

**Narrating Survival: Storytelling as Psychological Reconstruction and
Narrative Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Ian
McEwan's *Atonement***

Anuja

Research Scholar, Department of English, BMU Rohtak.

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Abstract:

This paper examines storytelling as a process of psychological reconstruction in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). While existing scholarship has primarily explored these novels through posthumanism, bioethics, metafiction, ethics and trauma studies, comparatively little attention has been given to storytelling as the psychological mechanism through which traumatic memory is transformed into narrative identity. Drawing upon Jerome Bruner's narrative psychology, Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity and the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Dori Laub, this study adopts a qualitative comparative textual approach to analyse the retrospective narratives of Kathy H. and Briony Tallis. It argues that storytelling functions as an internal psychological dialogue through which fragmented memories are continually interpreted and reorganised into a coherent sense of self. The paper further demonstrates that Kathy and Briony experience different forms of trauma: existential and moral, respectively. Despite this, they employ remarkably similar narrative strategies to negotiate memory, identity, and loss. Rather than presenting storytelling as a means of redemption or complete healing, both novels portray narration as a practice of psychological survival that preserves continuity of self despite irreversible trauma. The study contributes to trauma studies, memory studies and contemporary literary criticism by foregrounding storytelling as a dynamic process of identity reconstruction rather than merely a narrative technique.

Keywords: Storytelling, Trauma, Narrative Identity, Psychological Reconstruction, Memory.

Introduction

Trauma disrupts more than the continuity of lived experience; it fractures the narratives through which individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. When overwhelming experiences resist immediate comprehension, memory

becomes fragmented, identity unstable and language seemingly inadequate to express psychological reality. In such circumstances, storytelling assumes a significance that extends beyond recollection. It becomes a cognitive and emotional process through which individuals reorganise disjointed memories, reinterpret the past and negotiate a coherent sense of self. Consequently, narratives of trauma are not merely records of suffering but acts of psychological reconstruction in which the self is continuously reimagined through memory. Contemporary trauma studies have increasingly emphasised that recovery does not depend upon erasing painful experiences but upon integrating them into meaningful narratives that allow individuals to endure irreversible loss. Storytelling, therefore, emerges not simply as a literary technique but as a fundamental mode of psychological survival.

The relationship between storytelling, memory and identity has occupied an important place within literary and psychological scholarship. Jerome Bruner argues that human beings make sense of their lives through narrative, constructing identity not as a fixed essence but as an evolving story shaped by remembered experience. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity suggests that the self is continually formed through the interpretation and reinterpretation of the past rather than through stable or immutable characteristics. These perspectives become particularly significant in trauma narratives, where the continuity of experience has been disrupted. Cathy Caruth observes that traumatic events frequently resist immediate understanding and return belatedly through fragmented memories, while Judith Herman emphasises that psychological recovery requires survivors to reconstruct coherent narratives capable of integrating traumatic experience into personal identity. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives shift attention away from trauma as an isolated event toward the narrative processes through which individuals attempt to live with its enduring consequences.

Within contemporary British fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) offer two of the most compelling explorations of memory, identity and psychological survival. Although the novels differ substantially in setting and subject matter, both are structured around retrospective narration by protagonists who revisit painful pasts in an attempt to understand themselves. Ishiguro situates Kathy H.'s narrative within a dystopian society where cloned individuals are denied autonomy and reduced to biological utility, while McEwan presents Briony Tallis's lifelong confrontation with guilt after her childhood misinterpretation irreparably alters the lives of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis. In both novels, the narrators speak from temporal distance, organizing fragmented memories into narratives that seek not to rewrite history but to interpret its psychological significance. Their storytelling reflects an ongoing dialogue between past experience and present consciousness, revealing that identity is continually reconstructed rather than permanently established.

Despite their thematic richness, the two novels have generally been examined within separate critical traditions. Scholarship on *Never Let Me Go* has largely focused on posthumanism, bioethics, cloning, medical humanities and questions of humanity under biotechnology. Critics have explored the ethical implications of cloning, the commodification of the human body and the novel's interrogation of personhood in technologically advanced societies. By contrast, *Atonement* has been discussed primarily in relation to metafiction, historiography, narrative reliability, ethical responsibility and the relationship between fiction and truth. While these approaches have generated important insights, they also reveal a significant critical tendency: storytelling is often treated as a formal narrative strategy or aesthetic device rather than as a sustained psychological process through which identity is reconstructed after trauma.

