", but he often "went round sighing and shaking his head disgustedly"(Ishiguro, *NLMG* 80). But it is never clear what more he wants them to do.

Finally, as a carer, Kathy tries to improve the needs of her donors. Even though she is entirely aware of her destiny from the age of fifteen, she does not confront either her fate or that of her friends. Instead, she witnesses the murder of her fellow students and prepares for her death. Moreover, she accepts her next role as a donor saying that she "welcome[s] the chance to rest" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 30). Lochner also examines how readers share Kathy's "intimate childhood memories, her nostalgia, and her sadness at the loss of her friends, [but they've] rebelled against her stoical acceptance of her fate" (101). This follows what James Butcher writes in *Lancet*, saying "Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the book is the stoicism with which the clones face their fate" (1299).

NLMG is written entirely in the first-person narrator by Kathy H who is now 31 years old narrating the story with retrospection. Kathy is not only a character in the story she tells, but she is the heroine of that story and her solo narrator. In this way, Kathy can be recognized as an autodiegetic narrator of the novel. Moreover, Ishiguro portrays her voice as meticulous, flush, dull, and monotonous. He makes her lack a sense of humor for



being described as an extremely scared and solitary woman.

Consequently, Kathy in Ishiguro's *NLGM* (2005) can be regarded as an example of an unreliable narrator, because she has a partial understanding of what is going on in front of her in the novel. Thus, the readers cannot rely upon her views entirely. But, they try to work out all the missing behind them. Mazar observes, the "gaps in Kathy's limited knowledge of the world" make readers "complement her narrative"(13). Elnady further discusses the role of the narratee which is to "mediate between the central consciousness and the outside world "(23). On the other hand, Kathy is quite trusted as a narrator, because she does not lie to herself or her readers. But, she admits the gaps she has in her memory which makes her unreliable.

Friendship is further tackled in *NLGM*. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are students at an idyllic boarding school called Hailsham. These heroes search for truth that pushes the storyline forward and also makes them in a conflict. Kathy feels lonely because Ishiguro portrays her as "a person who is related to no one" (Mullan 113). Tommy and Kathy are seen as close friends. As for Kathy and Ruth, they have many disagreements at Hailsham. However, the relationship between these three characters is gradually changed from an innocent friendship to that of a love triangle. Tommy and Kathy reveal their love for each other through their artwork. However, Ruth primarily espouses a fake romantic affair with Tommy to destroy Kathy's love



relationship with him. So far, Ruth has learned the value of friendship and made amends for her selfish behavior. When Kathy realizes that their love cannot defer their organ donations, Kathy “quietly accepts the news and does not seek any form of reprisal against the system” (Whitehead 73). Madame collects the artwork of Hailsham's children in an attempt to assert the humanity of the clones. However, she is incapable of persuading “others of [the] students’ right to humane consideration” (Black 794).

Identity is also stressed in *NLMG*. Ishiguro emphasizes the theme of identity through how organ donation is seen through the lens of the students who are the donors of this scheme. Consequently, the student's awareness of their own identity in the eyes of others makes them feel shocked. Maya Schechtman says the ' failure to be tuned into basic facts about the world one inhabits ... interferes with the capacities and activities that define the lives of persons' (122). Thus, in *NLMG*, the clones' lack of knowledge about their position in society adds to their vital differences from others. Thus, the students' experience can only be seen through what is available to them by others and not through their awareness.

Embedding is another narrative technique that can be applied to the novel. Genette defines it as assuming "the role of the first narrative with respect to another that it carries..."(49). Although embedded narratives are not exactly part of the narrative sequence, the aim behind their existence is understood. *NLMG* makes use of embedded



narratives through the sneaky choice of the title of the novel which originated from a pop song by Judy Bridgewater. This song tells the story of a woman who is not pregnant; however, she has a baby by miracle. The woman 'holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing' ...[not only] because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid ...that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her' (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 70). Both Kathy and Madame have different interpretations of the song of "Never Let Me Go" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 51).

Kathy, the unreliable narrator, is accustomed to listening to this song as a child. She observes that this song is found on an ancient cassette tape bought at Hailsham. It indicates how much it is important for Kathy to keep someone close. Thus, the song may refer to either Bridgewater's lover or that assumed baby Kathy dreams to give birth to. When Kathy was a child, she imagined having that baby in her arms while listening to the song saying "Baby, baby never let me go" (Ishiguro, *NLMG* 266). Although Kathy knows that her interpretation does not cope with the rest of the song, she keeps the image of the mother holding tightly her baby. She knows that the clones are infertile. or from 'even humanity' (Herbert 55). As Martin Puchner says, Ishiguro "forces the reader to question the essence and the limits of the human by "adopting his theme of cloning, (49).

On the other hand, Madame interprets the song in a different matter. She weeps as she sees Kathy swinging back and forth like a mother. She knows quite well that



Kathy is a clone and consequently she cannot bear children. Thus, she cries out of feeling sympathy for her. Moreover, she may think that there are two worlds nowadays. While the new world is harsh and cruel depending much on scientific discoveries and organ donation, Kathy holds the old one internally. Although this old world disappears in reality, Kathy pleads for it "never to let her go"(Ishiguro, *NLMG* 267).

