

Writing by Withholding: Omission as a Stylistic Strategy in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro and J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract

In the modern fiction, style restraint and economy of narrative have become more and more popular as alternatives to expressive extravagance, in which the narrative foregrounds meaning, instead of making it by means of articulation. In this regard, Kazuo Ishiguro and J. M. Coetzee novels provide a rather promising location in case of exploring the role of withheld narration of literary meaning. This research paper will mainly explore the omission as a planned stylistic device of a few novels by Ishiguro and Coetzee by arguing that narrative gaps, ellipses and understatement of emotions are not thematic silences but formal devices of meaning-making. The article attempts to bridge a gap that is vital in comparative stylistics by moving the focus away peculiar to ethical or political interpretation to sentence-level and narrator withholding. It is based on stylistics and narratology, mostly relying on the theory of narrative discourse presented by Gerard Genette and the notion of readerly indeterminacy presented by Wolfgang Iser, as well as the achievements of modern stylistic criticism. Methodologically, the analysis is done through close textual analysis of *The remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* by Ishiguro and *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee, which will be done in terms of narrative voice, focalization and syntactic restraint. As the analysis shows, there is a great deal of difference in the style: the omissions of Ishiguro lead to retrospective uncertainty and subsequent self-recognition, whereas the omissions of Coetzee lead to immediacy, obscurity, and exposure to morality. This paper concludes that omission is a unique aesthetic value in contemporary fiction that broadens existing conceptualizations of narrative restraint and has a role to play in contemporary styles of literary study.

Keywords: Narrative Omission; Stylistic Restraint; Contemporary Fiction; Comparative Stylistics; Narratology; Prose Minimalism

الكتابة عبر الحذف: الإضمار بوصفه استراتيجية أسلوبية في روايات كازو إيشيغورو وج. م. كوتزي
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الملخص

في السرد الروائي الحديث، غدا الاقتصاد الأسلوبي وضبط التعبير السردية بديلين مفضلين عن الإسراف التعبيري، حيث يُصار إلى إبراز الدلالة عبر الإيحاء لا عبر الإفصاح المباشر. وفي هذا السياق، تمثل روايات كازو إيشيغورو وج. م. كوتزي مجالاً خصباً لاستقصاء دور السرد المُضمر في إنتاج المعنى

الأدبي. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الحذف بوصفه أداة أسلوبية مقصودة في عدد من روايات إيشيغورو وكوتزي، من خلال المجادلة بأن الفجوات السردية، والقطوع، وتخفيف الانفعال العاطفي لا تمثل صمماً موضوعانياً بقدر ما تشكل آليات شكلية فاعلة لصناعة المعنى. وتسعى المقالة إلى سدّ فجوة نقدية مهمة في حقل الأسلوبية المقارنة، عبر تحويل بؤرة الاهتمام من القراءات الأخلاقية أو السياسية الخالصة إلى تحليل البنية الجمالية وأنماط الحجب السردية على مستوى الراوي. وترتكز الدراسة نظرياً على الأسلوبية والسرديات، مستندةً أساساً إلى نظرية الخطاب السردية لدى جيرار جنيت، ومفهوم اللاتحديد القرائي عند فولفغانغ إيزر، فضلاً عن منجزات النقد الأسلوبية الحديث. أما منهجياً، فيُنجز التحليل من خلال قراءة نصية دقيقة لروايتي بقايا اليوم ولا تدعني أرحل لكازو إيشيغورو، وروايتي العار وفي انتظار البرابرة لج. م. كوتزي، وذلك من حيث الصوت السردية، والتبئير، وضبط التركيب النحوي. وتُظهر نتائج التحليل وجود تباين واضح في التوظيف الأسلوبية للحذف بين الكاتبين؛ إذ تقود إضمّارات إيشيغورو إلى حالة من اللابيقين الاستعادي وما يعقبه من وعي ذاتي متأخر، في حين تقضي إضمّارات كوتزي إلى أنية الحدث، وغموضه، وتعريفه الأخلاقية المباشرة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الحذف لا يمثل مجرد تقنية سردية ثانوية، بل قيمة جمالية مميزة في السرد المعاصر، تسهم في توسيع التصورات القائمة حول الاقتصاد السردية، وتؤكد فاعليته بوصفه أداة مركزية في الدراسات الأدبية الحديثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الحذف السردية؛ الاقتصاد الأسلوبية؛ السرد المعاصر؛ الأسلوبية المقارنة؛ السرديات؛ النثر المينيمالي