Moreover, comparative scholarship linking these novels remains limited. Although both texts have independently attracted considerable attention within trauma studies and memory studies, few comparative analyses investigate how retrospective narration functions psychologically across the two works. Existing research frequently examines trauma, memory, guilt, or identity as separate thematic concerns, yet rarely considers storytelling itself as the mechanism through which these experiences are reorganised into a coherent sense of self. Consequently, an important dimension of both novels remains comparatively underexplored. Reading *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* together creates an opportunity to examine how two distinct forms of trauma—existential trauma arising from institutional dehumanization and moral trauma arising from guilt—produce remarkably similar narrative responses. Such a comparison demonstrates that storytelling is not merely the representation of traumatic experience but the psychological activity through which narrators negotiate the relationship between memory, identity and survival.

This study therefore adopts an interdisciplinary framework that brings literary analysis into dialogue with narrative psychology and trauma theory. Drawing upon Jerome Bruner's theory of narrative psychology, Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, Cathy Caruth's theory of traumatic memory and Judith Herman's account of trauma and recovery, the paper examines storytelling as a process of psychological reconstruction. Rather than treating narration as simple recollection, it argues that storytelling functions as an internal psychological dialogue through which fragmented memories are reorganised into narrative identity. Kathy H. and Briony Tallis do not narrate merely to remember their pasts; they narrate in order to understand the relationship between their remembered selves and their present identities. Their narratives reveal that psychological survival depends not upon forgetting trauma but upon continually interpreting it through language.

Accordingly, this paper advances three interconnected arguments. First, it demonstrates that storytelling initiates psychological reconstruction by transforming fragmented experiences into meaningful narratives. Second, it argues that memory in both novels is selective, interpretative and emotionally structured, functioning as the primary medium through which narrative identity is reconstructed. Finally, it contends that storytelling ultimately enables psychological survival without promising complete healing or redemption. Neither Kathy nor Briony succeeds in overcoming trauma or recovering what has been irretrievably lost; instead, both learn to inhabit loss through the continuous act of narration. By placing *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* in comparative dialogue, this study proposes that storytelling neither erases trauma nor rewrites history. Rather, it enables individuals to negotiate the distance between their remembered selves and their present identities, transforming fragmented experience into a coherent narrative through which psychological survival becomes possible.

Literature Review

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* have attracted extensive scholarly attention, yet the two novels have generally been examined within distinct critical traditions. Existing research has generated valuable insights into trauma, memory, ethics and identity; however, comparatively little attention has been given to storytelling itself as a psychological process through which traumatic experience is reorganised into narrative identity. A review of the scholarship reveals both the richness of existing approaches and the critical space that this study seeks to address.

Critical discussions of *Never Let Me Go* have primarily centred on posthumanism, bioethics, medical humanities and the ethical implications of cloning. Scholars have explored how the novel interrogates concepts of humanity, autonomy and bodily commodification within a technologically advanced society. Many studies interpret the cloned characters as symbols of institutional exploitation, examining the ways in which scientific progress transforms human beings into objects of medical utility. Other critics have focused on Ishiguro's representation of memory and nostalgia, arguing that Hailsham functions as a symbolic space where innocence, loss and belonging converge. These readings have significantly enhanced our understanding of the novel's ethical and philosophical dimensions. Nevertheless, Kathy H.'s retrospective narration is often treated primarily as a stylistic device or a vehicle for revealing the dystopian world, rather than as an ongoing psychological practice through which she reconstructs her identity in response to trauma.

Scholarship on *Atonement* has followed a different trajectory, concentrating largely on metafiction, historiography, narrative reliability, and moral responsibility. Critics have extensively examined Briony Tallis as an unreliable narrator whose imaginative misinterpretation alters the lives of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis. Particular

attention has been devoted to the novel's self-reflexive structure, its interrogation of the relationship between fiction and truth and its ethical engagement with guilt, accountability and the limits of artistic representation. Many scholars argue that McEwan questions the authority of historical narratives by exposing fiction's capacity to reshape memory and influence moral judgment. While these studies illuminate the novel's formal complexity and ethical concerns, storytelling is frequently analysed as a narrative technique or metafictional strategy rather than as a sustained psychological process through which Briony negotiates guilt and reconstructs her moral identity.

