

EXAMINING HUMAN RIGHTS AND POST-HUMAN SOCIETY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S "NEVER LET ME GO"

Abstract

The present study is an attempt to examine human rights and post human society in Kazuo Ishiguro's science fiction. Kazuo Ishiguro's science fiction novel, *Never Let Me Go* portrays a society of "post-humans," where humans create clones to harvest their organs, thereby extending their lifespans. By analyzing the concept of "post-human" and the society it creates in Ishiguro's novel, this thesis aims to interpret the childhood, teenage, and youth lives of the protagonists Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy. It will examine the unfair and unreasonable treatment of cloned individuals within this "post-human society". Additionally, this paper will explore the implications for human rights in the context of human cloning as depicted in "Never Let Me Go". By delving into the themes of survival, the consequences of cloning mistakes, and traumatic experiences, the paper will argue that Ishiguro employs the setting of human cloning to shed light on the plight of ordinary people and to evoke sympathy for oppressed groups in real life.

Keywords: Never Let Me Go, Kazuo Ishiguro, human rights, human cloning, post-human

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I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of human cloning has long been a subject of controversy in modern society, especially with advancements in science and technology. Concurrently, the idea of a "post-human" era, representing the inevitable progression of the times, is also a concept that has garnered attention. Numerous works of art have been created exploring the themes of human cloning, one of which is Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go*.

Kazuo Ishiguro, a British novelist of Japanese origin, has gained significant recognition for his literary contributions. His notable works include *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, and *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro has been honoured with accolades such as the 1989 Booker Prize, the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, the British Empire Medal, and the French Arts and Literary Knight Medal. Alongside Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, he is regarded as one of the "British literary immigrants three males." Ishiguro, who identifies himself as a "serious cinephile," consistently incorporates a serious undertone in his works. A recurring theme in his writing is the concept of "misplaced efforts," exploring instances where individuals' well-intentioned actions lead to unintended consequences or reveal underlying evils. He believes that our perception of ourselves often differs from reality, and the accomplishments we pride ourselves on may be rooted in nefarious origins. As he puts it, "I am interested in how people who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts."

Never Let Me Go, published in 2005, is Kazuo Ishiguro's sixth novel. It revolves around the memories of clones who serve as organ donors and reflects on the significance of their lives. The novel received critical acclaim in British and American literature, winning the prestigious 2005 Booker Prize and securing a place on the American Book Review Association Awards Final List. It is considered one of Ishiguro's most poignant works. Renowned author Haruki Murakami has even expressed his admiration for the novel, stating, "Nearly half a century of books, my favourite is *Never Let Me Go*." In 2010, the novel was adapted into a film of the same name, a romantic and tragic portrayal of British dystopian society. The film received widespread acclaim from critics, the media, and audiences alike, provoking profound contemplation on its release.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its publication in 2005, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* has garnered significant attention and sparked extensive research and analysis. While overseas research on the novel has yielded fruitful results, domestic research, although limited, has also made some notable contributions.

Overseas critics hold differing perspectives on the subject matter of *Never Let Me Go*. Joseph O'Neill argues that the novel effectively adapts to the era of new science and technology, making it a persuasive and poignant work of science fiction. This highlights the biotechnological themes present in the novel. Titus Levy categorizes the novel as a Bildungsroman and examines it from a narrative perspective. He suggests that the novel provides a model for addressing contemporary human rights issues and demonstrates how death and autobiography novels can serve vulnerable social groups. Justin Burley asserts that the human-dominated society depicted in the novel enslaves, threatens, and massacres clones

through coercive means. Others view *Never Let Me Go* as a metaphor for human existence disguised within the genre of science fiction. These critics argue that Ishiguro employs the science fiction framework to explore themes of ordinary human life, the human soul, human relationships, love, creativity, and the innocence of childhood. For example, Bruce Robbins highlights that one of the novel's greatest strengths is its depiction of not only clones but also humans. Earl Ingersoll believes that the novel prompts readers to reflect on themselves, while Martin Puncher suggests that the ultimate goal of the novel is to question the status of clones and, by extension, the status of humans. Henrietta Roost posits that the novel, within the context of organ transplantation, reveals the confrontation and conflict between dominant power and marginalized others, particularly in the context of cultural diversity and immigration waves. Current research on *Never Let Me Go* encompasses various perspectives, including narrative analysis and exploration of the ethical issues raised in the novel. Scholars have also called for increased awareness of the potential misuse of modern technology. Additionally, some researchers have delved into the absence of the humanity theme. However, research is scarce on the profound metaphor of "Everyone is a donor" in *Never Let Me Go*. This article aims to further develop this topic and fill the gaps in existing research.

III. CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN POST HUMAN IDENTITY

The term "post human" first appeared in the 1860s and was mentioned by the Russian mystic Madame H. P. Blavatsky in her work "Secret Doctrine." However, it was rarely used until the second half of the 20th century when some developed countries entered the post-modern era characterized by the rise of the information society. During this time, advancements in modern science and technology, coupled with new ideas and aesthetic consciousness, led to the emergence of various practices aimed at artificially designing, transforming, beautifying, simulating, and constructing human individuals. These endeavors resulted in the formation of new associations and groups comprised of individuals who could no longer be considered purely natural or biological. Instead, they were created through processes involving technical manipulation, electronic augmentation, and information-based actions. These individuals came to be known as "post humans," representing a new category of beings.

The term "post human" gained increasing usage as a result of these developments and the growing recognition of the implications they carried. It signified a departure from the traditional understanding of humans as purely biological entities, challenging the notion of a fixed human nature. Instead, post humans represented a shift towards a more technologically influenced and augmented form of existence. The construction of post human identity was propelled by the desire to transcend the limitations of the human condition through the use of technology. This led to the creation of artificial persons who could incorporate technological enhancements and capabilities. The term "post human" became a widely used descriptor for this new type of being, highlighting its artificial nature and the transformative impact of technology on human identity. Overall, the emergence and proliferation of the term "post human" reflect the societal shifts brought about by advancements in science, technology, and the information society. It signifies a departure from the traditional understanding of human nature and the exploration of new possibilities for human identity construction through technological means. The desire for post human attributes can be traced back throughout human history. The pursuit of enhancing human capabilities and transcending biological limitations has always been present in human society's evolution. While information

technology and biotechnology have played a significant role in intensifying this desire, there is ongoing debate regarding whether we have entered a "post human era." This is because the definition of post human extends beyond superficial concepts such as human-machine fusion or the biological transformation of natural individuals.

N. Katherine Hales, an American contemporary scholar, outlined several assumptions about the characteristics of post humans in her book "How We Became Post human." Firstly, the post human viewpoint emphasizes the value of information and data forms, often disregarding the need for material evidence. Secondly, according to this perspective, consciousness is seen as an accidental phenomenon rather than an inherent aspect of human identity. Additionally, the post human view posits that the human body is fundamentally a prosthesis that we learn to manipulate, leading to a continuous process of using additional prostheses to expand or replace the body, which has been ongoing since before our birth. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the post human view seeks to arrange and shape human beings in ways that tightly link them to intelligent machines. Hayles' hypothesis goes beyond the hybrid nature of the biological body and encompasses the cognitive, moral, and cultural aspects that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be human.

In summary, the desire for post human attributes has existed throughout human history, and advancements in technology have intensified this pursuit. N. Katherine Hayles' assumptions about post humans explore the value of information, the accidental nature of consciousness, the manipulability of the human body, and the close connection between humans and intelligent machines. These ideas challenge conventional understandings of human identity and have implications for various aspects of human existence. Post humanism challenges a fundamental aspect of humanism, which is the emphasis on the superiority, uniqueness, and particularity of humans. It does not advocate for the elimination of human beings but rather explores the relationship between humans, tools, and the world. Post humanism seeks to transcend the concept of time and reevaluate the definition of human beings. It represents a rhetorical discourse that describes the continuous evolution of human states throughout history.

IV. POST HUMAN SOCIETY IN NEVER LET ME GO

In the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, the story takes place in a post human society where major medical advancements have been made, leading to a significant increase in life expectancy. The society depicted in the book is a parallel world to the real world, with its unique characteristics. The narrative revolves around a boarding school called Hail sham, where the children, who are clones, are raised under the supervision of "guardians" rather than traditional parents. The importance of children's health is emphasized through regular physical examinations and the prohibition of smoking. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that these cloned children are being raised for the sole purpose of providing organs for non-cloned humans, who are suffering from incurable diseases.

