

# Cognitive Dissonance and the Quiet Resistance: A Psychological Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

Sandhiya E.

Postgraduate in English Literature  
Independent Researcher

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**Abstract:** This study examines the psychological tension experienced by the main characters in *Never Let Me Go*, analyzing their internal conflicts through the lens of cognitive dissonance. Through Kathy's subdued narration, Ishiguro constructs an atmosphere where emotional suppression and moral uncertainty dominate.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Dissonance, Kazuo Ishiguro, Psychological Fiction, Identity, Dystopia, Kathy H., Memory, Moral Conflict.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Ishiguro, celebrated for his restrained and introspective storytelling, often focuses on memory, identity, and emotional repression in tightly controlled social environments (Mullan).

This paper explores how Ishiguro portrays cognitive dissonance through the internal struggles of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth in *Never Let Me Go*. It examines how conflicting desires and emotions—hope versus reality, identity versus function—shape their behaviors and moral responses. Drawing from Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, this study aims to show how Ishiguro's characters embody psychological tension in a world that denies them full humanity (Festinger 3).

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, introduced in 1957, explains how individuals experience psychological discomfort when they hold conflicting beliefs or values. This discomfort often leads them to modify either their beliefs or behaviors to reduce the inconsistency. In literature, this theory helps interpret characters who wrestle with moral ambiguity, identity crises, or emotional suppression. In the context of *Never Let Me Go*, this framework allows for a deeper

understanding of the characters' internal struggles as they face predetermined lives within a morally ambiguous system. Their attempts to rationalize their existence, suppress hope, or cling to illusions reflect classic symptoms of dissonance.

## III. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### ➤ Kathy H.

Kathy narrates her story with calmness and reflection, often steering away from confronting painful realities directly. Her fragmented and repetitive storytelling style mirrors her internal conflict (Ishiguro 41). Despite understanding the truth of her role as a carer and eventual donor, she continues performing her duties without protest. Her passive acceptance reflects an internal coping strategy to reconcile her limited existence with her deep emotional needs.

### ➤ Tommy

Tommy's artistic expressions and emotional reactions reflect a deep inner struggle to find meaning within the confines of his predetermined role.

### ➤ Ruth

Ruth often exhibits controlling behavior and manipulative tendencies, possibly as a way to compensate for her inner insecurity. Her final admissions and attempts to repair broken

relationships reveal her buried guilt and emotional dissonance (Ishiguro 212).

#### IV. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

Each of the three characters handles dissonance differently—Kathy with passive reflection, Tommy with emotional eruptions, and Ruth with social maneuvering. Together, they represent various human responses to psychological conflict. Their inability to rebel is not weakness but a subtle expression of humanity striving to maintain dignity.

##### ➤ *Narrative Technique and Structure*

Kathy's reflective and measured tone reveals a mind shaped by restraint. Her scattered memories, full of silences and revisions, reflect a consciousness fragmented by internal conflict and quiet grief (Wood).

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Never Let Me Go* offers a poignant psychological study of characters caught between emotional hope and existential resignation. Through the lens of cognitive dissonance, this research has shown how Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth internalize conflicting beliefs—about love, purpose, and identity—within a rigidly deterministic system. Their coping mechanisms, whether through memory, art, or role-playing, highlight the complex human need to preserve dignity even in dehumanizing circumstances.

Ishiguro's narrative technique—especially Kathy's restrained voice and reflective tone—mirrors the psychological repression central to the novel's ethical themes. The Gallery, Hailsham's philosophy, and the characters' relationships are not just narrative devices but representations of the mind's negotiation with painful truths.

Ultimately, this study affirms that *Never Let Me Go* transcends its dystopian genre to become a meditation on moral agency, emotional resilience, and the universal tension between illusion and acceptance. The novel reminds us that the struggle to remain human—even when stripped of choice—is one of literature's most enduring and necessary conversations.

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