The broader fields of trauma studies and memory studies provide important theoretical foundations for understanding both novels. Cathy Caruth's work on traumatic memory has demonstrated that trauma often returns belatedly because overwhelming experiences cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of their occurrence. Similarly, Judith Herman emphasises that recovery requires survivors to integrate traumatic experiences into coherent life narratives rather than suppress or erase them. Within narrative psychology, Jerome Bruner argues that individuals construct identity through storytelling, while Paul Ricoeur conceptualises identity as an ongoing interpretative process shaped by narrative rather than fixed personal attributes. These theoretical perspectives have profoundly influenced literary studies of trauma and memory, encouraging scholars to view narration as central to identity formation. However, many applications of these theories focus either on individual texts or on broader conceptual discussions, leaving relatively little comparative work that examines how storytelling itself functions psychologically across different literary contexts.

Comparative scholarship connecting *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* remains limited. Although both novels have been discussed independently in relation to trauma, memory and identity, few studies place them in direct dialogue through the shared framework of narrative psychology. Existing comparative research tends to emphasise themes such as loss, ethics, mortality, or remembrance, while treating storytelling primarily as a literary form rather than as the mechanism through which narrators reorganise fragmented experience into coherent identities. Consequently, the psychological function of narration remains comparatively underexplored. The distinction between existential trauma in Kathy's experience and moral trauma in Briony's experience has also received limited sustained comparative attention, despite the fact that both protagonists rely upon retrospective storytelling to negotiate their relationships with the past.

The present study addresses this critical gap by bringing *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* into comparative dialogue through the combined perspectives of trauma theory and narrative psychology. Rather than examining storytelling merely

as a structural or aesthetic feature, it investigates narration as an internal psychological dialogue through which fragmented memories are transformed into narrative identity. In doing so, the study argues that storytelling neither erases trauma nor guarantees redemption. Instead, it enables Kathy H. and Briony Tallis to preserve continuity of self despite irreversible loss, demonstrating that psychological survival depends not upon forgetting the past but upon continually interpreting it through narrative. By foregrounding storytelling as the central mechanism of psychological reconstruction, this study contributes a comparative perspective that extends existing scholarship on both novels while strengthening the interdisciplinary conversation between trauma studies, memory studies and narrative identity.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative comparative textual analysis to examine how storytelling functions as a process of psychological reconstruction in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Rather than comparing the novels solely on thematic similarities, the study investigates the psychological function of retrospective narration and the ways in which memory, trauma and identity interact within each narrative. Close reading is employed to analyse key scenes, narrative patterns and selected textual moments, with particular attention to how the protagonists use storytelling to interpret traumatic experiences and negotiate their evolving identities.

The comparative approach is especially appropriate because the two novels portray different forms of trauma while employing remarkably similar narrative strategies. Kathy H.'s experiences arise from existential trauma, produced by institutional dehumanisation and the predetermined fate of cloned individuals. In contrast, Briony Tallis experiences moral trauma, rooted in guilt, remorse and the irreversible consequences of her childhood actions. Despite these differences, both protagonists recount their lives retrospectively, repeatedly revisiting significant memories in an effort to understand themselves. The study therefore compares not only what the narrators remember but also how the act of narration itself becomes a psychological process of self-understanding.

The theoretical framework integrates narrative psychology with trauma theory. Jerome Bruner's concept of narrative psychology provides the foundation for understanding storytelling as a means through which individuals construct and organise personal identity. Complementing this perspective, Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity explains that identity is not fixed but continually reshaped through the interpretation and reinterpretation of lived experience. These theories enable the study to examine storytelling as an internal dialogue between the remembered self and the present self rather than as a simple recollection of past events.

To analyse the psychological dimensions of trauma, the study draws upon Cathy Caruth's theory of traumatic memory and Judith Herman's understanding of trauma and recovery. Caruth's concept of belatedness explains why traumatic experiences often return through fragmented memories rather than immediate comprehension, while Herman argues that psychological recovery depends upon integrating traumatic experiences into a coherent life narrative. These perspectives illuminate the narrative structures of both novels, where memories emerge through emotional association rather than chronological sequence.

