

**Self-Deception, Guilt and Propaganda: Kazuo Ishiguro's
*Unreliable Narrators***

Shruti Reddy

Research Scholar, Govt. D.B. Girls' P.G. College, Raipur

Email: reddyshruti22@gmail.com

&

Dr. Kalpana Paul

Research Supervisor, Principal, Madanlal Sahu Govt. College Armarikala,

District- Balod, Chhattisgarh

Paper Received on 22-04-2026, Accepted on 29-05-2026

Published on 30-05-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.02.630

Abstract

Justification of the past actions and reconciliation of the difficult truths construe the unreliable shady narrators of Ishiguro whose artistic pursuits act as a lens to relocate the past and memories unforgettable. Masuji Ono, a retired painter and artist in the context of post-World War II Japan is the unreliable narrator initiating tension in the plot while he meticulously recounts his past but edits the unpleasant to portray his image as a positive figure. Memories can be manipulative when recalled and the supremacy of one's existence may rob the realistic facts and true gelifluctions of one's personality, so how far the memories and recalls can be trusted, are they unreliable and filtered? How does the mind struggle to hide the guilt of the truth untold and is it abnormal and insane? The paper attempts to study, analyze and answer these questions in the light of Ishiguro's unreliable narrators in his timeless works

Keywords: Memory, nostalgia, guilt, abstract, forgetting

One of the most prominent aspects of the writings of Kazuo Ishiguro is his use of unreliable narrators in his works who present an account of the situations and characters in the novel and at time recall their memory to reveal facts and past incidents. This aspect of Ishiguro's writings represent the core element of his literary genius which serves as a narrative trick and acts as profound tool for making a

thematic exploration of his works. The characters deliberately lie to the readers and at the same time they are lying to themselves as well by working meticulously upon their selective memory for not only deceiving the world but also themselves. Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* and Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* are immensely desperate to reconstruct the past in order to justify their dignified present.

Self-deception is a psychological process in which an individual acquires a false belief despite the evidences present against his false belief and this is done often for the motivational or emotional reasons. Selective memory helps in this process and makes an individual pick up only certain patterns and pieces of past that are relevant enough to justify his present status and dignity. Psychologists have viewed self deception and selective memory as a fundamental aspect of human psychology which act as a complex mechanism for securing one's ego and facilitate his or her social interactions.

According to biologist Robert Trivers - *Self-deception is an adaptation that evolved primarily to make us better*. Sigmund Freud views Self-deception as *a protective function of the psyche in which ego defence mechanism is achieved through psychological strategies designed to protect the ego which involved selective forgetting or biased interpretations of the events of the past*. It refuses to acknowledge truth that is apparently clear and creates an intellectual justification of unacceptable behaviour.

In case of the unreliable characters of Ishiguro it is observed that they are linked to present things in a subjective approach and reflect the fragility of memory which is a central theme of his works. The narrators are frequently faltering, omitting certain events and also subtly alter their recollections of the past in order to align with their self-image of present. In *The remains of the Day* Stevens continuously reframes his memories of Lord Darlington and his own actions to preserve his dignity and professional loyalty after thinking about the moral implications of his political activities and his personal emotional life.

Through his narration Stevens tries to show a version of events which contradict his own emotions. When Steven's father, who was also a servant at

Darlington Hall is seriously ill and is on his deathbed during a crucial International Dinner going on, then Stevens prefers to perform his duty rather than attend his father and this he later interprets in a tone of triumph hiding his emotional repression. This quite clear when he talks to Miss Kenton:

Miss Kenton was still standing out in the hall where I had first spotted her. As I emerged, she walked silently towards the staircase, a curious lack of urgency in her manner. Then she turned and said: "Mr. Stevens, I'm very sorry. Your father passed away about four minutes ago."

"I see."

She looked at her hands, then up at my face. "Mr. Stevens, I'm very sorry," she said. The she added: "I wish there was something I could say."

"There's no need, Miss Kenton."

"Dr. Meredith has not yet arrived." Then for a moment she bowed her head and a sob escaped her. But almost immediately, she resumed her composure and asked in a steady voice: "Will you come up and see him?"

"I'm very busy just now, Miss Kenton. In a little while perhaps."

"In that case, Mr. Stevens, will you permit me to close his eyes?"

"I would be most grateful if you would, Miss Kenton."

She began to climb the staircase, but I stopped her, saying: "Miss Kenton, please don't think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now."

"Of course, Mr. Stevens." (*TROTD Ishiguro*)

The words spoken by Stevens are completely cold, heartless and dismissive which are devoid of human feelings which rather express a sense of triumph, pride and dignity demonstrating the self-deception. It is well understood that the sad demise of Stevens' father was a profound personal tragedy, yet Stevens has carefully twisted the entire event into a state of professional victory and his devotion towards his job to reflect that how much he is blind to emotional concerns and aspects of his life rather than what his profession demands from him. He is cheating and deceiving

himself because somewhere deep down in his heart he has the guilt of losing his father and not be there with him during his final moments of life.