Chapter One: Introduction

During the last decades, the contemporary novel has progressively turned its back on the expressive profusion and the open revelation of psychologies that has come to be more and more marked by narrative austerity, by the implication, secrecy, and economy of form. Narrative meaning, within this mode is sometimes produced not by direct expression but by absence, deferral and understatement. According to those who criticize modern fiction, it is a restraint that signifies a shift to representational fullness towards the structural economy where omission is an aesthetic attribute and not a narrative restriction (Genette, 1980; Lodge, 1992).

The novels of Kazuo Ishiguro and J. M. Coetzee should be considered within the context of the stylistically defined prose style of emotional restraint, influence of narrative and limitation of revelation. The two authors are often referred to as minimalist or understated but these terms are usually used in descriptive and not interrogative ways. Rimmon-Kenan points out that restraint in narration involves critical attention to information dissemination, focalization and withholding as interest in gaps in the narrative actively determines interpretation (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

The main aspects on which critical analysis has been applied to Ishiguro fiction are memory, repression and unreliable narration particularly when it comes to retrospective storytelling, and self-recognition (Shaffer, 2008; Wong, 2005). By comparison, analyses of Coetzee have focused on moral disquiet, power and moral revelation, frequently relating his narrative techniques to political or philosophical models (Attridge, 2004; Head, 2009). Although these strategies have delivered useful knowledge, they view silence and restraint as

thematic effects, and not as stylistic operations. This focus demonstrates that there is a critical void. What has not been tapped fully is how omission works with an elevation of the narrative style, working via the use of ellipsis, syntactic frugality, and the calculated non-exploration of the mind. The meaning of texts often emerges, as argued by stylisticians, in those areas where they are silent, and they require the reader to fill in between the structural gaps (Toolan, 1998).

However, comparative stylistic studies of omission among modern novel writers are still uncommon. In order to fill this gap, this paper proposes a stylistic strategy, which is omission. The study does not equate omission with silence or ineffability, but rather formulates the notion of omission as a formal technique, which is incorporated in narrative discourse. This practice is consistent with the difference drawn by Gérard Genette between the story and discourse that emphasize how narrative knowledge can be withheld, repressed, or repackaged (Genette, 1980).

Omission then is a compositional construct and not absence of narrative. Another theory that supports the theoretical framework is Wolfgang Iser theory of textual gaps and readerly participation. Iser contends that indeterminacy is one feature of literary texts, which mobilizes the role of the reader in the construction of the meaning by what he calls blanks or gaps (Iser, 1978). This point of view is applied stylistically to understand omission as a way of controlling the attention of the reader instead of representing the failure in the process. The article is written in close stylistic reading of *The Remains of the Day* by Ishiguro and *Never Let Me Go* by Ishiguro, and *Disgrace and Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee in methodology. The analysis is based on the narrative voice, focalization, sentence structure, and those points where the author does not explain anything, and the model of the stylistic analysis is used, with the accent made on the interpretative meaning of the linguistic choice and narrative economy (Leech and Short, 2007).

The stylistic difference is evident in the comparative analysis. Ishiguro omissions are more prone to create the effect of retrospective uncertainty and delayed awareness, bringing the reader into a slower interpretive re-evaluation, but Coetzee omissions bring about immediacy and moral exposure through refusing narrative mediation. These results imply that omission is a unique aesthetic value in modern fiction which is remaking the role of narrative restraint in modern prose and is a cause of contemporary debate in stylistics and narratology (Attridge, 2004).

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

2.1 Narrative Restraint in Modern and Late-Modern Fiction

The criticalization of the contemporary novel is increasingly attributing narrative restraint as a fundamental stylistic inclination and not an aesthetic periphery. Since the experiments of early modernism, restraint has served as a reaction to the perceived weariness of omniscient narration and expressiveness.

