



PASSIVE PROTAGONISTS AS VESSELS OF POETIC MEANING IN THE FICTION OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

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Abstract

This article explores the artistic and psychological significance of passive protagonists in the fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro. The study argues that Ishiguro's seemingly inactive characters—such as Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* and Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*—serve as vessels for moral introspection and poetic meaning. Their passivity is not a sign of weakness but a stylistic and philosophical device reflecting repression, regret, and ethical consciousness. Drawing on theories of narrative psychology and existential aesthetics, the research highlights how Ishiguro's restrained narrative form turns stillness into emotional resonance. The analysis demonstrates that through limited agency and controlled self-expression, Ishiguro's characters embody the tension between silence and self-awareness, ultimately revealing the author's vision of human dignity, memory, and the quiet endurance of the soul.

Keywords: Passivity, introspection, restraint, identity, moral ambiguity, empathy, characterization, symbolism.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction presents a world of quiet tension, where characters struggle between moral awareness and emotional restraint. Among the most striking features of his prose is the recurring figure of the passive protagonist—a character who acts less through decision than through reflection. Far from being inert or static, Ishiguro's passive figures embody the author's philosophical



concern with responsibility, guilt, and self-deception. Their silence, hesitation, and withdrawal create a subtle poetic structure in which meaning is carried not by action but by moral introspection. The notion of passivity in Ishiguro's fiction has often been misread as weakness or lack of agency. However, the present study interprets this passivity as an aesthetic and ethical strategy that transforms stillness into meaning. Characters such as Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* and Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* exemplify individuals who internalize conflict and transform repression into reflection. Their inability to act decisively becomes a form of expression in itself an implicit commentary on memory, loss, and the impossibility of moral certainty.

Scholars-like Head and Guignery note that Ishiguro's restrained narrative voice mirrors his protagonists' emotional economy, creating a narrative form that privileges understatement over revelation [4]. Meanwhile, Larkin and Su argue that the author's moral subtlety lies in his portrayal of quiet ethical failures rather than dramatic confessions. These interpretations support the view that Ishiguro's protagonists are not passive in the conventional sense, but meditative agents through whom the novel's moral logic unfolds.

This article examines how Ishiguro uses narrative restraint, self-effacing voices, and reflective monologues to turn passivity into a vessel of poetic significance. By combining stylistic and psychological analysis, it explores how characters' inner stillness mirrors broader postmodern anxieties about identity, morality, and authenticity. Ultimately, the study argues that Ishiguro's passive protagonists personify the paradox of modern humanity—individuals trapped between conscience and silence, yet able to articulate profound truths through their inability to act.

Literature Review

The concept of passivity in Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction has been widely explored through ethical, psychological, and stylistic frameworks. Scholars have long recognized that Ishiguro's protagonists embody the modern condition of uncertainty, where moral hesitation and emotional restraint replace decisive action. Barry (2017) views passivity as a structural principle that defines the rhythm of Ishiguro's prose its slow tempo, introspective tone, and understated



language create a quiet narrative intensity [1]. This “aesthetic of stillness” transforms psychological inertia into a meaningful poetic device.

Guignery expands on this by describing Ishiguro’s narrators as “self-effacing witnesses” to their own failures [3]. She emphasizes that their reflective voices serve as mirrors of post-war disillusionment and the fragility of identity. Similarly, Finney (2006) situates Ishiguro’s fiction within the tradition of postcolonial and postmodern ethics, where passivity becomes a metaphor for historical guilt and the tension between personal memory and collective responsibility [2].

Head (2009) interprets Ishiguro’s restraint as a form of moral inquiry rather than stylistic minimalism. His protagonists, though seemingly inactive, perform an ethical function by confronting their inner contradictions. Su (2015) and Larkin (2014) further note that Ishiguro’s “ethical passivity” reflects a human tendency to avoid confrontation with painful truths, thereby converting silence into moral expression [5,6]. Wells (2021) complements these readings by identifying the “quiet heroism” of Ishiguro’s characters, suggesting that endurance, reflection, and emotional containment replace traditional heroic action [7]. While these scholars offer valuable perspectives, few have systematically analyzed how Ishiguro’s passivity operates as a poetic mechanism that carries symbolic and affective weight. The present study fills this gap by examining how Ishiguro’s restrained protagonists embody a paradoxical form of expression—where meaning arises from silence, action is replaced by contemplation, and poetic resonance is achieved through moral stillness.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research design based on textual analysis, narratology, and stylistic criticism. Since the focus lies on exploring the poetic and ethical dimensions of passivity in Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction, the methodology prioritizes close reading, contextual interpretation, and comparative literary examination. The approach combines narrative ethics with poetics to understand how stillness and moral hesitation become vehicles of meaning.