By combining narrative psychology with trauma theory, this study examines storytelling not merely as a literary technique but as a psychological practice that reorganises fragmented memory into narrative identity. It argues that storytelling does not erase trauma or guarantee redemption; instead, it enables Kathy H. and Briony Tallis to preserve continuity of self despite irreversible loss. This interdisciplinary framework therefore provides a coherent basis for analysing how narrative transforms memory into a means of psychological survival.

Analysis

I. Storytelling as Psychological Reconstruction: An Internal Dialogue Between the Past and the Present Self

The retrospective narratives of Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go* and Briony Tallis in *Atonement* demonstrate that storytelling is not simply an act of remembering but a psychological dialogue between the remembered self and the present self. Both narrators recount experiences that have irrevocably shaped their identities; however, they do so not to produce objective histories but to understand the emotional significance of their pasts. Their narratives therefore function as acts of psychological reconstruction, through which fragmented experiences are reorganised into coherent identities. Jerome Bruner's theory of narrative psychology is particularly relevant here, as it suggests that individuals construct their sense of self by continually arranging lived experiences into meaningful stories. In both novels, storytelling becomes the means through which identity is negotiated rather than merely described. Kathy's narration establishes this process from the opening pages of *Never Let Me Go*. She introduces herself with the understated declaration, "My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old and I've been a carer now for over eleven years" (Ishiguro 3). The statement appears factual, yet it immediately reveals that Kathy defines herself through narration rather than through conventional social relationships or personal achievements. Almost without transition, she turns from the present to memories of Hailsham, allowing recollection to shape her identity. Importantly, her memories do not unfold chronologically. Instead, they emerge through emotional association, moving between childhood friendships, seemingly ordinary conversations and later experiences as a carer. This narrative structure reflects Bruner's argument that identity is constructed through interpretation rather than through the simple accumulation of facts. Kathy's storytelling is therefore less concerned with recording events accurately

than with preserving emotional continuity in a life whose future has always been predetermined.

Briony's narration in *Atonement* performs a similar psychological function but originates from a fundamentally different emotional condition. Whereas Kathy narrates from the perspective of existential vulnerability, Briony narrates from moral responsibility. Before the central traumatic event occurs, Briony already understands the world through stories. The narrator remarks that "The play... was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition" (McEwan 4), revealing that storytelling is her preferred means of imposing order upon experience. Yet the same imaginative impulse that enables artistic creation also contributes to her catastrophic misinterpretation of Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis. After the false accusation, storytelling no longer serves imagination alone; it becomes the medium through which Briony repeatedly confronts guilt and attempts to understand the consequences of her actions. Like Kathy, she returns continuously to decisive moments from the past, suggesting that narration is not an escape from trauma but an attempt to negotiate its enduring psychological effects.

Although the sources of their trauma differ, Kathy and Briony share a common narrative impulse. Neither narrator seeks complete historical accuracy. Kathy openly acknowledges the uncertainty of memory when she remarks, "I don't know how it was where you were..." (Ishiguro 13), inviting readers to recognise that remembrance is shaped by personal experience rather than objective certainty. Similarly, Briony's retrospective narration repeatedly questions the adequacy of memory and fiction to represent reality. In both novels, storytelling is characterised by hesitation, revision and self-reflection. Such narrative uncertainty should not be interpreted as weakness or unreliability; instead, it reflects the psychological complexity of remembering traumatic experiences. The narrators do not simply retrieve memories from the past—they reinterpret them from the perspective of the present, allowing identity to evolve through continuous reflection.

Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity offers a valuable framework for understanding this process. Ricoeur argues that identity is neither fixed nor static but develops through the stories, individuals tell about their lives. Kathy's repeated return to Hailsham and Briony's continual revisiting of the events of 1935 illustrate precisely this dynamic. Neither narrator remains psychologically identical to her younger self. Instead, the act of narration creates a dialogue between who they once were and who they have become. Kathy's memories transform childhood experiences into sources of emotional resilience, while Briony's storytelling converts lifelong guilt into ethical self-examination. In both cases, storytelling functions as an interpretative process through which fragmented experiences acquire coherence without losing their emotional complexity.

