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## DECONSTRUCTING UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *A PALE VIEW OF HILLS*

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**Abstract:** Unreliable narration is a recurring feature in Kazuo Ishiguro's novels, particularly in his debut work, *A Pale View of Hills*. By combining rhetorical narratology (Booth - Phelan) and deconstruction (Derrida), this paper demonstrates that unreliability is not merely a device but a central narrative strategy shaping reception and narrative ethics. Close readings of key scenes (the cable-car trip, the rope motif, the drowned kittens) map three axes - perceptual (distorted memory), evaluative (misaligned judgments), and ethical (divergence from the implied author's norms). The gap between Etsuko's telling and the implied author's horizon is produced by semantic slippage/deferment, inviting the authorial audience to co-construct meaning. Thus, unreliable narration can be understood as an open structure that both guides readers' reception and exposes the inherent limits of any attempt to fix meaning in the act of reading.

**Keywords:** *A Pale View of Hills*, deconstruction, Kazuo Ishiguro, unreliable narration

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## GIẢI CẤU TRÚC LỜI KỂ KHÔNG ĐÁNG TIN TRONG *CẢNH ĐÒI MỜ XÁM* CỦA KAZUO ISHIGURO

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**Tóm tắt:** Lời kể không đáng tin là một đặc trưng thường gặp trong các tiểu thuyết của Kazuo Ishiguro, đặc biệt là tác phẩm đầu tay của ông, *Cảnh đời mờ xám*. Bằng cách kết hợp lý thuyết tự sự học tu từ (Booth - Phelan) và giải cấu trúc (Derrida), bài viết cho thấy tính “không đáng tin” không chỉ là thủ pháp mà còn là chiến lược tự sự trung tâm chi phối cách tiếp nhận và đạo đức của người đọc. Trên cơ sở đọc sát các cảnh then chốt (sự kiện đi cáp treo, motif dây thừng, cảnh nhân chìm mèo con), người viết xác định ba bình diện tạo nên sự không đáng tin gồm: tri giác (kí ức bị bóp méo), đánh giá (lệch chuẩn nhận định), và đạo đức (trượt chuẩn mực đạo đức của tác giả hàm ẩn). Kết quả cho thấy khoảng cách giữa lời kể của Etsuko và “chân trời” của tác giả hàm ẩn được tạo bởi sự “trượt nghĩa” của ngôn ngữ, từ đó mời gọi người đọc đồng kiến tạo nghĩa. Như vậy, lời kể không đáng tin được nhìn nhận như một cấu trúc mở: vừa định hướng tiếp nhận, vừa làm lộ ra những giới hạn của mọi nỗ lực cố định hóa ý nghĩa trong quá trình đọc.

**Từ khóa:** *Cảnh đời mờ xám*, giải cấu trúc, Kazuo Ishiguro, lời kể không đáng tin

### 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. His literary works primarily revolve around issues of identity, selfhood, and memory in the age of globalization and the dominance of artificial intelligence. In addition, as a diasporic subject, Ishiguro often explores the instability of personal identity in the face of displacement and the necessity of adaptation to new environments. Within his literary career, the novel *A Pale View of Hills* serves as a formative milestone that helped establish his narrative style. Scholarly studies on this work have predominantly focused on themes of memory, gendered trauma, and postwar trauma, for instance, the studies of Matek (2018), Wong (2019), Song (2023). However, these studies have yet to approach the novel through the combined lens of deconstruction and rhetorical narratology.

By adopting such a perspective, this article aims to analyze the unreliability of the narrative voice as a rhetorical strategy embedded within the narrator's mode of telling. Through Etsuko's narrative performance, the ideal reader becomes aware of the dissonance between the narrator's message and the implied author's intended meaning. The narrator, in this case, conceals, omits, or distorts events in such a way that the act of reading turns into a puzzle-solving process. The deconstructive reading of the narrative becomes an act of dialogic reflection and interrogation. Meaning in the text is no longer treated as fixed or absolute but as a “play” of signs. Within this play, the reader becomes an active participant, an agent who interacts with the signifying system arranged by the author. However, this arrangement is not closed or determinate; rather, it remains open to slippage, contradiction, and self-subversion, thereby inviting the reader into a dynamic field of interpretive engagement.

In Vietnam, the reception of Kazuo Ishiguro's works has been reflected through articles

such as *Japanese Emigrant Literature in the Context of Globalization* (2014), *The Buried Giant* (Kazuo Ishiguro) and *The Call of Journey in Monomyth* (2018) by Nguyen Phuong Khanh, *The Heritage of Memory in Inoue Yasushi's Historical Novel Tonko and Kazuo Ishiguro's Fantasy Novel The Buried Giant* (2018) by Phan Thu Van, and *Literary Ideology in East Asian Writer's Nobel Lectures* (2019) by Bui Tran Quynh Ngoc. These studies primarily approach Ishiguro from perspectives such as interculturalism, memory, and identity in migrant literature, or the literary discourse surrounding the Nobel Prize. However, there remains a lack of studies that delve into narrative depth and the inherent instability of language in his novels. By proposing a reading based on deconstruction and rhetorical narratology, this article aims to enrich the reception of Ishiguro's work.

