

From Suppression to Narrative Reconstruction: Unreliable Narration and Trauma in The Remains of The Day and Atonement

Sultonova Lolaxon

First-year doctoral student at Namangan State University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between unreliable narration and trauma in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Although the two novels differ in historical setting, narrative structure and stylistic organization, both demonstrate how traumatic experience is mediated through memory, silence, distortion and belated confession. In Ishiguro's novel, Stevens's narration is shaped by emotional repression, professional ideology and an inability to confront personal loss and moral complicity. In McEwan's *Atonement*, Briony Tallis's narrative authority is destabilized by guilt, retrospective reconstruction and the ethical impossibility of repairing the damage caused by her childhood misinterpretation. The article argues that unreliable narration in both texts is not merely a technical device but a psychological and ethical mechanism through which trauma becomes narratable. Using narratological, psychoanalytic and comparative methods, the study shows that both novels move from suppression toward narrative reconstruction, yet neither offers complete healing. Instead, they reveal fiction as a space where memory is revised, responsibility is negotiated and the limits of testimony are exposed.

Keywords: Unreliable narration, trauma, memory, narrative reconstruction, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, *The Remains of the Day*, *Atonement*, guilt, repression.

Introduction: In contemporary British fiction, the representation of trauma is often connected with fragmented memory, delayed recognition and unstable narrative authority. Trauma resists direct expression because it is experienced not only as an event but also as an aftereffect that returns through silence, repetition and distortion. For this reason, many modern novels do not present traumatic experience through transparent narration. Instead, they construct narrators whose accounts are incomplete, self-protective or ethically compromised. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* are two significant examples of this tendency. Both novels are concerned with the burden of the past, the failure of perception and the need to reshape memory through narrative.

The Remains of the Day presents the retrospective journey of Stevens, an English butler who travels through the countryside while reflecting on his years of service at Darlington Hall. At first, his narration appears controlled, polite and rational. However, as the novel develops, it becomes clear that his account is marked by denial and emotional suppression. Stevens's loyalty to Lord Darlington, his rigid concept of dignity and his inability to acknowledge love for Miss Kenton reveal a deeper psychological conflict. His unreliability arises not from deliberate deception but from a lifetime of self-discipline that has prevented him from recognizing the moral and emotional consequences of his choices.

In *Atonement*, unreliability is organized differently. The novel begins with Briony Tallis's childhood misreading of events that leads to a false accusation against Robbie

Turner. Later, the narrative reveals that the text itself is Briony's lifelong attempt to understand and repair her guilt through fiction. Her narration is therefore shaped by retrospective knowledge, imaginative reconstruction and ethical anxiety. Unlike Stevens, Briony openly recognizes guilt, yet her reconstruction remains problematic because fiction cannot undo historical harm. Thus, both novels investigate how personal and historical trauma is narrated through partial, unstable and belated forms of memory.

The relevance of comparing these novels lies in their shared concern with the ethics of narration. Both texts ask whether telling a story can become a form of responsibility, whether memory can be trusted and whether aesthetic reconstruction can compensate for moral failure. This article argues that unreliable narration in these novels functions as a bridge between suppression and narrative reconstruction. It reveals the psychological mechanisms by which trauma is hidden, but it also becomes the means through which suppressed experience gradually enters language.

The material of the study consists of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. These novels were selected because both are retrospective narratives in which the past is not simply remembered but reconstructed under the pressure of guilt, loss and historical violence. The research uses a comparative literary method in order to identify similarities and differences in the representation of unreliable narration and trauma. The comparison focuses on narrative voice, temporal structure, memory, silence, confession and ethical responsibility.

The methodological basis of the study combines narratology and trauma theory. Narratology makes it possible to examine the position of the narrator, the organization of time, focalization and the gap between narrated events and their later interpretation. Trauma theory helps to explain why certain experiences are displaced, repeated or narrated indirectly. The study also relies on psychoanalytic concepts such as repression, denial and belatedness, since both Stevens and Briony construct their stories after a long period of emotional or moral disturbance. The analytical approach is qualitative and interpretive. The novels are read as literary structures in which form and content are closely connected: unreliability is not treated as an external defect of narration but as the very form

through which trauma becomes visible.

