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Beyond Human Exceptionalism: Identity, Agency, and the Posthuman Subject in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) constructs a fictional world in which the boundaries between human and non-human life are profoundly destabilized through its narrative of cloned individuals raised exclusively for organ donation. This paper offers a posthumanist reading of the novel, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben to interrogate how the text destabilizes humanist assumptions about identity, agency, and embodiment. The study examines Hailsham as a disciplinary institution that produces the clones as posthuman subjects, analyses the euphemistic language of "donation" and "completion" as a mechanism of biopolitical governance, and considers the roles of memory, artistic production, and relational intimacy as sites of ethical resistance within a system that reduces life to bare biological resource. The paper argues that *Never Let Me Go* constitutes a sustained critique of human exceptionalism and the commodification of the body under biotechnological capitalism, ultimately proposing that memory, relationality, and ethical witnessing constitute forms of resistance within systems designed to render certain lives invisible.

Keywords: posthumanism, human exceptionalism, biopolitics, identity, agency, memory, Kazuo Ishiguro.

INTRODUCTION

Never Let Me Go (2005) constructs a fictional world in which the boundaries between human and non-human life are profoundly destabilized. Through the narrative of cloned individuals raised exclusively for the purpose of

organ donation, the novel raises critical philosophical and ethical questions concerning identity, humanity, and the consequences of scientific and technological advancement. A posthumanist reading of the text enables an examination of how Ishiguro interrogates and

destabilizes traditional humanist assumptions regarding the definition of the human subject.

Posthumanist theory, as articulated by thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Cary Wolfe, challenges traditional notions of human identity and agency, highlighting the ways in which the boundaries between human and non-human are constantly negotiated and redefined. Haraway's concept of the "cyborg" (1991) serves as a useful framework for understanding the implications of biotechnology and capitalism on the human condition, highlighting the ways in which humans are increasingly integrated with machines and technology. Butler's notion of "performativity" (1990) also provides a useful lens for examining the ways in which human identity is constructed and negotiated, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of human subjectivity.

Human Exceptionalism and the Politics of the Body

Never Let Me Go can be seen as a critique of human exceptionalism, which is rooted in the idea that humans are superior to non-humans. The novel presents a world where clones, created for the purpose of organ donation, exist in a state of liminality, caught between human and non-human. This liminality serves as a challenge to traditional notions of human identity, highlighting the ways in which biotechnology and capitalism are redefining what it means to be human. The clones' existence raises important questions about the nature of human identity and agency, highlighting the ways in which human exceptionalism is a myth that is no longer tenable in the face of rapid advancements in biotechnology and capitalism.

The novel also critiques the commodification of the human body, highlighting the ways in which biotechnology and capitalism are redefining the boundaries between human and non-human. The clones' bodies are treated as commodities, serving as a

source of organs for the benefit of human society. This commodification raises important questions about the nature of human identity and agency, highlighting the ways in which the human body is increasingly treated as a mere object or resource. The novel ultimately suggests that the commodification of the human body is a form of dehumanization, highlighting the need for a reevaluation of what it means to be human in a world where the boundaries between human and non-human are increasingly blurred.

Memory and Nostalgia

The novel also explores the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping human identity and agency. The clones' memories of their time at Hailsham, an idyllic boarding school where they were raised, serve as a nostalgic reminder of a past that is irretrievable. This nostalgia is bittersweet, highlighting the ways in which the clones' experiences are shaped by their unique circumstances. The novel ultimately suggests that memory and nostalgia play a crucial role in shaping human identity and agency, highlighting the ways in which the past informs the present and shapes our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

Hailsham as a Disciplinary Institution

The early sections of the novel, set predominantly within the institutional space of Hailsham, illustrate how the clones are simultaneously produced as human-like subjects and denied full recognition as members of human society. This contradiction constitutes the central tension of the narrative and functions as a sustained critique of technological and institutional systems that exploit biological life while maintaining the appearance of moral legitimacy.

The narrative is presented through the retrospective account of Kathy H., who reflects on her childhood and adolescence at Hailsham, a boarding school that initially appears to resemble conventional educational institutions.

