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**Memory, Loss, and Nostalgia in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and
Atwood's *The Handmade's Tale***

*Kazuo Ishiguro'nun Beni Asla Bırakma ve Margaret Atwood'un Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü
Romanlarında Bellek, Kayıp ve Nostalji*

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Abstract

Regarding the recent literary works and theories, issues such as memory, loss, trauma, history and nostalgia have been studied owing to their historical and social significance. The publications of many books that are concerned with the subjects of memory, loss, and nostalgia have drawn attention in the last decades. From this point of view, the concepts of remembering, losing, and nostalgia are significant and functional through the works of both Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood since the construction of these themes is crucial to their fiction. Their fiction is fundamental to carrying out the interactions and interrelations among these contemporary critical conceptions. Consequently, in this study, memory, loss, and nostalgia will be examined through Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Atwood's *The Handmade's Tale* within the frame of the relationships between one another and the bodies of the narrators through these novels.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, memory, loss, nostalgia

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Memory, Loss, and Nostalgia in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Atwood's *The Handmade's Tale*

Kazuo Ishiguro'nun Beni Asla Bırakma ve Margaret Atwood'un Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü
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Öz

Son dönemdeki edebi eser ve teorilerde, bellek, kayıp, travma, tarih, nostalji gibi konular tarihsel ve toplumsal önemi çerçevesinde sık sık ele alınmaktadır. Yine, son yıllarda, bellek, kayıp ve nostalji temalarına odaklanan pek çok kitabın yayınlanması dikkat çekicidir. Bu açıdan bakıldığında hem Kazuo Ishiguro'nun hem de Margaret Atwood'un eserlerinde hatırlama, kaybetme ve nostalji kavramları önemli ve işlevseldir çünkü bu temaların kurgulanması, adı geçen yazarların eserleri için çok önemlidir. Ishiguro ve Atwood'un özellikle, bellek, kayıp ve nostalji kavramlarını birbirleri ile ilişkilendirme biçimleri eserlerinin en dikkat çekici özellikleri arasında sayılabilir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmada bellek, kayıp ve nostalji kavramları, Ishiguro'nun *Never Let Me Go* ve Atwood'un *The Handmade's Tale* adlı romanlarında, bellek, kayıp ve nostalji kavramları, başlıca karakterlerin geçmişleri, kayıpları ve bedenleri ile olan ilişkileri çerçevesinde incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Beni Asla Bırakma*, Margaret Atwood, *Damızlık Kızın Öyküsü*, bellek, kayıp, nostalji

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Introduction

Due to their historical and social importance in the preceding century, topics including memory, loss, trauma, history, and nostalgia have been studied in contemporary works. Recently, there has been increased interest in the publication of numerous works that deal with the themes of nostalgia, loss, and memory. According to this viewpoint, Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood's writings both make substantial and useful use of the ideas of remembering, losing, and nostalgia. As a result, in this study, the concepts of memory, loss and nostalgia will be explored in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Atwood's *The Handmade's Tale* within the framework of the main characters' relationships with their past, losses and bodies.

Discussion

Never Let Me Go describes a dystopian world where human clones are formed in order to donate their vital organs when they are young. The novel is narrated by Kathy that is a clone raised at Hailsham, a boarding school for donors. Kathy, the protagonist of the novel, is thirty-one, and she is about to begin her donations, and for eleven years, she has been working as a carer for clones that donate their organs. On the other hand, *The Handmade's Tale* also describes a dystopian world where fertile women are enslaved as the handmades to bear children for elite couples in the totalitarian state, the Republic of Gilead. Offred is the narrator and protagonist of the novel that is one of the handmades in Gilead. The handmades have lost all their rights and freedom, which they have during the period of pre-Gilead, and they are seen as "two legged wombs" to bear children for their commanders. Both novels are narrated in the first person point of view, and both protagonists of the novels narrate the events with flashbacks through the novels.