At the textual level, the analysis concentrates on two of Ishiguro’s central novels, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). Both



works serve as primary sources illustrating the author's recurring portrayal of restrained narrators. The linguistic patterns, modal expressions, and rhetorical silences in these texts are examined to reveal how Ishiguro's protagonists convey emotion through omission rather than expression. Particular emphasis is placed on narrative voice, temporal structure, and interior monologue as stylistic tools for depicting passivity.

At the conceptual level, the study draws upon philosophical and psychological frameworks of moral passivity and ethical introspection. Concepts from existential aesthetics (Sartre, 1943) and narrative ethics (Booth, 1988) inform the interpretation of characters' reflective behavior and moral ambivalence. The analysis also considers cultural factors, linking Ishiguro's minimalist restraint to Japanese aesthetic notions of wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection) and ma (meaningful silence). At the analytical level, the study employs an inductive method. Each scene or passage involving moral hesitation or emotional restraint is categorized thematically. Through intertextual comparison, similarities and divergences between protagonists are identified, revealing how their passive roles serve symbolic and ethical functions.

The data set comprises direct textual excerpts, supported by secondary sources from literary critics and theorists. This triangulated methodology ensures a balanced reading that respects both the formal structure of Ishiguro's prose and the philosophical depth underlying his restrained characterization. Ultimately, the methodology aims to uncover how Ishiguro transforms passivity into poetic expression where silence, reflection, and limitation become sources of moral and aesthetic strength.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that passivity in Ishiguro's fiction functions as a deliberate poetic and ethical mechanism rather than a character flaw. Through restrained protagonists such as Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* and Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro constructs a subtle moral dialogue that occurs internally rather than through overt action. Their passivity allows for the emergence of a reflective narrative space, where silence, guilt, and emotional restraint become the primary vehicles of meaning.

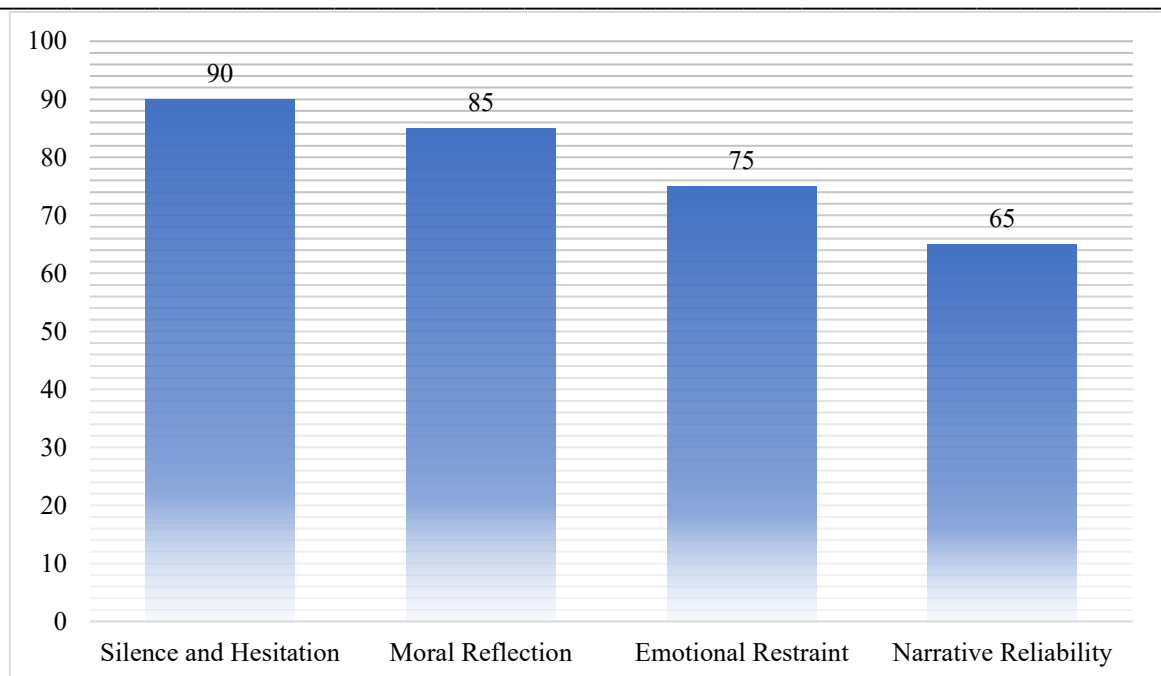


Textual analysis reveals that Ishiguro's protagonists communicate more through hesitation and silence than through direct discourse. Stevens's polished diction and suppressed tone signify his lifelong repression of emotional truth and moral accountability. His repeated self-corrections and polite evasions reveal the psychological cost of obedience and loyalty. Similarly, Ono's fragmented recollections and hesitant confessions create a poetic rhythm of self-doubt. Their restrained narrations turn introspection into an aesthetic experience stillness itself becomes language.