In the context of the dismissal of the two Jewish maids Stevens again tried to show his dedication towards the duty and his professionalism. Lord Darlington orders the dismissal of the two Jewish maids for which Miss Keaton protests but Stevens remains firm on his idea of professionalism.

Miss Kenton: "Does it not occur to you, Mr. Stevens, that to dismiss Ruth and Sarah on these grounds would be simply—wrong? I will not work in a house in which such things can occur."

Stevens: "Miss Kenton, I will ask you not to excite yourself and to conduct yourself in a manner befitting your position. This is a very straightforward matter. If his lordship wishes these particular contracts to be discontinued, then there is little more to be said." (*TRODT, 11*)

The above situation reflects the narrator to be unreliable as the phrases of professionalism used by Stevens to dismiss her moral outrage and his absolute idea to support the "wrong" is his unreliability in judging the moral aspect of the situation. His idea of sticking towards his duties is thoughtless and firm and he seems to be a more mechanized character rather than a humanized one who being morally bankrupt for the sake of the duty places aside all human and moral considerations. The constant denial of the intense emotional experiences of the characters makes their narrative full of gaps and contradictions because they themselves have failed to acknowledge their guilt and regretful feelings. When reading between the lines one is compelled to notice the emotional truth that the narrator himself is avoiding.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Laureate in Economics emphasizes that Self-deception is an automatic consequence of mind's shortcuts where the brain uses the heuristics or mental shortcut processes to render a quick information that result in predictable errors and lead to cognitive biases. These biases in turn create a very inaccurate and self-serving view of reality. The confirmation biases in case of the statements given by Stevens and the "reality" presented by him totally omit "The Reality" hidden behind as he selectively seeks out to recall information that confirms

his existing beliefs and completely ignore the contradictory evidence. He tries to impart positive attributes to his own character and negative attributes to the external events which is a selective memory outcome and which cannot be trusted as they self-contradict.

Kahneman worked extensively on the idea of *Two Selves* and highlighted that whenever someone tries to remember his own self, he is heavily biased so as to focus only on the peak moments of the life and end of the experiences completely neglecting the duration of the events. This idea of selective memory recall is often dictating the way one judges his past experiences and completely distorts the overall reality.

One of the most artistic figures in the novels of Ishiguro is Masuji Ono of *An Artist of the Floating World* who is a retired painter in the Post World War II of Japan. Masuji as a young artist had abandoned his Bohemian style of painting and took more interest in creation of patriotic and nationalist propaganda paintings. He wished to solve social purpose out of his art and creation. In the novel he struggles with the guilt of having contributed to a discredited ideology but his artistic choices are not mere art in fact they reflect his real self and his moral choices.

However, the tension in novel is created when Ono becomes an unreliable narrator. Though very carefully he recalls his past but he is highly selective in recalling those memorable events that portray him in a positive light. His at becomes helpless and lame to confront a painful past he had seen earlier in his life. In order to distort the narration of Ono Ishiguro makes use of certain striking symbols which help the readers to realize the unreliable nature of Ono's narration as he adds:

“An unreliable narrator is one whose account is suspect because he or she proves to have a limited knowledge of the events recounted either because his or her personal involvement in those events introduces bias, or because his or her values are in conflict with those of narrative itself” (Macey 387).

Set in the 1940s after the end of World War, Ono has been portrayed as a painter whose artistic impressions convey the propaganda of imperial regime that ruled Japan

during the Second world war. After the war the younger generation acquires a hostile attitude towards the imperial regime and its supporters. Ono is looking for a suitable groom for his daughter Noriko's marriage, but the role that was played by him as an artist start getting into the marriage issues of his daughter and so compelling situations make him visit Kuroda, one of his students whom he got arrested for going against his philosophies. Ono takes pleasure to dwell in the memories of his majestic past thereby witnessing how the younger generation is getting heavily influenced with the American Pop culture and architecture. He ends his narration with:

“Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well” (Ishiguro).

There is a Bridge of Hesitation that stands between the old town and the new town that seems to be developing day by day. The bridge is a symbolic interpretation of Ono's confused state of mind in which he is suspended between the wrongdoings of his past and the present, the bygone and the present and it is his reluctance to change and accept the new situations and new world around his to become a selective and unreliable narrator of the past, his action as a narrator is not trustworthy:

Ono is floating above the world on a bridge, while the old world of the pleasure district floats away and a new world, defined by the post-war focus on economic rebuilding, floats into view. The Bridge of Hesitation now reflects his own hesitation to let go of the world that is passing away (Levine)

Once upon a time Ono's paintings were seen as celebrated ones but with the changing times they were looked upon by the younger generation as a matter of shame, something that led the country towards a disastrous path which resulted in everlasting sufferings. Even Ono admits that what he did was ultimately harmful for the nation. In the past he even suppressed other artists and recalls suggesting authorities visit a former artist friend to invite him into a patriotic fold that resulted in his friend's at burned and artist arrested for questioning. He is having fear in his heart that his past image as a propagandist is going to harm the future of his daughter not getting married to a good family, therefore to present himself in the positive light

he struggles with the fact that all his actions made a great contribution and led his son Kenji as a martyr of war as well as the death of his wife. In his attempt of self deception he salvages his own dignity by framing his choices very well intentioned and at the same time questioning his memory to avoid displaying any kind of regret he had in his heart.