Concerning the issue of memory, the narrators of the novels revisit their pasts for various purposes. These purposes may contain their desires to think about their loss, their desires to forget and repress the past, or their nostalgic longings and desires to return to the past. In *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator, Kathy, revisits the past as being driven by nostalgic desire and longing to return to the past and to restore her destroyed world in the past. On the other hand, in *The Handmade's Tale*, the narrator, Offred, revisits the past in order to compare it with the future. In other words, unlike Kathy, Offred is not motivated by the nostalgic longing and desire to return to the past.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's early years at Hailsham is the central focus of the first nine chapters of the novel including a nearly idyllic picture of a happy childhood in an institution. Her narrative dwells on friendship, romance, fascination with teachers and a continuous rivalry for popularity via individual success. The students at Hailsham are slowly being made aware that they are different from other people. Hailsham manages to lodge itself in their memory as a place of happiness and innocence (Drag, 2014, p. 167). For instance, Kathy considers the period that she spent at Hailsham as "a kind of golden time" by confessing, "the earlier years—the ones I've just been telling you about—they tend to blur into each other as a kind of golden time, and when I think about them at all, even the not-so-great things, I can't help feeling a sort of glow" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 77). Regarding Hailsham as the place of origin for Kathy, she does not have a family home or any parents. The guardians of the Hailsham, particularly the institution, serve as the substitution. Kathy establishes her identity via lessons, artistic activities, discussions, and sincere communication with fellow clones, so she feels a sense of unity with other clones. Consequently, Hailsham remains as a stable point of reference and basement for ethical preferences for Kathy (Drag, 2014, p. 170). In other words, Kathy creates her identity through Hailsham, the guardians, and the fellow clones there rather than a family home or parents.

Concerning the first-person narrative towards the past, *Never Let Me Go* is based on the activity of remembering the past; its dealing with nostalgia strengthens the importance of memory. Kathy chooses the most meaningful period of her life in order to narrate and mourn for its loss. Through the perspective of thirty-one-year-old narrator, Kathy revisits her childhood and adolescence to comprehend what she could not understand at that time. Kathy's remembering refers to a complex process of reconstruction determined by her present perspective. In harmonious with the paradoxical logic of nostalgic distance, she has revisited Hailsham by recalling her memories of it; meanwhile, she has detached herself from Hailsham by placing it on an unreachable pedestal (Drag, 2014, p. 166-7). Ishiguro depicts his narrator's perspective as her revisiting memories:

I won't be a carer any more come the end of the year, and though I've got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest—to stop and think and remember. I'm sure it's at least partly to do with that, to do with preparing for the change of pace, that I've been getting this urge to order all these old memories. What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham. But I realise now just how much of what

occurred later came out of our time at Hailsham, and that's why I want first to go over these earlier memories quite carefully. (2005, p. 37)

These lines emphasize the narrator's reconstruction of her memories through her present point of view by ordering all "old memories."

The significance of memory is based upon Kathy's capacity to keep Hailsham alive and to supply her and her friends with a basis of shared experiences that set up a foreground to protect and reinforce the loosened bonds between them. Memory becomes an ultimate retreat for Kathy when she is dispossessed of everything she has valued as memory remains the only refuge that is insensitive to the bleakness (Drag, 2014, p. 178-9). Kathy expresses all her losses that have remained in her memories: "I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them. I suppose I lost Hailsham too" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 286). It is obvious that Kathy loses everything that is valuable for her; indeed, they are not concrete for Kathy physically; however, she has possessed them in her memories. She experiences her closest friends' deaths, Ruth and Tommy that become ties to Hailsham, which means a sense of loss for Kathy. Nevertheless, she values her memories that she will not lose. On the other hand, Ishiguro reveals the unreliability of the narrator through the novel while depicting the narrator's memories. While narrating the events, Kathy uses expressions such as "Maybe I am remembering it wrong" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 8) and "This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong but my memory of it" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 13). These expressions Ishiguro depicts his narrator who embraces her memories rather than repressing them; however, the narrator is aware of the possibility of being wrong owing to the unreliability and uncertainty of the memories.