The students attend structured classes, participate in organized activities, and form interpersonal relationships. They are also encouraged to produce artistic work, which is periodically collected by a figure known as Madame—a detail that acquires increasing significance as the narrative progresses. The guardians, who function as teachers, encourage creativity and emotional sensitivity, thereby suggesting that the institution values intellectual and artistic development.

However, gradual developments in Kathy's narration reveal that the students are not ordinary children but clones engineered for a predetermined purpose: to supply vital organs to the broader human population until they reach what is euphemistically referred to as “completion,” a term that the novel persistently problematizes. From a posthumanist perspective, Hailsham operates as a carefully regulated institutional environment in which identity is systematically constructed and managed through disciplinary mechanisms. As Cary Wolfe argues:

posthumanism does not merely refer to technological modification of the human body, but critically interrogates the philosophical foundations of liberal humanism that have historically defined the distinction between human and non-human life. (What Is Posthumanism? 2010)

In *Never Let Me Go*, this distinction becomes the central object of inquiry. The clones are not merely biological artefacts; rather, they are produced within a socio-institutional framework that simultaneously normalizes their exploitation and endows them with sufficient human qualities to render such exploitation ethically disturbing for the reader.

The Posthuman Subject and the Question of the Soul

The concept of the posthuman subject is particularly relevant to the depiction of Hailsham. As theorized by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999),

subjectivity is not a fixed or autonomous essence but is instead produced through complex interactions among biological, technological, and socio-cultural systems. In the novel, the clones exemplify this condition, as their existence is shaped both by biotechnological creation and by the institutional environment in which they are raised. Their bodies are technologically produced, while their emotional lives, cognitive patterns, and sense of self are formed within the structured environment of Hailsham.

Despite their artificial origins, the clones exhibit the full range of qualities conventionally associated with humanity. They form deep emotional bonds, experience jealousy and longing, and develop distinct personalities and interior lives. Kathy, in particular, demonstrates sustained empathy throughout her narrative, often pausing to reflect on the emotional states of others. Her remark illustrates a level of reflective consciousness and relational sensitivity that aligns closely with humanist definitions of personhood:

“I kept wading through the memories, looking for anything that might help me get a clear picture of what she'd been thinking” (Ishiguro 137)

The intimate friendship among Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy constitutes the emotional centre of the novel and persistently affirms the clones' capacity for relational existence. However, the broader society depicted in the novel refuses to recognize these capacities as evidence of full humanity. Instead, the clones are treated as biological resources whose sole function is to provide transplantable organs. This condition is encapsulated in the institutional language of “donation” and “completion” (Ishiguro 81), which functions as a euphemistic discourse that obscures the ethical implications of systemic bodily extraction.

Such linguistic framing performs significant ideological work. By substituting

administrative terminology for explicit references to death and surgical extraction, the system effectively neutralizes moral discomfort and renders violence bureaucratically invisible. Although the clones are biologically human in every meaningful sense, they occupy a structurally marginal position within a system that defines them purely in instrumental terms.

A further significant dimension of Hailsham is its emphasis on artistic production. Students are encouraged to create drawings, paintings, and other artistic artefacts, which are periodically collected for an enigmatic "Gallery." For much of the narrative, the purpose of this Gallery remains unclear, and the students generate speculative interpretations regarding its function. From a posthumanist perspective, the Gallery can be understood as an institutional attempt to demonstrate that clones possess interiority analogous to that of humans in the traditional humanist sense of possessing a "soul."

This interpretive framework is later confirmed by Miss Emily, who explains that the institution sought to prove that clones possessed souls through their artistic output: "if you have a soul, then of course the soul will reveal itself somehow" (Ishiguro 255). This reflects a fundamentally humanist assumption that artistic expression is a unique marker of human interiority. However, despite this effort, the system of organ donation remains unchanged, indicating that moral and artistic arguments are insufficient to counteract entrenched socio-economic and biomedical structures.