In this post human society, human cloning is used as a means to create a reserve of organs for transplantation. The act of embedding these cloned organs into human bodies blurs the boundaries between natural and artificial, resulting in the creation of hybrid beings. The disintegration of the natural person signifies the onset of post human identity construction. The traditional humanist foundation is challenged in this world, as society views clones as

soulless and merely as a means to provide organs. The creation of clones is solely driven by the desire to prolong the lives of non-cloned humans by acquiring their organs. This utilitarian approach to cloning undermines the value of human life and raises ethical questions about the treatment of clones as mere commodities. Overall, *Never Let Me Go* explores the themes of identity, humanity, and the consequences of advancements in biotechnology in a post human society. It raises thought-provoking questions about the ethics and moral implications of using technology to manipulate and exploit human beings for the benefit of others.

V. THE ETHICAL IDENTITY OF CLONES

- 1. Definition of Human Rights:** The ethical identity of clones raises complex questions regarding their status and the recognition of their human rights. The definition of human rights provided by the United Nations emphasizes that human rights are inherent to all individuals, without discrimination based on factors such as race, sex, nationality, or religion. These rights include the right to life, freedom, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, and access to work and education, among others. Human rights encompass both individual and collective aspects, covering various personal, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. However, the concept of human rights remains an abstract framework and a subject of interpretation influenced by different periods, classes, civilizations, and perspectives. Different cultures and societies may prioritize certain aspects of human rights based on their values and beliefs. Western views often emphasize individual rights and autonomy, while other cultures may prioritize communal or collective values, such as benevolence or social harmony.
- 2. Human Identity of Clones:** The field of cloning is advancing and evolving alongside scientific and technological progress. However, the cloning of human beings is still at a stage envisioned by scientists and has not been fully realized. While some experts believe that the technical aspects of human cloning have been resolved, the primary concern that troubles the public is the ethical implications associated with human cloning. Cloning technology should not be regarded solely as a means to fulfil human desires and fantasies. If human beings were to coexist with "human" clones, created by their hand, it would present significant challenges regarding the clones' self-awareness, human dignity, and moral ethics. Consequently, the issue of their identity becomes a new theoretical problem.

Human cloning involves artificially replicating human genes to produce individuals, which fundamentally differs from the natural birth of human beings. Humans are the natural result of sexual reproduction, whereas human cloning is an artificial creation aimed at achieving scientific objectives. Despite the method used to generate cloned human embryos, the clones possess the same intelligence, and physiological functions, and lack any essential differences from human life. They share the same genetic characteristics, physiological structure, appearance, and traits as their corresponding archetypes. Moreover, humans are considered abstract anthropological beings, and labour is an essential aspect of human nature. In his *Manuscript of Economics and Philosophy* in 1844, Marx argues that people-oriented individuals represent the anthropological essence and fundamentally differ from animals in terms of communal living. He states that "conscious activity of life distinguishes man from animal life, making human beings' conscious anthropological beings." Thus, through practical

activities, humans create the objective world and transform the inorganic world, demonstrating their conscious anthropological existence.

Similarly, Kant proposes that "man is an end in himself", emphasizing the principle of treating humanity as an end, never merely as a means. This perspective fundamentally distinguishes humans from animals. Animals exist based on unconscious instinct, whereas human survival involves consciously striving towards life's goals. Considering Marx and Kant's definitions of human beings, if clones develop the same self-awareness as human beings, they should be considered human beings both from a general and legal standpoint. Consequently, human clones should possess the same civil rights as natural persons, including the right to life, health, property, inviolability, work, education, and even the right to vote and marry. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the development of cloning technology primarily serves human purposes. The utilitarian objective of human cloning, aimed at "copying" humans, poses a significant ethical dilemma. When humans view the extraction of genetic material and the creation of individuals as mere objects or experimental subjects devoid of human rights, it undermines their human dignity and value, regardless of whether clones possess identical physical attributes to their prototypes. The utilitarian purpose behind the birth of human clones devalues their existence and assigns them a predetermined mission before they are even born. As beings born to fulfil the interests of humanity, their lives resemble those of caged birds, as they are deprived of freedom, both physically and mentally.