David Lodge notes that contemporary prose often foregoes the overt commentary in favor of implication and thus the reader is asked to create meaning based on the structural and stylistic resources and not to be told how to do so.

What is emerging here is an indication of a shift in the narrative authority in the sense that, the meaning is now spread throughout textual gaps and not located in narratorial control. The narratological theory offers a theoretical basis of certain change. The difference between story (*historie*) and discourse (*recit*) by Gerard Genette shows the way in which the meaning of a narrative is formed not just by the events, but also by the style and extent to which information is revealed or concealed (Genette, 1980). In this context, restraint works as an official policy by which discourse controls entry to motivation, interiority and judgment. Contemporary storytelling therefore is more and more biased towards the articulation of less than what is shown.

2.2 Omission, Ellipsis, and Indeterminacy

Reader-response criticism and stylistics have expressed the theoretical interest in omission in the most comprehensive way. The notion of textual blanks by Wolfgang Iser highlights the point of view that texts in literature are organized around the indeterminacy, requiring the reader to provide the links that the text deliberately does not provide (Iser, 1978). In this sense, omission is not a lack of meaning but a process which evokes interpretive involvement. Stylistic critics also focus more on the linguistic aspects of omission. According to Toolan, ellipsis can operate at the narrative levels, which are syntactic, semantic, and discourse-related levels and determine the expectation of an understanding among the readers and oppose closure (Toolan, 1998). Likewise, Leech and Short hold that stylistic economy heightens meaning because it focuses on the unsaid, and thus, the power of narrative minimalism to express itself is boosted (Leech and Short, 2007).

Regardless of these theoretical implications, the aspect of omission is hardly studied as a comparative stylistical law in particular novelists. The omission is often discussed on an abstract level, and no one has explored how various authors can use withholding to different aesthetic and moral purposes.

2.3 Stylistic Restraint in the Fiction of Kazuo Ishiguro

Memorial, repression, and unreliability of narration have all been predicted in acute reception of Ishiguro novels. According to the scholars, Ishiguro often uses his narrators to give an account of what happened in a retrospective manner, slowly uncovering the degree to which they deluded themselves (Shaffer, 2008). Wong stresses the fact that understatement in the prose of Ishiguro is a form of emotional repression wherein the narrators describe the events without mentioning the ethical or emotional consequences of the narration (Wong, 2005).

Nevertheless, even though these interpretations acknowledge this repression on the part of Ishiguro, they are inclined to think about omission more as a psychological than a stylistic device. The emphasis is made on what the narrator does not know, instead of the way narrative discourse structurally

suppresses information. Consequently, the stylistic mechanics of omission such as structure of sentences, narrative pace, and focalized restriction are under theorized.

2.4 Stylistic Indeterminacy of J. M. Coetzee Fiction.

The fiction by Coetzee has produced a massive amount of criticism that focuses on ethical duty, command, and discomfort on the part of the audience. According to Attridge, the stories of Coetzee are unresponsive to interpretive artistry, and present the reader with moral situations that are not resolvable into thematic clarity (Attridge, 2004). Head equally reports that Coetzee does not use prose commentary which creates an ethical immediacy by narrative opacity (Head, 2009).

But, like in the case of Ishiguro, omission in the work of Coetzee is usually construed more philosophically than stylistically. The act of refusal of explanation is an ethical act that is discussed, but very little is said about the formal means that make this refusal possible, namely, ellipsis, parataxis, and limited focalization. Thus, omission is not considered a stylistic act as a part of narrative discourse but as an ideological phenomenon.

2.5 Comparative Methods and Essential Shortcomings.

Ishiguro and Coetzee have few comparative studies, which are mainly thematic. Comparisons that are made are usually based upon the similarities of such issues as ethics, memory or postcolonial identity and stylistic analysis has not been developed. Rimmon-Kenan warns that narratological comparison should deal with the formal structure of the speech instead of thematic similarity per se (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

This lack of long-term comparative stylistic study of omission is a significant lacuna. Although restraint is used by both authors, the narrative logics of using omissions bring about delayed realization and retrospective doubts in Ishiguro and immediacy and moral vulnerability in Coetzee. The current criticism has not been able to define such a divergence in terms of a single stylistic pattern.