## 2. Literature Review

This article approaches *A Pale View of Hills* through the combined lens of rhetorical narratology and deconstruction. This combination arises from the fundamental correlation that both approaches suggest: a literary text never possesses a single, fixed, and immutable central meaning, and meaning is primarily generated in the act of reading. While deconstruction may be regarded as a theory of reading, rhetorical narratology pays close attention to the triadic relationship between the implied author, the narrator, and the audience. However, in order to uncover the meaning of the text, the reader must engage in close reading to identify linguistic elements that slip, defer, or hollow out meaning, such as semantic slippages, indeterminacies, and metaphors. It is precisely through this interpretive process that the reader begins to uncover the narrator's narrative strategy or, more accurately, the rhetorical design through which the implied author communicates meaning.

### 2.1. Unreliable Narration in Rhetorical Narratology

Rhetorical narratology is a branch of modern narratological studies that emerged in the late twentieth century. In article *A Theoretical Outline of Narrative Unreliability: The Rhetorical Stance*, Mihăeș (2012) evaluates the interrelations among the contributions of Wayne C. Booth, Seymour Chatman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and James Phelan. According to Mihăeș, Wayne C. Booth laid the groundwork for the concept of unreliable narration through the notion of the implied author. The distinction between the implied author and the narrator within a narrative serves as the theoretical basis for identifying unreliability in narrative discourse. Accordingly, when the narrator's account diverges from the norms, beliefs, or judgments of the implied author - whether in cognition, ethics, or emotional evaluation - the narration becomes unreliable.

Chatman (1978) builds upon Booth's framework and offers further refinements. Chatman argues that narrative unreliability resides not in the narrator's moral nature but in their perspective on events or the ontological status of reality itself. His view thus shifts the locus of unreliability from the narrator's character to the nature of discourse.

Rimmon-Kenan (1983) similarly locates unreliability in the mode of narration. However, she identifies the causes of unreliability in the narrator's limited knowledge, degree of involvement in the story, and their underlying value system.

Phelan (1996), one of the most prominent figures in rhetorical narratology after Booth, centers his research on character narration - that is, when the narrator is also a character within the narrative. Phelan posits that a narrative conveys two distinct messages: the narrator's message directed toward the narratee, and the implied author's message aimed at the authorial

audience. When these two communicative levels diverge, the narrative becomes unreliable. Phelan further identifies the dimensions from which narrative unreliability arises. The character - narrator performs both character functions and telling functions. The telling functions are subdivided into reporting, interpreting, evaluating, and disclosing. Unreliability occurs when one or more of these functions deviate from the standards and norms constructed by the implied author. Thus, a narrator is deemed unreliable when their acts of reporting, interpreting, or evaluating fail to align with the framework of meaning encoded by the implied author.

Mihăeș's work offers a comprehensive synthesis of studies on narrative unreliability as a rhetorical mode of textual analysis. She concludes:

“Although contested by many of his cognitivist fellows, Phelan has provided, at least theoretically, a model of narrative unreliability which links the rhetorical and the ethical, convincingly arguing that real authors shape their texts in certain ways so as to communicate values, norms, attitudes and ultimately meanings to their authorial audience.” (Mihăeș, 2012)

In *Narratology – Theory and Application*, Tran (2017) also discusses the rhetorical reading model of unreliable and deficient narration proposed by James Phelan. The author affirms: “In this model, unreliability is a function of the relationship between the implied author and the narrator, not a function of the relationship between the narrator's point of view and some purely hypothetical objective viewpoint, nor a function of the relationship between the narrator and the real reader” (Tran, 2017, p. 289).

But how does one determine the relationship between the implied author and the narrator, especially when, according to James Phelan, the implied author is “the streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text” (Phelan, 2005, p. 5). Phelan also asserts that the author or implied author is a constant and can only be inferred through “the overarching issue of how the implied author deploys the available narrative resources” (Phelan, 2005, p. 10). These narrative resources include “character, event, setting, narrative discourse, as well as techniques, forms, structures, genres, and narrative conventions” (Phelan, 1996, p. 19).

Thus, while narration may be understood as a strategy for organizing and presenting story events to affect a narratee, the use of narrative resources functions at a higher level with the aim of creating a communicative experience for the reader. In this framework, the author/implied author merely sets the epistemological and ethical horizon through the deployment of narrative resources, whereas the reader plays the active role in meaning-making. This meaning-making process will inevitably resonate with the reader's own experiences and lead to a variety of interpretations.

Therefore, Phelan neither absolutizes nor denies the significant role of the author/implied author. Clearly, the reader cannot completely escape the cognitive and moral framework established by the implied author, but neither is there perfect alignment in individual reading experiences. For instance, when reading *The Tale of Kiều*, some readers may feel both pity and admiration for Thúy Kiều, while others may regard her as overly clever and calculating. Although emotional responses to the character may differ, it is undeniable that the ethical standard established by the implied author positions Thúy Kiều as a figure who values deep emotional bonds - a moral trait in harmony with Vietnamese ethical norms.