Regarding *The Handmade's Tale*, Atwood depicts a totalitarian, theocratic regime that dominates the subjects by controlling time and history by means of memory. "Into the Memory Hole: Totalitarianism and Mal d'Archive in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*," Finigan proposes that *The Handmade's Tale* is centrally concerned with dominating the subjects through the control of their experience of time, memory, and history. The protagonist of the story tries to establish her own archives in defiance of the authoritarian eradication of memory and public history. Offred, the handmaid, attempts to bolster the shattered past in the diaries and journals by attending to those fossilized remains that do persist, sedimented in memory, language, and materiality. She explicitly imagines them as records for a future history

beyond the regime's control (2011, p. 435). Finigan further explains that the totalitarian regime seeks to abolish the traces of the past as fast as possible. The physical and symbolic remnants of the “time before” are either renamed or destroyed (2011, p. 438). Atwood’s narrator, Offred, who has lost her own name and past, explains these changes: “There used to be an ice-cream store, somewhere in this block. I can’t remember the name. Things can change so quickly, buildings can be torn down or turned into something else, it’s hard to keep them straight in your mind the way they used to be” (Atwood, 1998, p. 190). These lines emphasize the changes that the totalitarian regime does in order to control and suppress public history and personal memory.

In terms of the relationship between memory and loss in *The Handmade’s Tale*, the control of the totalitarian regime threatens the narrator with the total loss of personal memory. The Gilead regime’s assault on personal and social memory has formed a chasm between the unstable signifier of Offred’s memories and the signified of past reality. All kinds of symbolic and actual violent applications such as the separation of families, the seizure of photographs and other mementos, the forbidding access to nearly every form of media, the rigid supervision of any social contact, the threat of torture and disappearance inosculate to erase the connection between past and present. Offred thinks, “I try to remember if the past was exactly like this. I’m not sure, now [...] somehow the mix is different. A movie about the past is not the same as the past” (Atwood, 1998, p. 306). Besides, it is more disturbing for Offred that her loved memories that are related to her husband and her lost daughter are gradually being erased. Shockingly, Offred considers herself an erased person from the memories of others as a victim of this erosion process (Finigan, 2011, p. 441). Offred considers that time “has washed over me” and “I am only a shadow now [...] a shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become” (p. 296). In other words, the erosion process is not unilateral but mutual. The more Offred’s memories of the beloved fade away, the more she is also faded away from the memories of others.

The issue of loss is at the centre of not only Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* but also Atwood’s *The Handmade’s Tale*. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng and Kazanjian describe loss as an “ongoing and open relationship with the past” that contain “bringing its ghosts and spectres into the present” (2003, p. 3). With regard to loss, in *Writing History and Writing Trauma*, LaCabra makes a distinction among loss, absence, and lack. Absence is more abstract than loss and is “not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)” (2001, p. 49). LaCabra (2001) clarifies the relationship between absence and loss:

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalised rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (p. 46)

LaCabra further explains the contrastive relation between the indefiniteness of absence with both loss and lack's orientation towards a particular object. There is a clear distinction between the concepts of loss and lack as following: "loss is to the past, so lack is to the present" (2001, p. 49). Therefore, for both novels, it is possible to observe the categories of loss and lack towards specified objects for the narrators. Nakamura proposes, in *The Handmade's Tale*, Offred's losses transform into absence that leads her to the predicament of melancholy. Although she has clear memories of the past, she is unable to long for her past. What is traumatic to her is that she is unable to be nostalgic for her past. For instance, her husband is missing and she thinks that her daughter will not remember her. These objects of mourning have not yet been totally lost, which prevents Offred from pursuing the act of mourning (Nakamura, 2015, p. 123). On the other hand, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's losses also transform into absence that leads to impossible mourning for her. As she has clear memories of past, and unlike Offred's situation, Kathy is able to long for her past. Kathy's separation from Hailsham becomes a traumatic loss, and this separation results in the nostalgic longing to return to her idealized world and her childhood in this idealized world. This nostalgic longing gives rise to her disappointment with her present life. Her disappointment with her present life can be called as lack at the present in accordance with LaCabra's clarification.

Within the frame of the notion of nostalgia, it is a culturally derived emotion, which dates back to the seventeenth century. As opposed to basic primary emotions like anger and fear, nostalgia is a secondary emotion that includes both positive and negative feelings. It is a personal contemplation of a valued experience in the past. In addition, it is an experience, which one does not expect to live again. Thus, not only a pain of loss but also a regretful kind of pleasure accompany the contemplation. Nostalgic considerations mourn for a loss; however, they also contain the acceptance of the loss, and this acceptance makes possible a pleasurable feeling along with a kind of regret. Briefly, nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion, which is consciously constructed and can be revealed when desired (Dickenson and Erben, 2006, p. 224). In other

words, nostalgia is composed of not only negative feelings that include a pain of loss but also positive feelings that contain a reflection when wanted.