2.6. Positioning the Present Study.

The current work is a reaction to this gap because it develops a comparative stylistic exploration of omission as a structural device in the works of Ishiguro and Coetzee. It adapts omission to a compositional principle of action by relying on narratology and stylistics to rebrand omission, which contributes to readerly engagement and perception of ethics. Through foregrounding discursive methods, instead of thematic silence, the research will play a role in the contemporary discourse in stylistics and narrative theory by providing a sophisticated view of restraint as an aesthetic of modern novel.

Chapter Three: Discussion and Analysis

3.1 Omission and Retrospective Narration in Kazuo Ishiguro

Ishiguro has employed retrospective first person narration that is based on stylistic omission mainly through the inability of the narrator to speak the emotional truth. In *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens narrates the crucial moments of his life in a professional precision leaving out the emotional self-identification. This narrative suppressivity is the creation of meaning that is achieved indirectly because emotional meaning is created by lack and not by statement (Ishiguro, 1989). An obvious illustration would be when Stevens is thinking of personal dignity and regrets:

“I cannot even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?” (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 243)

In the passage, there is no direct recognition of emotional loss; instead of the feeling, there is abstraction. According to critics, such omission functions stylistically, pushing emotion out of the text, and forcing the reader to guess what is missing (Shaffer, 2008).

3.2 Silence and Emotional Withholding in *The Remains of the Day*

The aspect of omission is particularly apparent in any scene featuring Miss Kenton, where the lack of emotional expression is substituted with silence. Whenever Stevens thinks of the announcement of the engagement of Miss Kenton, the narration overrides the feeling: “I said nothing at all. She waited some little, then added that she was leaving me. (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 188)

In this case, there is no emotional response and interpretation of the story. Such lack of interior explanation is a stylistic discontinuity that permits inference on the part of the reader, an example of what Iser would call textual indeterminacy (Iser, 1978).

3.3 Omission, Memory, and Ethical Delay in *Never Let Me Go*

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro makes omission reach the organization of memory and moral consciousness. The narration of Kathy H. never makes any direct commentary about what the idea of organ donation means, it conditions the catastrophic reality in a rather understated way. Speaking of the meaning of the word completion she says: It was then that I firstly realized, actually, just what Ruth meant by completion (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 227).

Physical detail and emotional response are not given in the narrative and ethical meaning emerges in a retrospective manner. Such a stylistic withholding coincides with the idea of Genette of narrative discourse as the location where interpretation is created through temporal withholding (Genette, 1980).

3.4 Omission and Narrative Opacity in J. M. Coetzee

Coetzee omission operates according to narrative opacities, and not retrospectively. There is no moral framing in the first sentence in *Disgrace*: "In

his mind, he has become sorted out the matter of sex, half a century and divorced (Coetzee, 1999, p. 1)".

The absence of the judgment of the narrator provides a feeling of uneasiness in moral aspects since the readers are left to discuss the assumptions of Lurie without being filtered. As interpretation is what Attridge regards as negligent on Coetzee, the unwillingness to take the lead is a deliberate act of ethics founded on narrative restraint (Attridge, 2004).

The term omission and exposure to ethical issues in disgrace refers to the idea that someone has behaved unethically and is vulnerable to accusations of corruption or unethical behavior because of this action or omission (James, 2001).

3.5 Omission and Ethical Exposure in Disgrace

This is the concept of somebody acting immorally and being susceptible to being accused of corruption or acting unethically due to the act or omission (James, 2001).

After Lucy assaults, Coetzee enhances omission through denying the emotional elaboration. The reaction of Lucy is not narrated, it is only reported:

Then what would be the cost of the one has to pay to stay? This, maybe, is what they feel like (Coetzee, 1999, p. 158).

The story is deprived of psychological interpretation, and silence becomes ethical conflict. This omission in style is a manifestation of what Head describes as the strategy used by Coetzee to leave his readers in a moral ambiguity without being interpreted (Head, 2009).