## 2.2. Deconstruction Theory

In contrast with rhetorical narratology, deconstruction, a theory developed by Jacques

Derrida, challenges the very premise of textual reliability and semantic stability. In *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*, Barry remarks:

“So the deconstructionist practises what has been called textual harassment or oppositional reading, reading with the aim of unmasking internal contradictions or inconsistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity” (Barry, 2002, p. 69).

This is precisely the point of convergence between rhetorical narratology and deconstruction. While rhetorical narratology guides reading by identifying the disjunction between the narrator’s message and that of the implied author, deconstruction pursues a reading that seeks out textual incoherence and internal contradictions. Both theoretical frameworks are rooted in close reading. Therefore, even though Derrida famously asserts: “The writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by itself cannot dominate absolutely. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses” (Derrida, 1976, p. 158), this assertion is by no means incompatible with Phelan’s emphasis on the role of the implied author. Indeed, when Derrida insists that the writer cannot fully control the language and logic he employs, he is not denying authorial agency or the possibility of intentional communication. Rather, he seeks to underscore that every discourse is constituted by elements that exceed the writer’s absolute command. It is precisely the gap between what the writer intends to say and what the text actually articulates that opens the space for active, interrogative, and revelatory reading.

At first glance, Derrida’s assertion that the writer cannot fully control the language he employs appears to contradict rhetorical narratology’s emphasis on the controlling function of the implied author. This tension, however, arises largely from a difference in analytical levels. Derrida challenges the possibility of absolute mastery over the signifying system and the closure of meaning, whereas rhetorical narratology is concerned with forms of rhetorical and strategic control manifested in the textual organization that guides readers’ responses. The implied author, therefore, should not be understood as an omnipotent agent who governs meaning, but as a hypothetical textual construct that reflects conditional constraints on reading. Such control is necessarily limited and remains open to deconstruction, in line with Derrida’s emphasis on linguistic excess and instability. When Phelan emphasizes the distinction between the narrator and the implied author, he also acknowledges that language is never fully transparent; readers must trace the discursive traces and slippages between the narrator’s account and the value system implicitly conveyed by the text. From this, we can see that both Derrida and Phelan recognize the centrality of the reader in the construction of meaning. If Derrida advocates for a reading that uncovers instability, rupture, and internal conflict within the text, then Phelan, working from a rhetorical standpoint, demonstrates that the fissures between the narrator and the implied author open up complex layers of meaning and ethical value that the narrative seeks to communicate. Despite their terminological and methodological differences, both theories assert that the text is not a closed system, but an open entity, where meaning is always in flux, demanding that the reader engage with it actively, attentively, and imaginatively. Ethical judgment, therefore, is not conceived as the application of a fixed moral norm, but as a provisional and reader-oriented process that emerges through engagement with textual cues under conditions of semantic instability.

### **2.3. Research on Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of Hills***

In Kazuo Ishiguro’s literary trajectory, *A Pale View of Hills* is regarded as a formative work that defines his distinctive narrative style, inaugurating a series of novels deeply

concerned with memory, identity, and the fragmentation of the self. The novel has attracted significant scholarly attention from various critical perspectives. Matek (2018) focuses on the relationship between migration and trauma, illustrating how the protagonist confronts postwar memory through an indirect and fragmented narrative mode. From another angle, Wong (2019) explores the connection between memory and narrative, emphasizing the role of the first-person voice in generating semantic ambiguity and casting doubt on the truthfulness of the narration. More recently, Song (2023) have analyzed Ishiguro's debut novel from a trauma perspective. Song focuses on the traumatic experiences of female characters in the postwar context.

Overall, these studies share a common concern with the themes of memory and trauma, particularly gendered and postwar trauma, and analyze them through the lens of a nonlinear, fragmented, and unreliable narrative structure. However, there remains significant potential to extend the research through interdisciplinary approaches, for instance, by examining unreliable narration via the theoretical frameworks of rhetorical narratology and deconstruction. Such an approach would further elucidate the inherent instability of memory, narrative, and textual meaning.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employs the following research methodologies:

*Deconstructive theoretical approach:* The paper applies Derrida's framework of deconstruction - particularly the concepts of *binary opposition*, *différance*, *aporia*, and *trace* - to analyze the unreliability of the narrative voice.

*Rhetorical narratological approach:* It draws on rhetorical narratology, especially the notions of the *implied author*, *unreliable narrator*, and *unreliable narration*, to demonstrate how the narrative strategy functions as a process of constructing textual instability.

Rather than fully integrating two equivalent frameworks, this article primarily adopts rhetorical narratology as its main analytical apparatus, while drawing selectively on Derridean insights to problematize the stability of ethical and epistemological norms.