This comparison also reveals an important distinction between narration and confession. Kathy does not narrate to justify her life, nor does Briony narrate simply to seek forgiveness. Rather, both engage in storytelling because it enables them to preserve continuity between their past and present selves. The significance of narration therefore lies not in its ability to alter historical reality but in its capacity to reshape psychological understanding. Storytelling becomes an internal conversation through which memory is organised, identity is reconstructed and trauma becomes narratable without being erased.

Ultimately, *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* redefine storytelling as an ongoing psychological practice rather than a completed narrative act. Kathy and Briony survive not because they overcome trauma but because they continue to interpret it through language. Their narratives demonstrate that storytelling does not repair the past; instead, it reconstructs the self that must continue to live with the past. If storytelling initiates this process of psychological reconstruction, it does so by reorganising memory into a coherent narrative identity. Understanding that transformation requires a closer examination of memory itself and its role in shaping traumatic experience.

II. Memory, Trauma, and the Reconstruction of Narrative Identity

If storytelling initiates psychological reconstruction, memory provides the material from which that reconstruction becomes possible. In *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement*, memory is not presented as an objective record of the past but as an interpretative process shaped by emotional significance. Kathy H. and Briony Tallis do not simply recall traumatic experiences; they continually revisit and reinterpret them from the perspective of their present selves. Consequently, memory functions as a dynamic psychological activity through which fragmented experiences are reorganised into narrative identity. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and Judith Herman's account of recovery illuminate this process by demonstrating that traumatic memory resists immediate comprehension and acquires meaning only through repeated narration.

Caruth argues that trauma is characterised by belatedness—the inability to fully understand an overwhelming experience at the moment it occurs. Instead, trauma returns through recurring memories that demand continual reinterpretation. Kathy's narration exemplifies this process. Rather than recounting her childhood in chronological order, she moves fluidly between different periods of her life, allowing one memory to evoke another through emotional association. Ordinary incidents—a conversation with Ruth, Tommy's emotional outbursts, Madame's reaction to the students, or the discovery of Kathy's treasured cassette—reappear because their meanings continue to evolve. These recurring memories demonstrate that Kathy is not searching for historical accuracy; she is attempting to understand how those experiences shaped the person she has become.

A defining moment in Kathy's psychological development occurs when Miss Lucy finally reveals the students' predetermined future:

"If you're to live decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you" (Ishiguro 81).

The significance of this revelation lies not only in the information it conveys but also in its delayed psychological impact. The students hear the truth, yet they cannot immediately comprehend its emotional consequences. Kathy understands its meaning only retrospectively, as later experiences reshape her interpretation of that moment. This delayed recognition reflects Caruth's understanding of traumatic memory, where meaning emerges gradually rather than instantaneously. Storytelling therefore becomes the means through which trauma is repeatedly revisited until it can be integrated into a coherent sense of self.

Briony's memories operate through a similar psychological mechanism, although the source of trauma differs fundamentally. Her repeated return to the events of the summer of 1935 demonstrates that guilt possesses its own form of traumatic persistence. The fountain scene, the library encounter and Robbie's arrest become recurring narrative centres around which her identity is continually reorganised. Unlike Kathy, whose memories preserve emotional continuity, Briony's memories repeatedly challenge the moral assumptions of her younger self. Every act of narration becomes an attempt to understand how imagination, certainty and misunderstanding combined to produce irreversible consequences. Memory thus functions not as nostalgic recollection but as ethical self-examination.

Judith Herman argues that recovery from trauma requires survivors to construct narratives capable of integrating painful experiences into their ongoing lives. Importantly, such integration does not erase suffering; instead, it transforms fragmented memories into a coherent psychological framework. This insight is reflected in both novels. Kathy repeatedly returns to memories of Tommy and Ruth not because she wishes to escape the present but because those relationships provide emotional continuity within a life defined by loss. Similarly, Briony's continual rewriting of the past does not absolve her of guilt but enables her to confront it honestly. In both cases, memory becomes less a repository of facts than a process through which identity is continually renegotiated.