Language, Biopolitics and the Ethics of Disclosure

The novel also explores the gradual process through which the clones become aware of their ontological difference from the outside world. This awareness is fragmented and partial, shaped by institutional silences and selective disclosures. A key moment occurs when Miss Lucy explicitly informs the students of their predetermined fate:

"Your lives are set out for you... you'll become adults, then... you'll start to donate your vital organs" (Ishiguro 81)

This intervention disrupts institutional normalcy but does not result in systemic change, as Miss Lucy is subsequently removed from Hailsham.

The clones' responses to this knowledge are particularly significant. Rather than resisting the system, they internalize its logic, a condition that can be understood through Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. As outlined in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), modern institutions operate through normalization and internalization rather than overt coercion. Hailsham functions precisely in this manner, producing subjects who understand their own exploitation as natural and inevitable.

Agency, the Cottages and the Search for Origins

As the narrative progresses to the Cottages, the clones enter a transitional space where they are expected to assume increasing autonomy while remaining structurally bound to predetermined futures. Although this phase appears to offer greater freedom, it ultimately reinforces their lack of agency. The clones attempt to construct identities by imitating cultural behaviours derived from external media, thereby highlighting the derivative nature of their subjectivity.

A significant aspect of this phase is the preoccupation with "possibles," the belief that each clone is derived from a human original. This concept reflects an ontological desire to anchor identity within a broader human genealogy. However, their search ultimately fails, reinforcing the absence of any stable origin for their existence.

Romantic relationships among the characters further complicate the novel's exploration of emotional subjectivity. These relationships demonstrate that clones

experience affective states such as love, jealousy, and vulnerability in ways indistinguishable from humans. The introduction of the rumour concerning deferrals—whereby love might delay organ donation—functions as a symbolic articulation of hope, although it is ultimately revealed to be unfounded.

Kathy's subsequent role as a carer further underscores the systemic logic of the donation framework. While carers provide emotional support to donors, they are themselves future donors, thereby reinforcing the cyclical nature of institutional exploitation. The system thus sustains itself through the internal participation of those it ultimately consumes.

From a posthumanist perspective, the donor system represents the fullest expression of biopolitical governance, wherein life itself becomes a managed resource. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," the clones can be understood as subjects reduced to biological existence without political recognition.

Despite their conditions, the clones exhibit emotional resilience, maintaining friendships and forms of care that provide meaning within structurally constrained circumstances. The novel suggests that such relational bonds retain ethical significance even within systems of extreme inequality.

Rupture, Witnessing and Ethical Memory

The narrative culminates in the revelation that Hailsham was established not to protect the clones but to demonstrate their possession of souls in an attempt to reform public perception. This effort ultimately fails, as broader societal structures prioritize medical utility over ethical recognition.

The discovery that deferrals do not exist constitutes the novel's most significant ethical rupture. The realization that emotional relationships have no institutional bearing exposes the fundamental disjunction between

human affect and systemic logic. Tommy's subsequent emotional breakdown marks a moment of unmediated bodily expression that contrasts sharply with the narrative's otherwise restrained tone.

Memory emerges as a central thematic concern, as Kathy's retrospective narration functions as an act of ethical witnessing. Her recollection affirms the significance of lives that the broader society has rendered invisible. The novel concludes with an image of dispersal and loss, yet also of continued witnessing, as Kathy remains attentive to the lives and experiences of those who have been systematically erased.

CONCLUSION

Never Let Me Go constitutes a sustained critique of human exceptionalism and a profound interrogation of the ethical consequences of biotechnology and capitalist rationality. By constructing characters who are simultaneously fully sentient and structurally dehumanized, Ishiguro exposes the limitations of biological definitions of humanity and compels a reconsideration of subjectivity within posthumanist frameworks. Through its depiction of clones as hybrid entities caught between human and non-human, the novel challenges human exceptionalism and highlights the need for a reevaluation of the boundaries between human and non-human. The novel ultimately suggests that posthumanist theory provides a useful framework for understanding the implications of biotechnology and capitalism on the human condition, and that memory, relationality, and ethical attention constitute forms of resistance within systems that seek to render certain lives invisible.

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