- 3. Clones in Never Let Me Go:** The novel *Never Let Me Go* depicts Kathy's recollections and follows her life through three distinct stages. In her childhood at Hailsham, a boarding school for clones, Kathy and her peers live in isolation under the supervision of "guardians." With the arrival of Miss Lucy, they learn the truth about their purpose: to serve as organ donors and sacrifice themselves until their youth fades away. As teenagers, Kathy and the other clones leave Hailsham and experience a period of self-discovery and emotional entanglements. They adapt to the outside world, accepting their predetermined destinies while searching for meaning in their lives. Kathy comes to terms with her identity and fate through her relationships with Tommy and Ruth and becomes a caregiver. In their young adulthood, the clones strive to prove themselves and yearn for the meaning of life in the face of mortality. Trapped in life as "donors," they await the inevitable notice to begin "providing" organs, trapped in a struggle without hope for survival or the right to die. Like any human being, Kathy and her fellow clones seek traces of their existence and yearn to prove themselves in the world. They work hard to survive, pursue the possibility of postponing their fate, grieve for death, and when Ruth and Tommy complete their donations, Kathy returns to the dilapidated Hailsham, reminiscing about the time that has passed. They continue searching for traces of their existence, seeking living proof and the meaning of their existence.

In this post human society, human cloning is socially labeled as "non-human" and dehumanized. Cloning is pursued to produce healthy human organs for medical purposes. The complete resemblance to humans makes transplanted cloned organs more acceptable, overcoming significant risks associated with previous transplantation procedures. Clones, with their human appearance, serve as "non-human" backup organ sources, valued only for their sacrifice to prolong the lives of their prototypes. From birth, clones are deprived of freedom, lacking family, belonging, and coherent identity. They are told from a young

age that their future entails organ donation until death, leading them to confront impending mortality every day during adulthood, no matter their location. The anxiety and insecurity stemming from their limited lifespan accompany their realization of their predetermined fate. The ambiguous identity of clones is inherent, as their lack of blood relations contributes to their perpetual sense of uncertainty. During their youth, they develop a partial understanding of their identity and believe that finding their "possible prototype" could help them understand their inner selves and perhaps predict their future. Thus, they embark on a hopeful journey of self-discovery. When Ruth encounters her "possible prototype," she realizes that they are created from the marginalized segments of society—drug addicts, prostitutes, alcoholics, and the homeless. They lack a family, a sense of belonging, a past, and a future. Once their donations are complete, they are left with no direction to follow. They resemble kites without strings, aimlessly drifting, and waiting to fall at any moment. Their predetermined mission and unalterable fate rob them of the right to self-fulfillment, as they exist solely for the sake of others and not for themselves.

The clones in *Never Let Me Go* demonstrate a striking acceptance of their predetermined fate and never actively choose to escape their irrevocable circumstances. From an early age, they are indoctrinated with the notion that their purpose is to donate organs until death. Despite their limited understanding of what donation entails, they deeply believe that it is their inherent responsibility and destiny, an unavoidable experience for every clone. They feel a sense of shame when their first donation marks the end of their lives, yet they take pride in being able to endure until their fourth donation. Even though they are aware that the fourth donation is the most painful, they often seek solace in the hope of finding their prototype to catch a glimpse of their future, even though they know they have no future. Their greatest aspiration is simply to postpone the start of their organ donation for a few more years. Consequently, lies such as "proving true love can delay donation" frequently surface and fade away. This theme of being "silent victims" is a notable characteristic of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, as he explores notions of responsibility and fate, setting his work apart. In this story, donating organs until death is profoundly sorrowful and unacceptable, yet it is the sole purpose for which clones are brought into the world—a responsibility ingrained in them and an inescapable destiny. The clones continue to perform acts of goodness despite lacking rights and agency.

In the end, the film concludes with a monologue from Kathy, the clone, where she ponders, "What I'm not sure about is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save." In her brief existence, she never finds a definitive answer. Clones, as they face death, fail to comprehend why their lives differ so greatly from those they are meant to save. They do not aspire to be fully human, nor do they dare to imagine living indefinitely. Instead, they merely hope to enrich their short lives and experience some of the beauty that the world has to offer. This alternative perspective adds a layer of humanity to the film, distinguishing it within its subject matter.