### 4. Research Findings

According to Phelan, "a character narrator is 'unreliable' when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer" (Phelan, 2005, p. 48). The recognition of this deviation between the narrator's voice and the implied author's judgment can only be discerned through the textual breach, in other words, through the internal contradictions beneath the seemingly coherent narrative surface. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the surface of the narrative does not reveal any apparent instability. The entire novel is narrated by Etsuko, a Japanese-born British woman who has recently lost her eldest daughter, Keiko. Keiko had left home and committed suicide in her room in Manchester. The story is narrated in an objective tone, devoid of expressions of grief or anguish, yet through her recollections of the past (particularly through the story of Sachiko and Mariko) the reader gradually begins to perceive the textual breach. Through the process of linguistic tracking and recognizing semantic slippage, the reader comes to identify the narrative instability and unreliability in Etsuko's voice, a narrative that simultaneously conceals and confesses her guilt in relation to her daughter's death.

#### 4.1. Perceptual Unreliability

The first dimension through which unreliable narration manifests is *perceptual unreliability*. This occurs when the character-narrator misperceives events or observes only

partial truths. Consequently, what they narrate diverges from reality. In the novel, the narrator Etsuko faces the loss of her eldest daughter, Keiko. The narrative never directly depicts Etsuko's grief; however, through her mode of storytelling, the reader can detect that she is enduring profound psychological trauma, not only personal trauma (stemming from Keiko's death and Etsuko's persistent self-blame), but also collective trauma (as a survivor of the atomic bombing in Nagasaki). Memory in this novel is recounted through a character deeply marked by trauma and sorrow. As such, the memories reconstructed are not entirely intact nor congruent with actual events, as Etsuko herself admits:

"It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 42); "Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 176).

Assmann has similarly remarked on the unreliability of memory:

"Individual memory is constrained by neurological and cultural barriers, such as attention and bias. It is also shaped by psychological pressures, which lead painful or incompatible memories to be repressed, transformed, overwritten, or even erased." (Assmann, 2008, p. 97).

Etsuko's recollection of the past does not stem from a deliberate act of consciousness; rather, it is triggered by external stimulus, the death of Keiko. Thus, the process of remembering is subjected to both neurological and psychological influences. Etsuko constantly conceals her true emotions, both in her inner thoughts and in conversations. From the very beginning, she does not narrate Keiko's death directly. Instead, the story opens with the name Niki - her younger daughter:

"Niki, the name we finally gave our younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I - perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past - insisted on an English one" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 3).

From the outset of her narration, Etsuko demonstrates an apparent avoidance of the past and its associated pain - "a selfish desire not to be reminded of the past.". But why this desire to forget, if not because the past is bound to suffering and haunting memories? If this trauma had begun long before Niki's birth, then the subsequent trauma Etsuko endures is reactivated during the five days of Niki's visit. Throughout those five days, the past is retold as a recursive journey through trauma and an attempt at comprehension. Keiko's death unintentionally reawakens a dormant past, and at this point, the confluence of present pain (Keiko's suicide) and past trauma (postwar devastation) renders the memory increasingly unreliable—distorted, overwritten, or even erasing key episodes. This displacement of memory in Etsuko's narrative is most vividly illustrated through the story of Sachiko and Mariko:

"I have no great wish to dwell on Keiko now, it brings me little comfort. I only mention her here because those were the circumstances around Niki's visit this April, and because it was during that visit I remembered Sachiko again after all this time. I never knew Sachiko well" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 6).

Although she denies having been truly close to Sachiko, one may still wonder: why does Etsuko remember her at all? The narrator never explicitly explains this, but through the way the characters and their circumstances are constructed, the reader can infer the reason. Etsuko and

Sachiko share many similarities: both are victims of war, both have introverted daughters, and both are involved with foreign men. If Etsuko lost her lover and her entire family during the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Sachiko too lost her husband and her parents. If Etsuko's daughter (Keiko) preferred to remain alone in her room, Sachiko's daughter (Mariko) also avoided playing with other children. If Etsuko eventually moved to England with her second husband, Mr. Sheringham, Sachiko also planned to emigrate to America with her boyfriend Frank. It is precisely due to these parallels that Etsuko's narration about Sachiko often evokes in the reader an impression that she is in fact talking about herself. In Chapter 1, Etsuko recounts a moment when two neighborhood women commented on Sachiko, who had recently moved to their village. Both described her as "unfriendly". The word "unfriendly" appears three times. Following Derrida's notion of *différance*, while the term may appear consistent in form, its meaning shifts with each instance. In the first two occurrences, the word clearly refers to Sachiko - the first expressing a general impression, the second reinforcing the women's disapproval of her demeanor. But in the third usage, the slippage in meaning becomes evident as the subject of "unfriendly" subtly shifts from Sachiko to Etsuko herself:

"Now I do not doubt that amongst those women I lived with then, there were those who had suffered, those with sad and terrible memories. But to watch them each day, busily involved with their husbands and their children, I found this hard to believe - that their lives had ever held the tragedies and nightmares of wartime.

It was never my intention to appear unfriendly, but it was probably true that I made no special effort to seem otherwise, for at that point in my life, I was still wishing to be left alone." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 8).