The foregrounding issue that gives rise to nostalgic longing and desire is the experience of loss although the object of longing and desire, particularly the object of nostalgia, is exposed to the idealization. Within the frame of nostalgia, in “Nostalgia and Autobiography: The Past in the Present,” Dickinson and Erben (2006) explain the relation between the loss and childhood:

The central features of nostalgic feeling are the contemplation of an experience in the past that was valued and will not return, accompanied by a mourning of loss that is less anguished than the misery of grief. There is pleasure as well as pain in this contemplation, and –importantly– there is an acceptance of the loss, sometimes nearly amounting to a sense that the loss was deserved. Almost always the loss has some connection with childhood – the loss of the contemplator’s own childhood, or, and particularly in literary evocations of nostalgia, an imagined ideal childhood. (p. 228)

Concerning the primary characteristics of nostalgic feeling, Dickinson and Erben highlight that mourning of loss, pleasure, pain, and acceptance of loss. In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy’s separation from Hailsham remains a loss, and this separation results in the nostalgic longing to return to her idealized world and her childhood in this idealized world. This nostalgic longing gives rise to not only acceptance of loss but also pleasure and pain. In *The Handmade’s Tale*, it is not observed a kind of loss that is related to an imagined childhood world or a sense of mourning for the past; moreover, Offred does not feel a sense of pleasure and pain for the past; however, Offred thinks, “We yearned for the future” (Atwood, 1998, p. 4). She mourns for the future, as nothing will be the same as the past.

With regard to the types of nostalgia, in *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym categorizes nostalgia as reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. While restorative nostalgia evokes the national past and future, reflective nostalgia evokes individual and cultural memory. In spite of their overlapping in the frames of reference, they do not overlap in their narratives and plots of identity. Restorative nostalgia is more about collective, pictorial symbols and oral culture, whereas reflective nostalgia moves toward an individual narrative, which is composed of details and memorial signs, constantly suspending homecoming. In some conditions, both can be seen in the same situations (Boym, 2001, p. 49). Regarding the kinds of nostalgia, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy’s devotion herself to look for and care for her childhood friends, healing old wounds, and strengthening the bonds of friendship may be seen as the traces of restorative nostalgia as Boym’s explanation as “a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home (2001, p.

xviii). Kathy is aware of the impossibility of the return to Hailsham that has been abolished; thus, she tries to strengthen her relationships during Hailsham years. In *The Handmade's Tale*, Offred does not try to reconstruct her lost home; on the contrary, she wants to construct a future that will not be the same as the present; this kind of nostalgia can be called as reflective nostalgia because it moves towards an individual narrative, which perpetually suspends the return to home.

One of the most prominent issues in critical explorations of nostalgic longing is the complex connection between nostalgia and memory that is one of the central points in *Never Let Me Go*. Memory is regarded as complicit in distorting the past in accordance with the desired image (Drag, 2014, p. 138). Drag further proposes that Kathy's commitment to looking for her fellows may be interpreted as a nostalgic longing for an impossible return to a place and a time that no longer exists. Her pursuing Hailsham is not only metaphorical but also literal through her vivid memory which is never far from her consciousness (2014, p. 174). Ishiguro depicts her retrospective mood:

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: "Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!" Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere [...] Not long ago I was driving through an empty stretch of Worcestershire and saw one beside a cricket ground so like ours at Hailsham I actually turned the car and went back for a second look. (2005, p. 6)

These lines emphasize Kathy's nostalgic longing and pursuing for Hailsham concerning her lively memories in spite of the fact that the return to Hailsham is impossible.

In confrontation with trauma, nostalgia is thought to divert the individual from the sustained wound and the emerging present crisis that draw their attention to fantasy and an imagined past (Su, 2005, p. 18). In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy is separated from Hailsham and her fellows, so this is a traumatic loss for her. With the influence of nostalgia, she is kept away from her wound and crisis and moves towards a fantasy world that refers to her idealized childhood. For instance, Kathy hears that Hailsham is going to close and there are plans to sell the house and grounds to a hotel chain. She says: "But what'll happen to all the students?" by thinking about "all the students who'd grown up with" her and "were now spread across the country, carers and donors, all separated now but still somehow linked by the place" they had come from

(Ishiguro, 2005, p. 212). In other words, Kathy idealized Hailham as her origin as her imagined world because it was so important for Kathy's past and identity even though she left there a long time ago.

