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## POSTHUMAN IDENTITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S NEVER LET ME GO: A CRITICAL SPECULATIVE LENS

**Majeed Anjum Kirmani**

*University of Karachi, Karachi*

[majeed\\_kirmani666@gmail.com](mailto:majeed_kirmani666@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*The article is about the lives of organ donor clones who are developed and other clones within a dystopian society in a Kazuo Ishiguro novel, Never Let Me Go, and they pose a crucial question on human identity, morality and agency. In this paper, the posthuman approach is applied to analyses how Ishiguro criticizes the conventional boundaries of human life. The research explores the connotations of the constructed identity of the characters and the speculative existence of the characters and places them within the context of posthumanism discourse as a whole. This paper positions that the development and experiences through which the clones develop emotionally create an interruption to the traditional understandings of personhood by considering such themes as agency autonomy, and the nature of humanity. The study entails the use of a speculative critical approach, combining posthumanism theory analysis and the film to integrate it, shedding new light on the role of clones in the determination of self and identity. Essential findings indicate that the reading material written by Ishiguro criticizes the dehumanization of man into a biological process by humankind and indignities the ethical line between man and machine. The paper fits into the emerging literature that analyses the scope of speculative fiction and its relation to posthuman identity*

**Keyword:** Posthumanism, Identity, Clones, Dystopian Fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro, Speculative Literature

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### INTRODUCTION

Never Let Me Go, written by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005): This novel is placed in the perspective of speculation with the lives of clones being developed to serve as organ donors. The novel tells a story of life in an alternative reality where clones are raised just to be used in supplying organs to human beings. In that regard, the novel is an epitome of the question about the essential elements of human nature. Ishiguro has developed a dystopia where his clones despite being genetically the same as humans lack the fundamental human rights and acknowledgement. These people, having been brought up in a remote facility with the name Hailsham, are educated knowing that their lives are rather special in a sense that they can only be considered useful to the biological ability to serve others. Thus, questioning the distinction between human and non-human beings, Ishiguro explores the moral consequences of dehumanizing people due to the source of their origin.

Human identity promulgated in the novel is innately linked to the notion of posthumanism, a term that disputes a conventional anthropocentrism view of the world. Posthumanism as a critical paradigm brings about issues of the interaction between human identity and technology progress, especially how humans interact with machines, animals and in this case, genetically engineered creatures. According to Katherine Hayles (1999), posthumanism deals with the decentering of humanism in which a consciousness has recognized the interpenetration of humans and technology, bodies and other non-human actors. A glimpse of this entanglement is expressed to the greatest potential as shown through Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth who are clones created by Ishiguro, they are genetically human but expressed to be below human standards, since they have been programmed to do so. The theme of the clones seeking their identity in the framework of their roles as designed is suggestive of the nature of posthuman discourse, wherein the concrete definition and privileged spaces of the human or the so called natural are

into question.

The main research issue of this paper is the need to identify how *Never Let Me Go* contributes to the investigation of the posthuman status and identity by using the experiences of the protagonists of the story as clones of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth and how their subjective thoughts and experiences challenge the one-dimensional perception of the human condition. Being the human clones, such characters are predisposed to a systematic deprivation of the rights to personhood, and the totality of their lives is contextualized by the unique use they have as organ donors. This framework essentially puts their clones in a situation in which existence is reduced to a single objective—which is against the overall human existence due to the fact that it is defined by individual autonomy and choice as well as self-determination. This denial as presented in the narrative can be highlighted by the interactions between the characters with each other, necessity to find a meaning, as well as their gradual discovery that they are part of the donor world that eventually began to doubt that there is a place in the world.

Through various experiences of the clones, Ishiguro tries to stress how unnecessary the distinction between human and non-human is. They are genetically the same as humans and still not treated as such with regard to rights, recognition and moral worth. Such a gap between biological identity and social status points out the shortcomings of the traditional definitions of personhood and humanity. Philosophers like Peter Singer (1975) have always maintained that the aspects of personhood should be defined in terms of consciousness and self-awareness, other than genetic inheritance. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro criticizes such an idea because he creates an example of characters that can be both in whom strong emotional intelligence and self-awareness pride lies and who are not accepted by society as complete humans. This injustice challenges the moral theories of social patterns and the way life is valued in accordance with biological determinism.