The above passage may initially seem like Etsuko attempting to justify Sachiko's aloofness. However, the sudden shift in narrative focus - from talking about Sachiko to using the first-person pronoun - reveals that Etsuko is, in fact, speaking about herself. While one might explain this shift as a projection - Etsuko sees herself in Sachiko - the lack of clear differentiation between observation and self-disclosure sows doubt in the reader's mind. Who, then, is truly being described as "unfriendly"? Sachiko or Etsuko? This ambiguity, once planted, continues to haunt the reader throughout the novel, especially as Etsuko reveals more about herself - often without being fully conscious of doing so.

The second detail that triggers suspicion in the reader is the trip to Mount Inasa. In Etsuko's recollection of the past, she describes going there with Sachiko and Mariko. The three ride the cable-cars together, wait at the station, and their day is recounted with remarkable precision and emotional depth. She even recalls "It is, I suppose, one of the better memories I have from those times." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 112). However, near the end of the novel, in a conversation with Niki in the present, Etsuko suddenly says: "Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 211). This utterance, although seemingly a momentary slip, inadvertently reveals that the trip to Mount Inasa might not have taken place with Sachiko and Mariko, as previously recounted in her memory, but was in fact a memory shared between Etsuko and her own daughter - Keiko. This rupture is not simply a lapse in recollection but serves as a crucial clue to the narrative structure's unreliability in *A Pale View of Hills*. Etsuko's act of attributing memories to others - or obscuring her own identity within the narrative - compels the reader to re-evaluate the relationship between Etsuko and Sachiko, between Keiko and Mariko. Could it be that the character Sachiko is merely a metonymic projection of Etsuko's past? Could the painful memories narrated through the figure of "another" be a way of avoiding direct confrontation with her own guilt and trauma?



By subtly creating such narrative slippages, Kazuo Ishiguro instills in the reader a profound sense of unease, not because of what is narrated, but because of the gap between what is told and what is withheld. This is precisely the art of unreliable narration that Ishiguro masterfully employs, producing a narrative space where memory, selfhood, and truth become entangled. Etsuko's unreliability as a narrator is further underscored in the scene where she comforts and advises "the child", a figure implicitly understood to be Mariko. However, upon closer inspection of the tone, attitude, and pronoun usage in the conversation, it becomes apparent that this is less a detached recollection of someone else and more an internal dialogue - a recollected conversation between Etsuko and her daughter Keiko. Throughout the exchange, the narrator avoids naming Mariko directly, instead referring to her only as "a little girl" or "the child." The name "Mariko" appears only at the end of the episode, in an ambiguous, imagistic sentence: "I thought I could see Mariko running along the riverbank..." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 196) - a fleeting presence, unconfirmed. This avoidance of naming suggests a deliberate distancing, as though Etsuko is consciously maintaining a veil between actual memory and narrated memory.

Notably, the line "If you don't like it over there, we'll come straight back" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 195) is not a generic reassurance. The use of the pronoun *we* rather than *you* implies a promise of shared fate and mutual commitment, something unlikely between a mother and another's child (Mariko), but deeply resonant in the context of a mother-daughter relationship, particularly between Etsuko and Keiko. The promise "we will come back if you don't like it there" carries emotional weight, reflecting a profound sense of guilt and regret that Etsuko may have harbored ever since moving her daughter from Japan to England, a decision that may have contributed to Keiko's eventual tragedy.

Therefore, this narrative moment reflects not only an unconscious effort to remember but also a simultaneous effort to conceal. Etsuko seems unable to confront the past directly and instead narrates it through the figure of "another." In this ambiguity, Etsuko's narration becomes unreliable - not because she deliberately seeks to deceive the reader, but because she herself cannot - or dares not - tell the truth transparently. Within rhetorical narratology, unreliable narration may be read as a mode of narrative control that simultaneously reveals its own limitations when confronted with distressing memory.

#### **4.2. Evaluative Unreliability**

Evaluative unreliability refers to a phenomenon in which the narrator provides questionable assessments and judgments. As Phelan defines: "A character narrator is evaluatively unreliable when he or she offers judgments about characters, actions, or events that significantly diverge from the judgments the implied author invites the audience to make." (Phelan, 2005, p. 50). To recognize this "significant divergence" between the narrator's evaluative stance and the implied author's judgments, the reader must engage in a close linguistic tracing to uncover the textual gaps or breach.