The deceptive nature of Ono in the text is implied symbolically by the smell of burning smoke. Ono reflects that the burning smoke smell is a traumatic experience for him because his father had burn down his paintings at the time when he wished to pursue his career as a painter. He expresses that he also feels the smell of burning smoke when he got one of his friends arrested for interrogation as he felt that he was engaged in unpatriotic activities. Ono has a guilt in his heart for getting his friend Kuroda arrested on account of his misinterpretations to the authorities that Kuroda was engaged in unpatriotic activities, but in reality, it was a false charge.

However, the underlying reason behind this act of Ono was very simple that Kuroda was shifting away from the teachings of Ono, and this is the same action which Ono had also done in the past with his teachers. However, Ono takes this as a treachery and hands him over to the authorities These are the reasons why the burning smell expresses trauma for Ono and so he imagines the smell whenever he finds himself in trauma:

“There’s a smell of burning around the house,” I remarked. ‘Burning?’ My mother was silent for a while, then she said: ‘No. I don’t think so. It must be your imagination, Masuji” (Ishiguro). “I also thought there was a smell of burning in the air, but when I glanced into the ash pot, there were no signs of its having been used” (Ishiguro).

On every time claims to smell burning smoke and he sees what his mind tries to show him which is his confirmation bias

How often – I continue reflecting – is it that we see what we want to see, rather than what is really before our eyes. In the trade we call this confirmation bias, and our

brains are riddled with it. We take a position on something and thereafter only see whatever confirms that position, ignoring all evidence to the contrary (Dolan).

The title of the novel using the term "*floating world*" itself reflects the themes of uncertainty and unreliability to signify the illusionary nature of Ono's narration. The floating world in reality refers to the pleasure districts of Japan highlighting aspects like momentary nature, escape and indulgence. Selective memory contributes greatly to generate a biased record of the past which supports any desired belief or self-image. Ono recalls and dwells upon memories that confirm his positive belief.

It is an act of willed blindness that tries to avoid the confrontation with a harsh truth about one's own moral complicity. The situation is same for Ono in the context of him getting Kuroda arrested by police an act of disobedience that he himself had done in his life and was not inflicted any punishment, but he punished Kuroda for the same. This is a harsh truth of his personal failure and filled with the universal human flaw the narrator Ono is unreliable in an authentic sense reflecting the common human tendency to reflect one's own history, edit it and present in a way to reflect one's own protected self-image.

Ishiguro's tricky style of writing to offer a clearly flawed and biased perspective of the narrator is actually to force the readers to actively participate in the story. In this respect the reader is required to double decode himself for interpreting the conscious words of the narrator and at the same time he has to read between the lines to understand the omissions, the subtext, the contradictions and the things that the narrator is trying to hide or suppress. The flawed memories and unreliability of his narrators is an effective tool used by Ishiguro to examine the vast cultural and ethical themes of loss and regret. The unreliable narrators of Ishiguro are often clinging to some idealistic approaches and norms but those approaches and norms seem to fail and appear as corrupt when closely analyzed in case of Ono and Stevens both in two different contexts of the idea of a "*great butler*" for Stevens and the Japanese Imperialism for Ono. In both the cases the factor of unreliability shows the cost of valuing social reputation and duty more over moral courage and personal fulfilment.

In conclusion the unreliable and self-deceiving characters of Ishiguro present a literary reflection of the psychological processes in the real world where the brain uses selective memory to lie to itself. The aspect of unreliability is sprouting out not as a deliberate attempt but the lies perform a psychological need to justify and rationalize the past choice in life that have often led to personal sacrifices, regret and complicity in moral failure.

Works Cited

- Dolan, John. *Everyone Burns*. Corsair, 2017.
- Ishiguro. *An Artist of the Floating World*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. E Book.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *An Artist of the Floating World*. New York.: Vintage International, 1989. ebook.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *In the land of memory: Kazuo Ishiguro remembers when Adam Dunn*. 27 October 2000. webpage.
- Levine, Yael. *An Artist of the Floating World April 1949*." LitCharts. 30 July 2018. 25 July 2025.
- Macey, Davi. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin Books, 2000. Print.
- Robson, David. *How self-deception allows people to lie*. 31 May 2022. website. 4 August 2025.
- Seddon, Holly. *The Unreliable Narrator: All You Need To Know*. n.d. 2 August 2025.
- West, Dave. *The Role Of Symbolism In "Never Let Me Go" By Kazuo Ishiguro*. 15 July 2021. Website. 4 August 2025.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*. Macmillan, 1927.