Furthermore, *Never Let Me Go* is used as the criticism of life commodification in modern society. By breaking down the bodies of the clones into simple biological assets, Ishiguro attacks the nature of the modern bioethics and the threat posed by turning human beings into the objects which could be mined to satisfy the needs of others. This criticism has become especially topical in the modern world where the development of biotechnology, cloning, and genetic engineering still leave many sophisticated questions in terms of ethics. The speculative way the novel is written makes this piece a warning story on the threat of dehumanization that may occur under the circumstances when humanity is simplified to its biological part. This echoes the controversy with respect to bioethics in the sense of whether cloning, genetic modification, and the ethics of organ donation are moral (Harris, 2007).

The purpose of the study is to add a contribution to the posthuman literary studies sphere as it focuses on the speculative critique of identity and humanity of Ishiguro. Through the posthuman prism, this paper will discuss the significance of the attitude that Ishiguro developed regarding clones as both individuals with emotional depth and complexity but devoid of their agency and autonomy. The analysis will provide a subtle appreciation of the moral, philosophic and cultural issues raised by the novel and especially to the current discussions of identity, individual will and the rights of genetically engineered organisms. In such a view, *Never Let Me Go* proves to be much more than a dystopian story; it is a thought-provoking commentary on how human identity is constructed when put up to the test of technological progress and bioethical concerns.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro has raised a significant debate of scholarly discourse especially in the disciplines of bioethics, identity, and dystopia literature. The major motifs in the novel namely

cloning, organ donation and selling human life, have brought about many ethical arguments. The novel has been approached by scholars using different theoretical approaches, yet it has allowed a space to be vacant in posthumanist interpretations of the text. This literature review addresses the main scholarly discourses around *Never Let Me Go*, determines the areas of existing gap in related researches, and explains how the current research has the potential of enhancing these literatures.

Bioethics is one of the most visible spheres of study related to *Never Let Me Go*. Other critics such as Leila Amineddoleh (2016) have taken up the question of the morality of human cloning by looking at the ethical question of how morally wrong or right it is to conduct some of the primary procedures that allow human beings to be cloned so that they could donate organs. Amineddoleh writes about how clones are reduced to commodities and the moral rightness of the way they are being treated as the means of human survival. This issue of commodification of human life is in the middle of Ishiguro novel as the existence of the clones, a genetically exact replica of the humans, was unworthy of the same moral and legal rights because their batch could be utilized in the supply of the organs only. This portrayal of the clones as nothing more than biological assets can be related to actual debates regarding whether cloning and organ donation ethics are justified.

On the same grounds, John Harris (2007) explores the impacts of bioethics on larger scale in *Never Let Me Go* especially on the ethical threshold of genetic engineering and human cloning. Harris addresses the theory of bioethics as applied to the technological innovations in the process of cloning namely, the question of whether it is ethical enough to create life on the assumption of acquiring organs. His discussion also addresses the theme of autonomy by ushering that the fact that the clones have no control over their fates is indicative of a larger theme regarding loss of individual autonomy in a world where manipulation of genetics is the norm of the day. The theme of *Never Let Me Go* focuses on the critique of the reductionism approach to human beings as creatures whose value depends on how they carry out biological processes. Harris does not study the same theme or even look back at it, but rather supplements it through his work.

Although these debates are dealing with the ethical issues of cloning and bioethics, they are mainly addressing the moral concerns about the way clones should be treated and the possible future impact of cloning technology. They do not often comment on philosophical connotations of humanization of the clones outside of the ethical level, and it is possible that posthumanism may have something to contribute here.

The speculative genre which *Never Let Me Go* belongs to has been another point of interest in the posthumanism discourses. According to such scholars as N. Katherine Hayles (1999), posthuman identity is a result of the mixture of technology, biology, and culture. The work of Hayles on the posthumanism establishes a sense of decentering the application of humanism and the creation of identities that do not conform to the stereotypical earlier versions of the human. To Hayles therefore, the posthuman identity is the erasure of all the distinctions between the human and non-human objects, and he therefore stresses the relationality of human beings with machines, biotechnology and artificial life.

Now, with *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro has employed posthumanism as the use of cloning. The clones in the novel are biologically human though they face the traits of subhuman due to the intent behind them as the organ donors. The novel poses a sharp conflict; the clones are deprived of their autonomy and rights as people regardless the fact that they have the same biological composition as humans. This fact of failure to accept the clones as humans brings into issue conventional definitions of humanity and personhood where the human being has been conventionally determined by biological and legal aspects.

This liminal existence of the clones between human and non-human allows Ishiguro to accuse of the existence of arbitrary relations between beings who are related only by their biological functions. This work of speculative writing on posthuman identity is directly related to the ideas expressed by Hayles because it raises the question of what exactly made a person considered as being human and whether biological identity is sufficient to grant it the label of a person.