Through *The Handmade's Tale*, Atwood makes use of the past, present, and future thanks to nature of the speculative fiction and science fiction. Concerning nature of speculative fiction and science fiction, Roberts makes a connection between history and prediction. He explains: "SF does not project us into the future; it relates to us stories about our present, and more importantly about the past that has led to this present [...] SF is a historiographic mode, a means of symbolically writing about history" (Roberts, 2000, p. 35). Roberts relates this kind of fiction with history, particularly nostalgia. Within the frame of Atwood's usage of history and prediction, Nakamura proposes, "Atwood focuses on past things and events in creating her future world, in order to make her prediction more plausible. It should be noted here that the future is something embedded in the past, and Atwood's task is to (re-)discover it, not to create it [...] such nostalgic tendency can be detected on the level of form as well as on the level of content; the past serves as a place for hope (2015, p. 112). In other words, Atwood's utilizing nostalgia by means of history is emphasized in order to create her predictions about the future of the world.

Within the frame of the relation between nostalgia and trauma in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is observed that there are two representations of nostalgia throughout the novel: forbidden nostalgia and inhibited nostalgia. Forbidden nostalgia shows how a dystopian government tries to suppress people's nostalgia, which is seen as a potential danger to power. On the other hand, when one's yearning for the past is obstructed by trauma or critical attitudes toward the past, it is known as inhibited nostalgia. The narrator's self-questioning over the yearning for the future that people once took for granted but are no longer permitted to have serves to further underline the melancholy tone. The object of nostalgia is a notion of the future rather than the specific items (Nakamura, 2015, p. 116-7). Both representations of nostalgia are observed in *The Handmade's Tale*. First, as the representation of the forbidden nostalgia, Offred's reaction shows the attitude of the regime to her past: "The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother. This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out" (Atwood, 1998, p. 62). It is obvious that the smell is nostalgic as it reminds the narrator of her memories. However, she recognizes that she must not remember that; therefore, this situation refers to the forbidden nostalgia for the

narrator. Second, Offred expresses at the beginning of the narration: “I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there [...] We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability?” (Atwood, 1998, p. 4). These lines highlight that the past and the future cannot be the same, so the narrator has strong feelings for the future which will not be the same as the past as the representation of inhibited nostalgia.

Conclusion

In the dystopian world, the solutions of the regimes are different. In *Never Let Me Go*, the regime prefers investing in scientific technologies by creating clones for organ donations. On the other hand, in *The Handmade's Tale*, the regime prefers to restore the virtue of femininity by forbidding abortion rather than investing in scientific developments. However, whatever the solutions of the regimes are, they control not only the bodies of the human clones in *Never Let Me Go* but also the female bodies in *The Handmade's Tale* by suppressing their desires, rights, and expectations. Concerning the usage of memory in the novels, it is observed that Ishiguro depicts memories as comforting and soothing for his narrator, Kathy, whereas Atwood depicts memories as discomforting and unsettling for her narrator, Offred, making a comparison between the past and present. Besides, these narrators are described as unreliable narrators by the novelists owing to their uncertainties while narrating their memories. Within the frame of the relationship between memory, loss, and body, not only Kathy but also Offred exemplify historiless bodies. With respect to Kathy's conditions, Kathy loses everything that refers to her origin such as Ruth, Tommy and Hailsham, and it is obvious that she will lose her body when she starts to donate her vital organs. In Offred's situation, she also loses everything including her body, husband, daughter, mother, money, job, and freedom in order to keep her body for reproductive purposes since she is described as “two legged womb” (Atwood, 1998, p. 176). Concerning the notion of nostalgia, *Never Let Me Go* and *The Handmade's Tale* have been examined through the types of nostalgia and the representations of nostalgia. Through the types of nostalgia, in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy's devotion herself to seek and care for her fellows, healing old wounds, and reinforcing the bonds of friendship can be seen as the characteristics of restorative nostalgia owing to the reconstruction of the lost home. In *The Handmade's Tale*, Offred does not try to reconstruct her lost home; conversely, she desires to construct future that will be different from the present; this type of nostalgia can be called as reflective nostalgia since it moves towards an individual narrative which permanently suspends the return to home.

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