So far, it has been illustrated how the sole narrator, Kathy, has used the narrative techniques of an unreliable narrator and embedded narratives to clarify the circumstances surrounding her inescapable fate in Hailsham as a donor of organs. Kathy and her friends, Tommy and Ruth, have not confronted their unjust role in organ transplantation, but they have surrendered. Neither love nor artwork has provided them with the solution to end their misfortunes. Moreover, these things have never become the source of their relief. In contrast, love and art are just representative of their human nature in contrast to animals and other objects. Kathy has been categorized as an unreliable narrator for having memory gaps. However, she has been regarded as a quite trusted narrator for declaring that in the narrative. In the next collection of *Nocturnes*, there will have been two kinds of unreliable narrators either a self-deceived narrator as in Charlie of "Come Rain or Come Shine" or the other-deceiving narrator as in Steve of "Nocturne".

In *Nocturnes*, most of the short stories are told in the first person narrator by the voice of either a young or a middle-



aged man. These narrators seem rootless in a world that recompenses practicality, making the protagonists 'musical gifts hard to evaluate. In the stories under study which are "Crooner", "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Nocturne", all the narrators seek fame and question their identity. In "Crooner", Gardner wants to restore his former fame. In "Come Rain or Come Shine", Charlie illustrates how successful he is compared to Ray. Finally, Steve desires to be a well-known saxophonist after his plastic surgery in "Nocturne". However, only some of these first-person narrators can be regarded as unreliable such as Charlie in "Come Rain or Come Shine" and Steve in "Nocturne".

"Crooner" is the inaugural story of *Nocturnes*. It describes a gloomy mood by emphasizing the story of a young guitarist from a band in the Piazza San Marco called Jan. This narrator comes across a former famous American singer known as Tony Gardner. The story tells how this well-known singer breaks away from his lovely wife, Lindy. He reveals that their marriage lasts for over twenty-seven years. The real beginning of the story is when Tony Gardner asks the narrator to accompany him while crooning to his wife. He chooses a romantic breakup from a "gondola" underneath Lindy's window in the hotel in Venice (Ishiguro, "Crooner" 14). It can be considered the point of attack for all the events that come later.

In "Crooner", there are some embedded narratives displayed in the narrative. Gardner's use of these narratives foreshadows what's going to happen in his relationship with



Lindy. There are the songs the narrator is asked to play in the romantic affair between Gardner and his Lindy such as "I Fall in Love Too Easily", and "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" (Ishiguro, "Crooner" 22-25). The song entitled "I Fall in Love Too Easily" reflects the love affair between Gardner and Lindy. Moreover, it reminds them of the happy memories they spend with each other while listening to that song.

Furthermore, the song which is "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" indicates what Mr. Gardner intends to do in his relationship with Lindy. It compares Gardner with that "American man [who leaves] his woman", but still thinks of her during "pass[ing] through the towns" (Ishiguro, "Crooner" 26). Thus, the song is considered a forthcoming expectation of the fate of Tony Gardner and his wife. It predicts that they will leave each other after their trip to Venice. This supports what Jan reveals by saying "these songs all held horrible meanings for Mrs. Gardner" (Ishiguro, "Crooner" 27).

"Come Rain or Come, Shine," tells the story of a forty-seven years old teacher. He is named Ray and he has been working for many years abroad at English schools. Then, he decides to visit his two married colleagues, Charlie and Emily, in England for a short regular visit. Unlike all of Ishiguro's other short stories in the same collection, this narrator is not a player of any musical instrument. The story symbolizes the vow that should be



adopted by a married couple to stay with each other forever despite all the obstacles they encounter.

In "Come Rain or Come Shine", embedded narratives can be displayed through Ishiguro's use of the sneaky title of this short story. It is named after a song by Ray Charles. In Ray's song, the "words themselves were happy, but the interpretation was pure heartbreak" (Ishiguro, "Come Rain or Come Shine" 33). It contains an outstanding item which is the use of the same name of the singer who is called "Ray" to be attributed to the overt autodiegetic narrator of that short story. In the song, the singer reminds his beloved of the vow they bestow upon themselves. They promise to be always with each other whether life is rainy, unhappy, and without money or reversely shiny, happy, and full of money. Likewise, being a good friend, Ray reminds Emily of Charlie's love for her. Thus, he makes her declare "[They] should sort [themselves] out" (Ishiguro, "Come Rain or Come Shine" 71).

Ishiguro presents how Charlie is an unreliable narrator. He makes readers see how much Charlie is a liar either to himself or the others. For example, there is Charlie's claim that neither he nor Emily can be in the same room together, which is proven to be untrue. This can be seen in "[they] didn't look at each other, but neither did they seem so uncomfortable being in the same room, despite what he'd claimed" (Ishiguro, "Come Rain or Come Shine" 37-40). Another remark by Ray is that although Emily and Charlie "never spoke directly to each other; Charlie kept joining in



the conversation [between Emily and Ray] in an odd, once-removed manner"(Ishiguro, "Come Rain or Come Shine" 40).