3.6 Omission and Political silence in Waiting for the Barbarians.

Omission in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is executed on political and moral judgment level. The Magistrate is violent several times without a comment: "I watched, silent. I did not speak." (Coetzee, 1980, p. 126).

The sentence has no justification, protest, or reflection, and makes the absence of it complicity. Narrative restraint itself creates the meaning, which is the point that has been argued by Toolan that omission can also enhance ethical implication because it withstands explanatory closure (Toolan, 1998).

3.7.Synthesis, Comparative: Two Stylistic Logics of Omission

Ishiguro and Coetzee use omission, comparatively, on the basis of the different stylistic logics. The omissions that Ishiguro makes are retrospective and psychologically protective creating delayed self-recognition, and Coetzee omissions are immediate and ethically confrontational. This transgression shows that omission is not a uniform technique but a loose stylistic precept that depends on voice of narration and focalization (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

3.8 Analytical Conclusion

As the analysis proves, omission can be viewed as an active stylistic means of the two novels, where their application determines the participation of readers in restraint, silence, and gaps in narratives. Through refusing to explain, feel, and

judge, Ishiguro and Coetzee make absent meaning, and affirmed omission as one of the aesthetic features of modern fiction (Leech and Short, 2007).

The aim of this study was to analyze the concept of omission as a stylistic device in some of the novels by Kazuo Ishiguro and J. M. Coetzee beyond the thematic approaches to studying silence to the use of omission as a form of narrative restraint at the discourse level. Through a combination of narratology and stylistics, the study has revealed that omission in modern fiction is an active aesthetic value and not a lack of narration or a denudation.

Summary of Key Results

The analysis makes a number of important conclusions. First, there arises omission as a deliberate stylistic act that is built in as a feature of narrative voice, focalization and syntactic economy. Omission in Ishiguro fiction functions in a retroactive way, creating the stories of the retrospective realization and avoidance of feelings. It is through the withholding of affective articulation that narrators can preserve a superficial coherence which is eventually torn at by the inference of readers. The temporal deferral, as opposed to the disclosure, creates meaning in these texts. Second, the paper shows that omission as employed by Coetzee has a contrary stylistic rationale. His stories use omission to create immediacy, opaqueness and moral disclosure. Coetzee shifts the burden of interpretation, also, to the reader by rejecting narratorial mediation, psychological clarification, or moral commentary. Omission therefore is a confrontational element of style which enhances ethical ambiguity instead of delaying it. Third, the comparative analysis proves that omission cannot be identified as a uniform narrative technique. Rather it works within separate stylistic logics that are influenced by narrative position and discourse structure. Although both authors use restraint, the omission by Ishiguro is self-contained and defensive, but the omission by Coetzee is external and subversive. This difference advances the current descriptions of narrative minimalism in that it proves that restraint has divergent aesthetic and ethical consequences. The most significant contribution that this study makes is that it conceptualizes omission as style. Instead of seeing silence as a thematic or ideological index, the research puts omission as a formal strategy, which organizes the reader engagement and the production of meanings. The given approach fills an obvious gap in the current criticism, which through the foregrounding technique of discourse, the study contributes to modern discourses of stylistics and narratology and to modern fiction studies, presents a comparative framework, which can be applied to other late-modern novelists. It also reaffirms the importance of close reading as a methodological tool that can expose the presence of powerful narrative mechanisms which were not obvious before. The conclusions of this comparative stylistic study are important implications to the analysis of the contemporary novel in general, outside Ishiguro and Coetzee. The systematic adoption of omission as an official strategy indicates that there is a more general tendency in late-modernist and postmodernist prose of a literature

of inference in which the reader plays a structural role in the creation of meaning. It is not an accident; this change is indicative of an increased authorial mistrust in direct statement, and a move towards forms of narration that are more reminiscent of the intricacies and incoherences of contemporary experience. Further studies might broaden this paradigm to examine the ways in which analogous stylistic logics of withholding are at work in the literature of other authors active in the twenty-first century, including Marilynne Robinson or Teju Cole, which would further isolate the role of omission as a defining, core characteristic of the aesthetic of the twenty-first century.

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