The analysis shows that in *The Remains of the Day* unreliable narration is primarily based on repression. Stevens speaks with precision and restraint, but his language frequently conceals more than it reveals. His repeated references to professional dignity, service and loyalty create the impression of moral certainty. Yet this certainty gradually breaks down as the reader recognizes contradictions between what Stevens says and what his memories imply. His narration avoids emotional directness. He does not openly admit grief for his father, love for Miss Kenton or responsibility for serving a politically compromised master. Instead, he transforms personal and ethical conflicts into questions of professional conduct.

Stevens's trauma is not represented through dramatic confession but through small disturbances in his controlled narrative. His memories return during the journey, often unexpectedly, and they challenge the official version of his life that he has maintained for decades. The death of his father, for example, is narrated through the language of duty rather than mourning. Stevens continues to serve guests while his father is dying, and he later interprets this as evidence of professional greatness. However, the emotional emptiness behind this interpretation reveals the cost of repression. His unreliability lies in his inability to name loss as loss. He has internalized a code of service so deeply that he mistakes emotional self-erasure for dignity.

A similar pattern appears in Stevens's recollections of Miss Kenton. Their relationship is marked by unspoken affection, missed opportunities and emotional hesitation. Stevens repeatedly frames their interactions as professional disagreements, but the reader perceives a deeper intimacy that he refuses to acknowledge. His narrative reconstructs the past in a way that protects him from confronting regret. The journey to meet Miss Kenton becomes, on the surface, a practical attempt to restore staff at Darlington Hall, but at a deeper level it is an unconscious search for emotional recognition. When Stevens finally understands that Miss Kenton has chosen another life, his narrative briefly loses its defensive structure. The moment is painful because it exposes the gap between the life he lived and the life he might have lived.

In *Atonement*, unreliable narration is connected not with emotional repression alone but with misinterpretation, guilt and authorial control. Briony Tallis's childhood imagination transforms ambiguous events into a false moral certainty. Her mistake is not merely cognitive; it is aesthetic and ethical. She imposes a narrative pattern on reality and assigns roles to others according to her immature understanding of romance, danger and innocence. Robbie becomes the villain of her imagined story, while Cecilia becomes the victim. This act of interpretation has catastrophic consequences because it turns fiction into testimony and imagination into social judgment.

The traumatic center of *Atonement* is Briony's false accusation and its effects on Robbie and Cecilia. However, the novel does not present trauma only as the suffering of the wrongly accused. It also presents trauma as the lifelong guilt of the one who caused harm. Briony's later narration is an attempt to reconstruct events, understand her error and offer symbolic compensation. Yet the final revelation that Robbie and Cecilia died before they could be reunited radically destabilizes the reader's trust. The ending shows that the happy reunion was Briony's fictional invention. Her narrative becomes both confession and illusion, both ethical effort and aesthetic manipulation.

Unlike Stevens, Briony is aware of the need for atonement, but her awareness does not guarantee moral resolution. She uses fiction to give Robbie and Cecilia the life that history denied them. This act may appear compassionate, but it also raises a serious ethical question: does the writer have the right to revise the lives of victims in order to ease personal guilt? Briony's unreliability is therefore more explicit and more self-conscious than Stevens's. She does not simply fail to understand herself; she understands too late and uses narrative to create a partial, imaginary repair. Her trauma is bound to authorship itself, because the original harm was caused by an act of false narration, and the later attempt at repair is also narrative.

Both novels demonstrate that unreliable narration is closely tied to time. Stevens and Briony narrate from a later stage of life, looking back on formative events that cannot be changed. Retrospection creates the possibility of insight, but it also reveals the limits of memory. In Ishiguro's novel, the past returns slowly

through hesitation and omission. In McEwan's novel, the past is reconstructed through layered narrative perspectives and finally revised by the author-narrator's confession. In both cases, the distance between event and narration is essential. Trauma becomes narratable only after time has passed, but this belated narration remains incomplete and ethically unstable.