VI. THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF POST HUMANS

In *Never Let Me Go*, the post humans can be categorized into two groups based on their views on human cloning. One group sees clones as soulless organ providers, while the

other group aims to awaken and explore the clones' humanity. The majority of post humans accept the materialization of human clones, while a small minority represents a different perspective, reflecting a sense of guilt inherent in human nature, which is significant in the novel. During their childhood, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy attend Hail sham, one of the few schools dedicated to cultivating cloned individuals. Hail sham offers various educational and artistic courses to foster the creative and communicative abilities of clone students. The guardians, including Miss Emily and Madam, make efforts to provide a better living environment for the clones. Activities like "selling" serve as crucial opportunities for the clones to interact with the outside world, acquire external goods, and gather information. Additionally, Hail sham provides courses such as painting, sketching, pottery, prose, and poetry to nurture the students' talents and skills. Through these artistic endeavors, the clone students express their creativity. The way they are perceived and respected within Hail sham often depends on their artistic achievements. Outstanding works by clone students may even be selected by Madam for display in the gallery to gauge whether clones possess souls comparable to human beings. As the clones mature, they leave Hail sham and participate in an exchange program designed to familiarize them with real-life situations, such as practicing dialogue in a simulated coffee shop environment. The educational methods employed by Hail sham, including "selling," "communication," and "art education," inspire the clones' creative instincts and instill a sense of value in them. These experiences also cultivate their group identity and drive them to seek truth and self-recognition.

However, when Madam obtains evidence suggesting that human clones possess souls through their artistic expressions, she becomes fearful of them. Similarly, those who support the notion that cloning is more than just an organ provider initiates a campaign to prove their point. Hail sham's successful demonstration that clones raised in humane and cultured environments can develop sensitivity and intelligence akin to normal humans' fuels fear among humans about the awakening of clones. Consequently, the community abandons the issue of human cloning upon Hail sham's closure. From then on, human cloning becomes a commoditized and materialized "organ source." While people are aware that cloning is more than just a tool or machine, societal acceptance of phrases like "cancer is curable" minimizes these concerns. When individuals face loved ones or family members suffering from cancer, their primary concern becomes receiving organ transplants promptly to save lives. The clones who provide organs are largely disregarded, and people fail to consider whether clones share the same essence as their own lives. As cloning technology advances, humans also fear that clones may become more intelligent and superior, potentially threatening their position in society. Not only do they exploit clones, but they also harm individuals of lower social standing, viewing both clones and low-ranking people as tools for their benefit. Towards the end of *Never Let Me Go*, the author employs Madam's words to express sentiments and apprehensions about the posthuman era: "I saw the rapid arrival of a new world. More scientific, more effective. More treatments for past diseases... It's a very ruthless and cruel world."

VII. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* delves deep into the post human world portrayed in the novel, where human cloning coexists with humanity. Ishiguro's plain and calm narrative style effectively outlines the desolate fate of the clones without explicit struggle or denunciation. While most domestic scholars focus on the conflict

between scientific and technological advancements and ethics, the author argues that the work's underlying message extends beyond this dichotomy. *Never Let Me Go* serves as a metaphor for the survival of human society, utilizing the framework of science fiction and the concepts of "post-human" and "clone" to explore the human condition. The question of why the clones choose not to escape or end their own lives often perplexes readers and viewers, leading some to perceive the work as excessively dark, pessimistic, and fatalistic. However, it is precisely the silent endurance of the clones' choices that elevates the novel's themes beyond ordinary science fiction. It transcends mere debates about bioengineering and moral ethics or explorations of human nature. Instead, the novel becomes a reflection on the fragility, brevity, inherent fate, and responsibility of life.

Although set in the future, *Never Let Me Go* vividly depicts daily life, mirroring our reality. Beneath the guise of science fiction, the novel reveals the essence of human existence, including human relationships, emotions, sexuality, love, creativity, and the innocence of childhood. The clones, such as Kathy, perceive themselves as "human" from the inception of their independent thinking. Despite Hail sham's attempts to restrict their activities and indoctrinate them, these children are no different from their non-clone counterparts. They experience friendship, jealousy, teasing, deception, independent thinking, rich emotions, and their understanding of the world—they are undeniably "human." In the final scenes of the novel, as Kathy contemplates the sunset, she acknowledges that both donors and recipients ultimately face the end of life, having embarked on a path of selfless donation and dedication. In reality, every person in society can be seen as a "donor." From an early age, the clones in *Never Let Me Go* were taught that their purpose in life is to provide organs to those in the outside world. As they repeatedly give, their health deteriorates until they eventually die with honor. Similarly, people in our society are taught that the value of their lives hinges on how much they give and contribute to society. In such a system, individuals may feel there is no alternative path to realizing their self-worth.

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