"Nocturne" describes a weird meeting that takes place between Lindy and a talented saxophonist jazz musician called Steve at Beverly Hills hotel. The twice repetition of "wrapped in bandages" is a hint of how the narrator's identity is disguised behind these dressings (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 103-138). Ishiguro's use of "The nearness of you" is very sneaky which can be seen as an example of embedded narrative. It can be analyzed either from Steve as an unreliable narrator or from Lindy's perspective. On the part of Steve, Lindy's reaction after the track ends does not look good by "the way she let herself slump into the sofa, like a tense mannequin" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 125). Steve thinks that Lindy does not admire his musical track. Besides, he does not know the reasons behind her attitude. On the other hand, Lindy observes that what she does is out of her "jealousy" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 128). She extends that Gardner pulls her up about that song to the extent that it becomes "something [she does not] ever seem to get over" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 128). Thus, she describes Steve's playing of that song as "Really professional" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 125).

Steve is considered the unreliable narrator of this story. Thus, he perceives all the events through his recognition using the first-person narrative. He further engages in a long monologue about himself and the other characters. He



seems unable to have a complete understanding of all the events he encounters. As Mariko Matsuoka has relevantly observed, the first-person narrative is "limited in perspective or vision precisely because the narrator him/herself functions as one of the characters in the story" (1).

Steve feels subconsciously that he is a loser. Consequently, he uses his self-deception for allowing the boyfriend of his separated wife to pay for his surgery. In "Nocturne", Steve is considered one of these self-deceived unreliable narrators. First, he thinks that a new face may someday bring his alienated wife back. Second, he sees that the attractive face may bring him more work as his agent always pretends.

Steve as an unreliable narrator speculates the reasons behind the fame of Lindy Gardner despite her modest talent. In Steve's view, Lindy does not deserve the fame she has as "she doesn't even pretend to have the musical ability" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 111). However, "the right love affairs, the right marriages, [and] the right divorces" were what made her news targets to magazine covers leading her to be seen as a "star quality" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 111). However, the whole matter is different from Lindy's angle. She knows that she does not possess the talent required to achieve that dream. However, she "work[s] at it, not mind what people said. [Knowing that] there was still a chance" (Ishiguro, "Nocturne" 142).

In sum, this chapter has examined Ishiguro's *NLMG* and *Nocturnes* from which the following stories "Crooner",



"Come Rain Or Come Shine" and "Nocturne" have been chosen. The two narrative techniques of an unreliable narrator and embedded narratives have been tackled to explore the major themes of identity and friendship. In *NLMG*, Kathy has been regarded as an unreliable narrator, because of the gaps in her memory. Kathy has been portrayed as having a partial understanding of what has been going on throughout the narrative. The song "Never let me go" has been used as an embedded narrative to reflect how Kathy has been torn between her role as a donor and her dream of giving birth to a child.

In *Nocturnes*, both Charlie of "Come Rain or Come Shine" and Steve of "Nocturne" have been seen as unreliable narrators. Although Charlie has not been the narrator, he has been regarded as the main character through whom the narrator has recalled the events. He has been depicted as one of the other-deceiving narrators. He has been a liar to his fellow characters.

Likewise, Steve of "Nocturne" has been portrayed as an unreliable narrator. He has been considered a self-deceived narrator. Steve believed that Helen would return to him after escaping with her boyfriend. He has also deceived himself that she has afforded the expenses for his plastic operation out of her love for him. Embedded narratives have also been used throughout the narrative either to remind characters of their memories or to foreshadow what would happen in the narrative.



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الراوي غير الموثوق به والروايات المضمنة في رواية كازو إيشيغورو

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المستخلص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص تقنيي السرد للراوي غير الموثوق به والروايات المضمنة في تصوير إيشيغورو للصدقة وسعي شخصياته إلى الهوية. يمكن عرض هذا في فيلم *Never Let Me Go* (NLMG) من Ishiguro. كما سيتم تطبيقه على بعض القصص القصيرة لـ موسيقى إيشيغورو الهادئة التي ستختار منها القصص التالية "Crooner" و "Come Shine أو Come Rain" و "Nocturne". أشاد Dzhumaylo بإيشيغورو لاستخدامه الفريد "لما يسمى بخيال المدرسة الداخلية الإنجليزية" كمنصة "لعالم الخيال العلمي المرير" في NLMG. على عكس المدينة الفاضلة ، غالبًا ما تنتبأ الرواية البائسة بمستقبل إما متشائم أو مليء بالرعب من خلال ما يجري في الآونة الأخيرة. يؤكد Lochner ، "الواقع المرير الأدبي هو التحذير من التفاؤل الخاطئ والآثار المدمرة لليوتوبيا العلمية من خلال إسقاط التطورات الحالية بشكل خيالي في المستقبل" (٢٢٥).

الكلمات الافتتاحية: الراوي لا يمكن الاعتماد عليها؛ الروايات المضمنة ، البحث عن الذات ، الواقع المرير