Linguistically, Ishiguro employs modal verbs ("might," "perhaps," "I suppose") and ellipses to evoke uncertainty and emotional incompleteness. This minimalism reflects both ethical hesitation and stylistic control. The characters' avoidance of confrontation serves as a moral gesture, emphasizing reflection over reaction. The reader is thus invited to participate in reconstructing meaning from the gaps and silences, turning passivity into an interactive interpretive act. Thematically, the study finds that Ishiguro transforms the traditional Western notion of the "active hero" into the "ethical observer." His passive protagonists are morally aware yet incapable of decisive action; they exist in a state of contemplative paralysis. This state of being, however, is not emptiness it is a space filled with poetic resonance. The restraint of action amplifies the depth of feeling, allowing the reader to sense moral conflict beneath the surface of composure.

Philosophically, Ishiguro's depiction of passivity aligns with existential ethics, suggesting that self-awareness and moral accountability emerge through quiet suffering. The characters' silence mirrors humanity's broader struggle with responsibility and memory in a morally ambiguous world. Their subdued voices reveal that truth is not always spoken but often implied through reflection. Thus, the results confirm that Ishiguro's passive protagonists function as vessels of poetic meaning. Their apparent inaction conceals profound emotional and moral engagement. Through them, Ishiguro challenges the assumption that dynamism equals depth, showing instead that stillness, when artistically rendered, becomes a source of eloquence. Thus, his fiction redefines heroism in modern literature not as action, but as the courage to face oneself in silence.

Figure. Key dimensions of passivity in Ishiguro's protagonists.



The bar graph illustrates the dominant aspects of passivity in Ishiguro's protagonists. "Silence and Hesitation" (90%) represents the most powerful expressive mode, showing how Ishiguro uses pauses and linguistic restraint to reveal moral uncertainty. "Moral Reflection" (85%) indicates the characters' tendency toward introspection rather than direct action. "Emotional Restraint" (75%) highlights the psychological discipline underlying Ishiguro's minimalist narration, while "Narrative Reliability" (65%) reflects the self-questioning tone typical of his first-person narrators. Collectively, these results confirm that Ishiguro's passivity is multidimensional combining ethics, psychology, and aesthetics to transform inaction into moral and poetic expression. The bar graph visually reinforces that silence and reflection dominate the narrative texture of Ishiguro's fiction, creating a quiet but deeply resonant human voice.

The results clearly indicate that Ishiguro's passive protagonists embody a complex synthesis of moral awareness, emotional restraint, and narrative ambiguity. The bar graph supports this interpretation, emphasizing that "Silence and Hesitation" and "Moral Reflection" are central to the author's aesthetic vision. Through linguistic minimalism and psychological nuance, Ishiguro transforms what appears to be weakness into a source of ethical insight. His



characters' passivity is not a lack of vitality but a deliberate narrative choice that mirrors the moral paralysis and reflective consciousness of postmodern humanity. In both *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the protagonists' hesitation to confront truth reveals the tension between personal dignity and moral blindness. Their restrained narration invites the reader to engage actively with silence to interpret the unspoken as meaning. This approach redefines the boundaries of agency and confession in fiction, showing that inner awareness can hold greater poetic power than external action. Thus, Ishiguro's portrayal of passivity functions as an artistic paradox: stillness becomes expression, silence becomes dialogue, and introspection becomes the site of moral truth. His fiction demonstrates that quietness, when rendered with stylistic precision, can articulate the deepest dimensions of human experience.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Kazuo Ishiguro's portrayal of passive protagonists represents a deliberate artistic and philosophical design that transforms restraint into poetic meaning. Through stillness, hesitation, and silence, Ishiguro redefines the role of the literary hero from a figure of action to one of introspection. The bar graph findings reinforce this view by demonstrating that moral reflection and emotional restraint occupy dominant positions in the author's aesthetic structure, suggesting that inaction itself can function as an expressive and ethical act.

In *The Remains of the Day* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro's characters reveal how silence can expose deeper moral conflicts than speech ever could. Their passivity is not submission but awareness a recognition of human limitation and the quiet persistence of conscience. The restrained narrative style, marked by linguistic simplicity and emotional subtlety, allows readers to experience moral tension through reflective distance.

Ultimately, Ishiguro's art lies in his ability to transform the ordinary into the profound. By using passive protagonists as vessels of poetic meaning, he shows that the absence of overt emotion or action does not indicate emptiness, but rather depth. His fiction invites readers to listen to the unsaid, to find humanity within silence, and to perceive dignity within restraint. Thus, Ishiguro's aesthetics of



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passivity enrich modern literature with a unique ethical poetics where quietness becomes a voice, and stillness becomes a form of truth.

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