For instance, when evaluating Mrs. Fujiwara, Etsuko once states: "Mrs. Fujiwara always tells me how important it is to keep looking forward. And she's right. If people didn't do that, then all this" - I pointed again at the view - "all this would still be rubble." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 121). However, many details throughout the novel suggest that Mrs. Fujiwara may not fully align with the characterization Etsuko offers. In the past, Etsuko meets Mrs. Fujiwara on three occasions, and each time she receives advice from her. The first time, when Etsuko visits Sachiko - who is then working as a maid for Mrs. Fujiwara - Mrs. Fujiwara recounts a story about a young couple visiting a cemetery and comments: "They should be thinking about the future" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 22). The second meeting occurs within a dialogue between Etsuko

and Sachiko about the war; this conversation appears to be inserted into the narrative and may not fit chronologically - perhaps it is a moment that Etsuko vividly recalls and finds particularly impressionable. During this second encounter, Mrs. Fujiwara remarks: "We've all had to put things behind us" (p. 82), and "You've everything to look forward to now, Etsuko" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 83). In the third meeting, Mrs. Fujiwara converses only with Mr. Otagawa, Etsuko's father-in-law. What Etsuko appears to remember most about Mrs. Fujiwara are her repeated exhortations to "put things behind us" and to "look forward". However, attentive readers may notice a significant omission in Mrs. Fujiwara's advice: she never speaks of the present. She does not encourage Etsuko to recognize the value of the current moment, nor does she affirm that the present life is fulfilling or sufficient. This absence creates a crucial gap in what initially appears to be hopeful counsel. If the present offers nothing to hold onto, then "looking toward the future" becomes less a hopeful orientation than a deferment of pain - a palliative illusion. Notably, in all three encounters between Etsuko and Mrs. Fujiwara, the latter brings up the past - despite her overt emphasis on "looking forward". In the first meeting, she recalls a young couple visiting a cemetery to mourn their relatives lost in the war. In the second, as she picks up Etsuko's train of thought, she confesses: "Like you say, in the mornings, just as you wake, it can catch you unawares. I often wake up thinking I'll have to hurry and get breakfast ready for them all." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 83) - a poignant image that reveals how the past continues to govern her subconscious. In the third encounter, during her conversation with Mr. Otagawa, Mrs. Fujiwara again refers to past memories. Thus, her exhortations to "look forward" do not originate from someone who has truly overcome loss, but rather from someone still living with it - attempting either to suppress or disguise it. This suggests that Etsuko's positive assessment of Mrs. Fujiwara - as a morally uplifting figure who supports others emotionally - is not entirely reliable. Mrs. Fujiwara's seemingly optimistic advice lacks depth and appears to sidestep the present - a common rhetorical strategy in postwar culture, where unspoken trauma is often silenced by slogans such as "we must move forward".

Etsuko's misjudgment arises from her tendency to project her personal experience onto others. Although she outwardly tries to maintain a cheerful and content façade, both Mrs. Fujiwara, Sachiko, and Mr. Ogata seem to perceive the unease and grief that still weigh heavily on her. Etsuko has not truly overcome the trauma inflicted by war - especially the pain of losing loved ones. These psychological wounds manifest in her behaviors and routines: her inability to play the violin (as it is tied to sleepless nights when she was first adopted by Mr. Ogata); her habitual sitting by the window, gazing toward the pale hills in the distance; her frequent talk of the future and of "leaving the past behind", while secretly keeping old letters and photographs of family members at the bottom of a drawer - a place she rarely opens, yet cannot bring herself to empty.

A clear manifestation of evaluative unreliability can be observed in the conversation between Etsuko and Niki at the end of Chapter 11. When recalling the fact that her father-in-law, Mr. Ogata, did not live with her and her husband after their marriage, Etsuko initially expresses her agreement with the traditional Japanese way of life: "On the contrary, Niki. I would have been happy if he'd lived with us. Besides, he was a widower. It's not a bad thing at all, the old Japanese way" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 205). She asserts that she was genuinely fond of Mr. Ogata and supported the idea of extended family living arrangements in line with Japanese tradition. However, when Niki expresses skepticism and challenges this view, Etsuko laughs and concedes: "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I was relieved he didn't come to live with us. I don't remember now" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 205). This abrupt shift in tone and statement reveals a fundamental inconsistency in Etsuko's evaluation. Her simultaneous affirmation of affection and tacit admission of relief at not having to cohabit with Mr. Ogata is a hallmark of evaluative

unreliability. The phrase “I don’t remember now” serves not merely as a vague excuse for evasion but also suggests that her memory is shaped by psychological mechanisms of denial and guilt - a manifestation of semantic instability, or *différance*, within the narrative voice. This contradiction becomes even more evident when juxtaposed with Etsuko’s earlier recollections of Mr. Ogata. On the surface, she consistently refers to him as a teacher, signaling profound respect and gratitude, as he had taken her in after the war when she had lost all her family. Yet, the way she reconstructs his character portrays him as a deeply conservative figure - one who embodies patriarchal authority and rigid traditionalism. He harshly criticizes his former student, Shigeo Matsuda, for publicly denouncing the old educational system, expresses bewilderment at a married couple’s political disagreement, and, most disturbingly, fails to see any problem in a husband beating his wife with a golf club - his only surprise being that the wife dared to disobey her husband. These reactions reflect a value system that Etsuko, though outwardly deferential, does not entirely endorse. In another instance, she considers advising Jiro to speak openly with Mr. Ogata, but ultimately refrains, knowing that her suggestion would not be taken seriously. This suggests that Etsuko does not entirely align herself with the value system represented by Jiro and Mr. Ogata, even though she appears outwardly agreeable. While her narrative maintains a tone of reverence, the very selection of details and nuances in her storytelling inadvertently reveal her underlying doubts, even aversion, toward such conservative attitudes. Thus, although Etsuko appears to evaluate Mr. Ogata as a respectable and honorable figure, the structure of her narration exposes a dissonance between her explicit judgments and her implicit feelings.