The fictional predilection of the genre also introduces a more general argument regarding the reality of how both technology and biological manipulation are threatening to the maintenance of traditional human categories. The novel by Ishiguro can be considered as an examination of the state of technology, or in this case, cloning and genetic engineering in which human identity can be redefined and/or even destroyed. The fact that the clones lack autonomy and will soon cease to exist as organ donors coupled with their exclusion of being considered as persons in society reveals that the future of the posthuman is one where technological solution end up isolating some individuals due to the way they are born. In that aspect, the work of Ishiguro can be compared to the one of Hayles in her or his post humanistic vision, where the human is no longer a priori, but rather it is molded by both the cultural and the technological influences.

Besides bioethics and posthumanism, the novel has been placed in the context of the background, in general, of the literary tradition of dystopia. Another aspect that is very common in dystopian stories is dehumanization and deprivation of the right to a particular group of people, in this case to the clones, as is the case with *Never Let Me Go*. Researchers like Roderick (2012) have focused on an analysis of dystopian fiction as a critique of all societal norms, especially since they manifest a dramatic version of real-life issues. In *Never Let Me Go*, the use and exploitation of the clones as sources of organ donation by the society as portrayed by Ishiguro dramatizes the dystopian genre ability to warn and caution the threats of unfettered technological advancement and indifference in the society.

Concepts such as totalitarian control, surveillance, and dehumanization explored in *Never Let Me Go* have led to numerous dystopian interpretations of the novel, yet it is possible that most dystopian readings will fail to address the text at some level in terms of posthuman identity as conveyed through the identity of the clones themselves. The clones do not just become the victims of a dystopian world--they are themselves its expression of what it is like to be considered in an everyday society as the other, the nonhuman. As any literary critic may state (Binns, 2020), the identity crisis of the clones and the way they tried to find purpose and meaning in their eventual deaths leaves the reader with disturbing questions that challenge the reader to redefine human identity as solely biological or one adapted to the specific experience of an individual and personified in his or her life.

Although the ethical connotations of the novel and the position it takes in the sphere of dystopian and bioethical literature have already been covered in the existing scholarship, a significant lack of interest is observed in using the posthuman theory to interpret the text. Most critics have centered on the ethical issues of cloning and transplantations with a lot being concentrated subjecting it to moral and legal issues. Nevertheless, very minimal research automatically assesses the philosophical and identity-based aspects of the existence of the clones as posthumanism. The role of this gap, however, is substantial since in *Never Let Me Go* the author provides an elaborate critique of traditional parameters standing between non-human and human by emphasizing emotional depth and consciousness as essential parts of what makes someone a human being.

This paper will attain this missing gap by providing a posthuman speculative approach to the works of Ishiguro. This study will examine how Ishiguro criticizes the conventional concept of personhood,

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identity and autonomy by analyzing the subjective experience, emotional intricacies, and existential conflict by considering a series of clones. These broader posthuman theories are also discussed in the study with the often-held view that there is no definite identity but rather technological, biological and social pressures define the identification. In this light, *Never Let Me Go* is not just a reflection on the bioethical but also an excellent example of the criticism of how humanity is determined and the consequences of existing in a posthuman world.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The value of this work is the use of posthumanism in the world of *Never Let Me Go*, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, the novel that is commonly discussed within the frames of moral and ethical values, but still lacks profound analyses through a posthumanism lens. Looking at the identities developed by the clones and their emotional and psychological levels, this study creates a new perspective through which one can look at the multileveled critique of human identification presented by Ishiguro about human identity, autonomy, and the impact of biotechnological revolution. This paper can be used to increase the awareness of how Ishiguro addresses the shortcomings of classic humanism, challenging the borders between the terms of human/non-human in the era of cloning and genetic engineering. Also, the study interacts with issues of posthumanism present today, including the ethics of cloning, the purpose of artificial existence, human commodification in the contemporary tech-savvy world. This research presents meaningful contributions to the literature as it bridges the gap that currently exists in the research space and resides at the intersection of science fiction, philosophy, and bioethics.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of posthuman identity in *Never Let Me Go*?
2. How do the clones' emotional experiences and subjective realities disrupt the human/non-human divide?
3. Why does Ishiguro's speculative portrayal of cloning critique the ethical implications of human commodification?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory applied to this study is posthumanism, which is based on the major works by N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Donna Haraway (1991), and others calling into question the humanist picture of the world. In posthumanism, the anthropocentric idea of privileged position of human beings in both moral and ontological order is criticized. Rather, it suggests that human identity is permeable and not isolable to non-human others, including technology, animal life and artificial living bodies. In her book, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Hayles underlines the scenario when the body is being connected to technology, and suggests that identity is more and more defined through the existence of biological and technological systems. In the same way, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) by Haraway contains an argument which proposes to disintegrate the boundaries between human beings and machines, and present identity as more hybrid and inclusive.