The comparison of the two novels shows that unreliable narration should not be understood simply as a matter of false information. In both texts, unreliability is a symptom of trauma and a formal principle of narrative construction. Stevens's narration is unreliable because he has built his identity on suppression. His language is not intentionally dishonest; rather, it is shaped by decades of emotional discipline. He cannot narrate the truth directly because truth would destroy the values on which his life has depended. The tragedy of Stevens lies in the fact that his professional ideal has protected him from emotional chaos while also preventing him from living fully.

Briony's unreliability has a different ethical structure. As a child, she is unreliable because she confuses imagination with reality. As an adult, she is unreliable because she reconstructs reality through fiction while knowing the historical truth. Her narrative is therefore divided between confession and invention. The act of writing becomes her attempt to move from guilt to atonement, but the novel refuses to present writing as complete redemption. McEwan shows that narrative can acknowledge harm, preserve memory and create symbolic justice, yet it cannot restore the dead or erase suffering. This makes *Atonement* a deeply self-reflexive novel about the power and danger of storytelling.

The movement from suppression to narrative reconstruction operates differently in the two works. In *The Remains of the Day*, suppression is gradually weakened by memory, but reconstruction remains modest and incomplete. Stevens reaches a limited recognition of his wasted emotional life and misplaced loyalty, yet he does not fully break from his habits of restraint. The final emphasis on learning to "banter" suggests a small opening toward human warmth, but it does not cancel the losses of the past. Ishiguro's narrative is powerful precisely because it avoids dramatic catharsis. Trauma appears as the quiet ruin of

a life lived according to borrowed values.

In *Atonement*, reconstruction is more elaborate and more visibly aesthetic. Briony builds an entire narrative architecture in order to revisit and revise the past. The novel's structure itself becomes an act of memory work. However, the final section reveals the fragility of this project. Briony's reconstruction does not recover truth in a pure form; it stages the conflict between factual truth, emotional truth and fictional compensation. The reader is forced to reconsider the status of everything previously narrated. In this way, McEwan transforms unreliability into an ethical challenge: the reader must ask not only what happened but also what narration can and cannot do in relation to trauma.

Both novels also connect private trauma with historical contexts. Stevens's life is shaped by the decline of the English aristocratic order and by the political failures of the interwar period. His loyalty to Lord Darlington implicates him in a broader history of appeasement and moral blindness. Briony's story is shaped by class relations, the Second World War and the violence of institutional judgment. Robbie's fate is determined not only by Briony's accusation but also by social prejudice and wartime catastrophe. Thus, trauma in both novels is not purely individual. It emerges from the intersection of personal error, social hierarchy and historical crisis.

The ethical significance of unreliable narration in these novels lies in its ability to expose the instability of self-knowledge. Stevens and Briony both tell stories in order to live with the past. Yet their stories reveal that memory is never neutral. It selects, hides, organizes and sometimes invents. The reader must therefore become an active interpreter, detecting silences and contradictions. This interpretive process mirrors the work of trauma itself, which often appears indirectly rather than openly. In this sense, both novels make the reader experience the difficulty of approaching truth after harm has occurred.

The *Remains of the Day* and *Atonement* present unreliable narration as a central means of representing trauma. In Ishiguro's novel, unreliability grows out of emotional repression, professional ideology and the inability to confront regret. Stevens's narrative gradually reveals the hidden wounds of a life devoted

to duty at the expense of love and moral independence. In McEwan's novel, unreliability is linked to misreading, guilt and the ethically ambiguous power of fiction. Briony's narrative reconstruction attempts to repair the damage caused by her false accusation, but the novel ultimately shows that narrative cannot fully compensate for historical loss.

Both novels move from suppression toward reconstruction, yet neither offers complete restoration. Their narrators use memory and storytelling to approach painful truths, but those truths remain partial, belated and morally troubling. The comparison demonstrates that unreliable narration is not only a literary technique but also a mode of trauma representation. It allows the novels to show how individuals protect themselves from unbearable knowledge and how they later attempt to reshape the past through narrative. In doing so, Ishiguro and McEwan reveal both the necessity and the insufficiency of storytelling in the aftermath of moral and emotional injury.

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