The contrasting emotional functions of memory further distinguish the two protagonists while reinforcing the paper's central argument. Kathy's memories preserve affection, companionship and belonging despite institutional dehumanisation. Even moments of pain are narrated with remarkable composure, suggesting that remembrance itself protects the emotional integrity of her identity. Briony's memories, by contrast, remain unsettled and self-critical. They repeatedly expose the gap between the child she once was and the morally reflective adult she

has become. Yet this contrast ultimately reveals a shared psychological process: both narrators use memory to negotiate the distance between their past and present selves. Memory therefore operates not as passive recollection but as an active dialogue through which identity is continually reconstructed.

The symbolic spaces within both novels further reinforce this understanding of memory. In *Never Let Me Go*, Norfolk—the place where lost things are believed to be found—becomes a metaphor for the psychological function of remembrance. Kathy and Tommy recover neither lost objects nor lost futures; instead, they recover emotional connections that sustain their sense of self. Likewise, in *Atonement*, writing itself becomes a symbolic space where Briony preserves the memory of Robbie and Cecilia despite her inability to alter their fate. In both novels, memory does not restore what has been lost; it preserves its significance within the narrator's evolving identity. Ultimately, Ishiguro and McEwan reject the assumption that remembering merely prolongs suffering. Instead, they suggest that forgetting would represent a deeper psychological loss because it would dissolve the narrative continuity upon which identity depends. Kathy's reflective recollections and Briony's confessional narrative demonstrate that memory is not an archive of completed events but an ongoing interpretative practice through which trauma becomes narratable and identity remains coherent. Yet if memory reconstructs the self, it cannot undo the irreversible realities that produced trauma in the first place. The limits of storytelling therefore become the final and most significant question, demanding an examination of whether narration offers genuine redemption or simply makes survival possible.

III. The Limits of Storytelling: Psychological Survival without Redemption

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that storytelling enables Kathy H. and Briony Tallis to reorganise traumatic memories into coherent narrative identities. Yet an important question remains: Can storytelling truly heal trauma? *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* answer this question with remarkable restraint. Neither novel presents narration as a means of overcoming suffering or recovering what has been irrevocably lost. Instead, both suggest that storytelling enables individuals to continue living with trauma without dissolving into psychological fragmentation. Narrative reconstructs the relationship between the self and the past, but it cannot alter the past itself. Storytelling therefore functions not as redemption but as a mode of psychological survival grounded in acceptance, ethical responsibility and the preservation of identity.

This distinction becomes evident in Kathy's narrative. Throughout *Never Let Me Go*, she never imagines that storytelling can change the system governing her life. Even after learning that the rumoured "deferrals" are impossible, she neither attempts heroic rebellion nor constructs fantasies of escape. Instead, her narration becomes increasingly reflective, returning to memories of Tommy, Ruth and Hailsham with emotional clarity rather than bitterness. Following Tommy's completion, Kathy

describes standing before a fence in Norfolk, imagining that everything she had lost had drifted there. The image symbolises the permanence of absence while simultaneously affirming the persistence of memory. The past cannot be reclaimed, yet it can still be narrated. Kathy's storytelling therefore preserves emotional continuity without denying irreversible loss.

Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity helps explain Kathy's quiet resilience. Ricoeur argues that identity is sustained through the ongoing interpretation of lived experience rather than through the recovery of an unbroken past. Kathy embodies this principle because she never seeks to replace painful memories with comforting illusions. Instead, she continually reorganises them into a narrative that allows her to understand who she is despite a future determined by institutional violence. Her narration neither challenges biological destiny nor promises emotional closure. Rather, it demonstrates that identity survives through interpretation even when external circumstances remain unchanged. Storytelling thus becomes an act of endurance rather than resistance, preserving the self where freedom is impossible.

Briony's narrative reaches a similar conclusion through an entirely different emotional trajectory. Whereas Kathy struggles against mortality, Briony confronts the burden of moral responsibility. Her final revelation—that Robbie and Cecilia never experienced the reunion she has described—fundamentally transforms the meaning of the novel. The happiness she grants them exists only within fiction. This disclosure is not an artistic trick but an ethical acknowledgement of storytelling's limitations. Briony recognises that narrative cannot restore lost lives or erase guilt. By exposing the fictional nature of her ending, she refuses the illusion that literature possesses the power to correct history. Instead, storytelling becomes an act of witness through which she accepts responsibility for what cannot be undone.