The dissonance between Etsuko’s judgments as a character narrator and the implicit moral stance of the implied author is evident in how readers, through close reading of dialogue and context, can detect the one-sidedness of Etsuko’s perspective. Her failure to recognize - or refusal to interrogate - the evasiveness in Mrs. Fujiwara’s advice mirrors her own avoidance of painful memories and emotions. It is a clear case of *evaluative unreliability*, wherein the narrator’s misjudgments serve less to obscure the truth from the reader than to reveal the fragility of her inner world.

#### 4.3. Ethical Unreliability

Although James Phelan does not explicitly define the term *ethical unreliability* as a distinct category in *Living to Tell About It* (2005), his triadic model for evaluating narrative reliability - comprising the axes of reporting, interpreting, and evaluating - suggests that ethical judgment plays a central role in the third axis. Specifically, when a narrator makes moral judgments about actions or characters that significantly deviate from the evaluative framework the implied author invites the reader to share, such moments may be considered manifestations of *ethical unreliability*. In other words, ethical unreliability can be regarded as a specific subset of *evaluative unreliability*, wherein the divergence lies not merely in aesthetic or emotional judgments but in a deeper, moral dimension.

In *A Pale View of Hills*, one of the most striking instances of ethical unreliability appears in Etsuko’s recollection of Sachiko drowning a box of kittens:

“She put the kitten into the water and held it there. She remained like that for some moments, staring into the water, both hands beneath the surface. She was wearing a casual summer kimono, and the corners of each sleeve touched the water.” (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 189).

This act, though foreshadowed earlier by Sachiko’s story of a woman during the war

who drowned her child: “Well, she brought her arms out of the canal and showed us what she’d been holding under the water. It was a baby.” (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 86). Death in the novel is presented through a series of haunting and morally ambiguous images: Keiko’s suicide by hanging, the woman who slit her throat after killing her baby, the unexplained murders of children, and the kittens drowned in a vegetable crate. These deaths are rendered both directly and metaphorically, contributing to the novel’s atmosphere of quiet moral anguish and ethical turbulence. A particularly resonant symbol appears in the recurring detail of the rope - first introduced when Etsuko searches for Mariko:

“Why are you holding that?” she asked.

“This? It just caught around my sandal, that’s all.”

“Why are you holding it?”

“I told you. It caught around my foot. What’s wrong with you?” (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 173).

This rope is not merely an incidental object. Its recurrence in two separate scenes, with identical language and Mariko’s repeated suspicion, signals an unconscious trauma haunting Etsuko. Her statement - “*I’m not going to hurt you*” - functions as both an assurance to Mariko and a defense to herself, a denial of moral responsibility for Keiko’s death. The rope, as a symbol of bondage and guilt, crystallizes the moral injury that Etsuko cannot transcend. Sachiko’s act of killing the kittens clearly violates normative ethics. Yet Etsuko, narrating through the proxy of Sachiko, neither justifies nor outright condemns the act. Instead, she lets it emerge silently, repetitively, and hauntingly - serving as a form of self-incrimination. While Etsuko occasionally attempts to rationalize her decisions - to “look toward the future,” to “do it for her daughter,” to “pursue a different life” - the narrative never suggests that she truly forgives herself. This duality reflects the essence of *ethical unreliability*: the narrator not only exhibits morally questionable judgment, but also suffers internally under the weight of that very judgment.

In the present narrative thread, Etsuko once asserts: “My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko’s interests very much at heart. There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again” (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 99). However, from a deconstructive perspective, the reader can discern two clear manifestations of the concept of *différance* in this statement.

The first manifestation lies in the phrase “kept Keiko’s interests very much at heart”. On the surface, this is a moral self-justification - suggesting that all of Etsuko’s actions were motivated by her daughter’s well-being. Yet when considered within the broader discursive context, the meaning of this phrase begins to slide from stability. In Chapter 6, Niki - Etsuko’s second daughter - mentions that her friend greatly admires Etsuko for courageously escaping the trap of marriage and child-rearing: “get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they’re just miserable” (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 98). From Niki’s perspective, Etsuko’s decision to leave Japan was not an act of maternal sacrifice, but a personal act of liberation. Even Etsuko herself is not entirely consistent: while she reacts sharply to Niki’s assertion (perhaps because she does not want to admit her own selfishness), she also concedes that Jiro - her former husband - was not as terrible as Niki portrays him, and in fact was a good father to Keiko. This inner contradiction becomes more apparent when we juxtapose two of Etsuko’s statements: she acknowledges that she “never pretended Keiko would not miss him” - an admission that her daughter would inevitably suffer from the separation - yet she simultaneously insists that leaving Japan was “justifiable” and “in Keiko’s best interests”. This inconsistency cannot be resolved through conventional logic, but rather must be understood as a manifestation of *différance* - where meaning is never fixed, but constantly deferred, shaped by unstable contexts, fragmented

emotions, and distorted memory. The fissure in Etsuko's narration reflects a collapse in moral cognition: she is trapped between the need to justify her past and the guilt over its consequences. This internal tension produces a language that is both unreliable and psychologically resonant.