In *Never Let Me Go*, posthumanism is not used to pursue human-like qualities of the characters, but rather the life of the clones that are neither human nor non-human. In this framework, the built-ness of identity in the novel by Ishiguro can be analyzed in terms of how it subverts the conventional ideas concerning personhood by focusing on inner and interior emotions and psychological character rather than biological functionality. In this light, the analysis provides some valuable insights regarding the repercussions of biotechnological ends and the redefinition of the human at the present globe.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper takes as its main method of analysis close reading and examines some textual passages in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro that shed some light on the posthuman attributes of the clones. Close reading is the technique which enables to examine the text in detail and deeply, and illustrate the intricacies of the character development, the chosen theme, and the narrative way, highlighting the details that show the posthuman identity. The research will seek to identify the fine nuances through which Ishiguro bends the emotional and psychological complexity of his characters, particularly, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth all towards the same end of the traditional humanist conception of identity and personhood. This approach also looks into how the structure of the narrative solidifies the speculative aspect of the story especially with regards to the ongoing discovery of the tragic fate of the clones. By doing so, close reading helps one to better apprehend how the novel raises questions pertinent to the study of what it means to live a human life especially in a world characterized by biotechnological manipulations.

To complement close reading, the piece of work also covers the discourse analysis in the wider context of cultural, ethical, and speculative expectations within the context in which Ishiguro presents cloning. Discourse analysis will assist in putting the text into a bigger picture of societal and ethical arguments about biotechnology, cloning, and bioethics. This approach will provide the discussion on how human rights and the choice of allowing free movement and control of human bodies are discussed by Ishiguro through his work, whose society sees the body and human life as a commodity. Discourse analysis also provides the possibility of analyzing how language in the *Never Let Me Go* draws and erases the frontiers of human and non-human, and the ways; these tongues display the posthumanism themes within the text. The selection of close reading and discourse analyses is also quite appropriate in this research study due to the rich authorship of literary and anticipative choice of the novel. Not just a moral and ethical exploration of cloning, *Never Let Me Go* is an elaborate work of literature that is clearly using the strategy of compelling inconspicuous narrative elements and figurative language in order to achieve the statement of the human condition. The approaches would be suitable in answering the research questions of the study on the posthuman identity, autonomy, and ethical considerations of cloning since it enables an in-depth study of the micro-level (the words in the text) as well as the macro-level (societal conditions that define the story) that shape the narrative. The close reading coupled with the discourse analysis presents a new way of thinking as this methodology puts much attention to the more philosophical and ethical layers of the novel.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro takes the lives of clones to provide an emotional criticism of the medium of human/non-human dichotomy. Describing the experiences of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth the novel addresses the issues of identity, autonomy, and personhood that is complex in regards to the clones to be both human and non-human in a way questioning any traditional individual being a human. The emotional character and self-consciousness of the clones, or rather the reflective narration in the mind of the clones (Kathy in particular), breaks the reductionism characteristic of human identity; which reduces personhood to biological origin. Observing the emotional intelligence, personal desires and a fine understanding of her existence, Kathy is highly intelligent in spite of being genetically engineered towards organ donation. This questions the idea of identity as purely biological, and states that identity is formed with memory, experience, and feelings which are fundamentals to our humanity. Here, Ishiguro implies that identity cannot be figured and fixed the same at all times but it is a dynamic process that is conditioned by the life experiences and relationships a person has.

Speculative elements in the novel entice the readers to consider the wider meaning of cloning, genetic engineering and biotechnology advances. With the innovative idea of the world where clones are

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pampered in the environment to find a single purpose, Ishiguro compels the reader to address the moral paradigm of human life being turned into a commodity. The clones are deprived of autonomy and power, they are just cast aside as organ donors. This absence of the choice brings forth the dehumanizing effects of considering people mere biological functions, which is similar to the nature of debates in the real world on bioethics issues of human cloning, the harvesting of organs, and the sanctity of all human life (Harris, 2007). By using such tragic depiction, Ishiguro indirectly criticizes the dangers that might arise because of promoting biotechnology without reflecting on the moral, ethical and emotional burdens of making human beings a biological commodity.