Dori Laub's understanding of testimony offers an illuminating perspective on this aspect of the novel. Laub argues that survivors become witnesses by narrating experiences that resist complete expression. Although Kathy and Briony occupy different moral positions, both assume the role of witnesses to their own psychological histories. Kathy bears witness to a system that denied individuality while quietly affirming the emotional lives of those it sought to reduce to biological functions. Briony, in contrast, bears witness to the consequences of her own actions, refusing to conceal the irreversible damage produced by her childhood certainty. Their narratives therefore function less as confessions seeking forgiveness than as testimonies preserving truths that might otherwise disappear into silence.

The comparison between Kathy and Briony reveals a shared understanding of storytelling's ethical and psychological limits. Kathy remembers in order to preserve human relationships threatened by institutional dehumanisation; Briony

remembers in order to confront moral responsibility that can never be fully discharged. Yet both discover that storytelling cannot erase suffering. Instead, narration transforms trauma into something that can be acknowledged without overwhelming the self. In this sense, storytelling becomes an internal dialogue through which the narrators negotiate the distance between who they once were and who they have become. The past remains irreversible, but it no longer exists as an incomprehensible rupture. Through narrative, trauma becomes integrated into an identity capable of enduring its consequences.

This insight also refines contemporary trauma theory. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma ultimately exceeds complete representation because language can never fully capture overwhelming experience. Ishiguro and McEwan do not challenge this proposition; rather, they reveal that complete representation is not the goal of storytelling. Narrative succeeds not because it perfectly reproduces traumatic experience but because it enables individuals to continue interpreting experiences that can never be entirely resolved. Kathy's calm recollections and Briony's self-critical confession illustrate that survival depends less upon achieving closure than upon sustaining the dialogue between memory and identity.

Ultimately, *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* reject conventional narratives of redemption. Neither Kathy nor Briony escapes the consequences of trauma and neither novel offers reconciliation through sentimental closure. Instead, both portray storytelling as an ongoing psychological practice that preserves continuity of self in the face of irreversible loss. Narrative cannot rewrite history, restore the dead, or remove guilt. What it can do is transform fragmented experience into a coherent understanding of the self. The enduring power of storytelling therefore lies not in its ability to heal trauma completely but in its capacity to make survival psychologically possible when healing itself remains beyond reach.

Conclusion

This comparative study has examined how storytelling functions as a process of psychological reconstruction in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. By bringing trauma theory into dialogue with narrative psychology, the paper has argued that storytelling is neither a simple recollection of the past nor merely a literary technique. Rather, it functions as an internal psychological dialogue through which fragmented memories are reorganised into narrative identity, enabling individuals to preserve continuity of self despite irreversible trauma. Through the retrospective narratives of Kathy H. and Briony Tallis, both novels demonstrate that identity is not fixed but continually reconstructed through the interpretation of remembered experience.

The comparative analysis has further shown that the two protagonists respond to different forms of trauma—existential trauma in Kathy's case and moral trauma in

Briony's—yet employ remarkably similar narrative strategies. Kathy's storytelling preserves emotional continuity in the face of institutional dehumanisation, while Briony's narration becomes an ethical engagement with guilt and responsibility. Although their experiences differ, both reveal that memory is an active psychological process rather than a passive archive of past events. Storytelling transforms traumatic experience into a coherent narrative without erasing its emotional or moral complexity.

Most importantly, this study has argued that the significance of storytelling lies not in its capacity to redeem the past but in its ability to sustain psychological survival. Neither narrator achieves complete healing, recovers what has been lost, or escapes the consequences of trauma. Instead, narration enables both women to negotiate the distance between their remembered selves and their present identities, making loss bearable without denying its permanence. In doing so, *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* challenge conventional assumptions that trauma narratives culminate in redemption or closure. Their enduring contribution lies in demonstrating that storytelling cannot rewrite history, but it can reconstruct the self that must continue to live with history. By foregrounding storytelling as an internal psychological dialogue rather than merely a narrative device, this study offers a comparative perspective that contributes to ongoing discussions in trauma studies, memory studies, narrative psychology and contemporary literary criticism.

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