The second manifestation of *différance* lies in the sentence: "There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again" (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 99). On the surface, this is a negation of the value of revisiting the past. However, within the novel's overall narrative structure, this statement becomes unstable. In the flashback sequences concerning Sachiko - a character who shares striking similarities with Etsuko and can be read as her mirrored self - readers repeatedly encounter Sachiko justifying her decision to emigrate to America "for Mariko". This repetition indicates that Etsuko, through the story of Sachiko, is in fact unable to forget the past, nor the true motivations behind her own actions. Her refusal to "go over such matters again" thus becomes a site of haunting, a psychological defense mechanism against painful memory - further reinforcing the instability of language and opening up a space for deconstructive reading.

The novel ends in a seemingly tranquil moment - with a smile and a gentle wave: "When she reached the gate, Niki glanced back and seemed surprised to find me still standing at the door. I smiled and waved to her." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 207). Etsuko's contemplation of selling the house - once a repository of memories with Keiko - signals her continuing struggle with trauma. Yet even this intention is later hedged in ambiguity: "I suppose so. It was just an idea, Niki, that's all." (Ishiguro, 1982, p. 208). The phrase "*just an idea*" illustrates the slippage of will, as if Etsuko can commit to nothing - neither the present nor a decisive severance from the past.

Thus, *A Pale View of Hills* is not merely a story about memory and the past, but a discourse on conscience, in which the narrator - though incapable of confession - reveals ethical fissures through the very structure of unreliable narration. In this space, the reader is not invited to judge Etsuko, but to confront the tragedy of human existence: when no choice can be wholly right, moral misalignment is no longer a verdict but a scar of survival.

#### 4.4. Discussion

Thus, by approaching the three levels of unreliability in *A Pale View of Hills* from a deconstructive perspective, this article has revealed the internal contradictions of the text itself as well as the infinite interpretative potential inherent in the reading process. Whether Etsuko truly overcomes her psychological trauma does not lie within a definitive answer, but rather depends on how the reader engages with the text. Linguistic traces continuously shift in meaning across different contexts, and the reader is ultimately unable to restore any fixed, immutable context for those linguistic elements. Therefore, as Derrida asserted in *Living on: Borderlines*, although the text is not directed toward a specific reader, and its author no longer exists, the process of deconstructing narrative is simultaneously the process through which the text continues to live.

In the context of contemporary literary criticism in Vietnam, engaging with foreign literary works through modern theoretical frameworks such as deconstruction and rhetorical narratology offers promising potential for research, while also bringing domestic criticism closer to global academic discourse. As stated in the *Introduction*, studies on Kazuo Ishiguro in Vietnam have mainly approached his works thematically or from an intercultural perspective, and very few of his novels have been selected as subjects of in-depth analysis. Meanwhile, Ishiguro is an author widely recognized around the world and one who poses significant challenges to various modern theoretical approaches. These observations point to a certain gap

in Vietnamese academic research, especially in terms of deconstructive readings. Therefore, promoting interpretative approaches that question the internal contradictions of the text will be a necessary step toward enriching the current landscape of literary criticism in Vietnam.

## 5. Conclusions

From the combined perspective of rhetorical narratology and deconstruction, this paper demonstrates that unreliable narration in *A Pale View of Hills* is not merely an artistic device but a central narrative strategy through which Kazuo Ishiguro constructs a linguistically unstable space - a space marked by contradictions where memory, selfhood, and morality are persistently interrogated and deconstructed. Within this ambiguous linguistic terrain, the narrator emerges as a tragic figure - caught between the urge to recount and the inability to confess, between a longing for redemption and a haunting sense of guilt. The three modes of unreliability (perceptual, evaluative, and ethical) are not discrete categories but are intricately interwoven, rendering the narrative a site of semantic instability and incessant slippage of meaning. In this light, Ishiguro's novel is not an attempt to recount a truth, but to reveal the impossibility of recounting it. In such a world, the character does not lie; she simply cannot be truthful. The narrator does not deceive; she merely fails to govern the language and memory that constitute her narrative. Thus, unreliable narration functions not only as a storytelling technique but also as a self-fracturing structure that unfolds within the act of reading itself.

## Declaration of AI Use

The author affirms that AI and AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT 4.0 was used for translation support and for grammar and spelling checks during the revision process. The author has carefully reviewed and edited all AI-assisted content to ensure its accuracy, originality, and adherence to ethical guidelines. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript and affirms that the use of AI tools has not compromised the scientific integrity, originality, or ethical conduct of the research. No AI tool was used to generate, fabricate, or falsify research data or results. No confidential or proprietary information was entered into any public AI model.

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