Also, the ethical aspects of cloning and life commodification are emphasized by a tragic tone of the novel. The sense of sympathy that Ishiguro causes by characterizing the clones as being well aware of the doom their fate has been predetermined to be, but not able to modify it, begs the question of ethical acceptability of the society that tolerates such activities. This echoes in the modern day moral issues with genetic manipulation and human cloning where consent, autonomy and personhood are utmost issues in bioethics (Amineddoleh, 2016). The speculative nature of the novel means that it acts as a cautionary fable of unmoderated biotechnological advances.

Although this work will explore the study of the posthuman aspects of *Never Let Me Go* in great detail, it also has some limitations. To use an example, the emphasis on posthumanism could lead to neglecting other worthwhile thematic dimensions of the novel, which might include the socio-political meaning of cloning or its comments on society and institutional authority and power. There is further reading that could be pursued in the future by investigating the way Ishiguro fits into the concept of postcolonial theory, feminist theory, or even Marxist analysis, particularly the way the clones are used as labor and subjugated to society. Also, there is room to conduct more empirical research drawing the real-life parallels between the world Ishiguro postulated and presently existing bioethical issues, e.g., the ethical consequences of using gene editing methods like CRISPR.

## FINDINGS

The identities of the characters, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth in the work of the book, *Never Let Me Go*, are highly influenced by the restrictions that society places on them as the clones. Although they have biological similarity with humans, their life is only characterized by their status of organ donors. It can be concluded that as the novel goes on, we realize that they are systematically dehumanized and denied agency. They are destined to live a preset life and they cannot decide much about what lies ahead of them in life. Giving an example, Kathy states her thoughts remembering Hailsham by saying that, she has heard many times that she should feel happy about what she has had (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 40). This quote brings out the feeling of despair produced into them by the society. They are forced to accept their destiny without analyzing anything since they do not have independence and freedom of choice.

Nevertheless, along with such limitations, the emotional life of the characters, their desires, and relationships demonstrate their complexity which overcomes the biological discharge of functions. The example of Kathy, who feels strong emotional attachment between herself and Tommy and Ruth, and whose remembrance of relationships is the core of her personality, will serve as an example. Her story indicates her deep inner world rebuking the idea that clones are lacking the personhood. The fact that Kathy dwells on her past, such as the feeling of loss that she feels regarding the eventual demise of her friends, underscores the extent of emotional expression that exists in even those people who are classified by biological roles.

The novel written by Ishiguro criticizes dehumanization of people into biological figures. The personal

issues of the clones such as the contemplations of Kathy on her relations with Tommy and Ruth indicate the moral problem of commodification of human lives. Their ultimate destiny, the harvest of their organs, becomes the metaphor in human dehumanization that may result when people are considered only their biological, but not emotional and psychological complexity as an important value. In such a manner, Ishiguro criticizes the modern-day bioethics, in which the sanctity of life is usually neglected because of the technological progress that treats human beings as means.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has explored critically the aspect of representation of posthuman identity in the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro using such a posthuman speculative lens. Dwelling upon the lives of Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, the study has shown how these experiences are burdened with the role of feelings and subjectivity undermining the traditional ideas of human identity. The clones exist in the novel as emotionally and philosophically responding individual beings, however, as created through the genetic engineering, they upset the absolute boundary between human and non-human. Emotional complexity of the characters further supports the notion that personhood is not only marked by biological factors but rather by consciousness, memory and emotional attachment which are main attributes of posthuman identity mentioned by such scholar experts such as Hayles (1999) and Haraway (1991).

Using the speculative plot, this novel by Ishiguro also revolts against the ethics of cloning, bioengineering, and selling human life as a product. The reality of the existence of the clones based on their biological use is a metaphor to the dehumanizing possibility of utilizing individuals as unit of use in the biotechnologically advanced world. This paper is the contribution of the blooming posthumanism literature because this research offers novel knowledge about ethical and philosophical ramifications of the revolution in biotechnology and the transcendence of human identity. The consideration of a posthumanism paradigm in the analysis of the novel not only contributes to our comprehension of the work by Ishiguro but also sets new horizons of a wider discussion regarding the future of identities in the world where technology plays an increasingly important role. The study opens the research avenue to the effective investigation of how speculative fiction can create apposite observations regarding the changing hues of humanity due to technological advancement.

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