

**BIOETHICS AND THE POSTHUMAN CONDITION: HUMAN CLONING IN KAZUO
ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO***

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Abstract

The twentieth century has witnessed a flurry of technological as well as scientific innovations in almost every walk of life. Most of the changes happening around us at present were anticipated decades ago by science fiction writers who were prescient enough to foresee a time when the latent potentialities of various forms of technology would be fully realized. However, the unbridled growth of technology has also brought with it a host of ethical problems, most of which centre on the consequences of humankind transgressing the conventionally defined limits to experience and knowledge. The present paper attempts to problematize the transhuman ambitions of current biotechnological research through an analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's sci-fi novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005). It employs the novel as a springboard to launch pertinent questions related to human cloning, prosthetics, organ harvesting, and the prospect of an eternal life, into the trajectory of a dystopian analysis of our posthuman future. The paper, however, does not advance posthumanism itself as a negative case. It attempts to distinguish between posthumanist endeavours, which necessitate the activation of a non-dualistic approach to the whole of life, and hubristic transhumanist projects that are informed by anthropocentric prejudices.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, cloning, face of the other, homo sacer, posthuman

Science fiction is a form of fiction that deals primarily with the effect of actual or imagined technological changes upon society and individuals. What sets sci-fi apart from other genres is its ability to offer critical commentary on social changes by analysing the phases through which contemporary or future forms of technology progress or are likely to progress. From time travel to artificial reproduction, there is no dearth of innovative ideas in the domain of science fiction. An analysis of popular SF novels produced in the last few decades like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931), Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), and Michael Marshall Smith's *Spare* (1996) reveals that the theme of cloning has never failed to engage the interests of sci-fi readers. Science fiction repeatedly features plots built around the theme of human cloning to raise polemical ideas about identity and subjectivity, and to predict a new world order in which certain elite human beings are able to purchase organs harvested from their clones to draw out their lives indefinitely. This paper discusses Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as a novel that presents the indeterminate status of clones as half-human and half-automaton. It begins with a discussion of the plight of the clones as presented in the novel and goes on to raise larger questions about bioethics and the politics of organ donation.

Kazuo Ishiguro, a major post human novelist of the twentieth century, is more popularly known for his lyrical tales of regret than for his contributions to science fiction. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017 for his oeuvre that strives to uncover the yawning abyss beneath the illusory sense of connection that we feel to the world. *Never Let Me Go* is perhaps the only work by Ishiguro that is set in an overtly dystopian world, and which addresses mainstream science fiction themes. *Never Let Me Go* is set in England between the 1970s and 1990s, and presents an alternative history in which artificial reproduction is approved by the state and human clones are widely produced.

The novel, which unfolds through Kathy's first-person narration, follows her life through three distinct stages. It opens with her childhood as the inmate of a boarding school called Hailsham, where she lives in isolation along with other clones under the care of "guardians". With Miss Lucy's arrival,

it is revealed that Hailsham's ultimate goal is to cultivate the hapless boarders as organ donors who must devote themselves selflessly to the caprices of the guardians. The second stage sees Kathy in her search for identity as she battles with her own emotional insecurities. At the age of eighteen, Kathy and other clones are assigned to different "cottages" and begin to experience the outside world to which they had had no access to before. They adapt to the surrounding environment in their own way, trying to accept their own destiny, and look for personal meanings in life. Kathy gets emotionally entangled with Tommy and Ruth and also becomes a "carer" at this stage. At the third stage, we find Kathy and the other clones trying to make sense of their short lives as they await organ donation and subsequently their death, which is euphemistically referred to as "completion". The novel deftly portrays the emotional turmoil experienced by clones like Kathy in the face of the realization that they are just containers for the organs required by a group of privileged individuals.

It can be seen that the term "cloning" is used in a variety of contexts to describe practices that involve the duplication of biological material. Cloning can occur at different levels of bodily organization: at the level of DNA, a single cell, tissues, or even the whole organism. The world at large was introduced to the mysteries of cloning only in 1997 when Dolly, a sheep, became an instant media sensation as a result of her being created through a technique called somatic cell nuclear transfer or SCNT. The two kinds of SCNT cloning that are in place today are: 1) research cloning aka therapeutic cloning and 2) reproductive cloning. The primary difference between research cloning and reproductive cloning is that whereas the former is intended to create embryonic stem cells that can later be used for research and therapeutic purposes, the latter deals with the cloning of whole animals and humans.

Human cloning, as the term denotes, is the creation of genetically identical human copies. If the only difference between sexual reproduction and cloning is one of the means adopted to accomplish the same ends, then one would be right in arguing that clones should be accorded the same civil rights as ordinary human beings. But the novel proves that such reasoning reflects more than anything our naivete and wishful thinking about the future dominated by Capitalist interests. In portraying a time when science and technology have grown exponentially, and where wealthy individuals are able to commission clones for replenishing their organs as and when they fail, the novel exposes the tragic truth about anthropocentric worldviews. As an example of clone fiction, the novel concerns itself with the question of what really constitutes a human and who can all be categorized as such, at the same time conveying the message that cloning and genetic engineering can lead to unpredictable and catastrophic consequences if they are undertaken in the name of preserving the status quo. Since posthumanism deals with the question of what it means to be a human in a technologized world, any discussion on cloning will be drastically incomplete unless it passes through the prism of posthumanism. Posthumanism poses fundamental questions about human identity and explores the boundary between the self and the other, with a view to examining whether the human is an elite category as it is touted to be or not. The shocking revelation that posthuman makes, at the end of its critique, is that the human has never been a category distinct from animals before the advent of Italian Renaissance, and that it is humanistic thought paradigms that have turned the human into a closed and homogeneous unit from which racial, sexual, and national differences were eviscerated to aggrandize white, male, and heterosexual identities.

Posthuman literature often represents bodies that are "abject" so as to rupture the distinction between corporeal normativity and monstrosity. Julia Kristeva speaks of abject bodies as neither subject nor object and neither sanitized nor unclean. She refers to the bodies of corpses that shockingly remind us of our own impending death. The concept can be used in an extended sense to refer to the Other composed of women, queer communities, Black people, and so on. Kristeva argues that the primary reason such bodies evoke abjection in spectators is because of their predilection to cause disturbances in conventional structures of order and identity. She argues that they are "inbetween, ambiguous, and composite" (4). Following Kristeva, it can be argued that the clones depicted in Ishiguro's novel are also

object since they occupy in-between zones. They evoke a feeling of abjection in others because of their uncanny resemblance to humans, which is in turn undercut by their role as mere bodies for organ harvesting. Kristeva's concept of object bodies fits in with the principles of posthumanism since it exposes the tenuous nature of human subjectivity and calls for a re-examination of hermetic ontological boundaries.

Posthumanism examines how, with the accelerating growth of biotechnology and artificial intelligence (AI) in the early 21st century, human beings began to delve into sophisticated means of overcoming their individual defects. It also analyses the ways in which human beings attempt to transcend their inherent biological limitations and achieve longevity or even eternal life. An attack of Liberal Humanism, posthumanism focusses on new ways of understanding the human subject away from his usual seat of eminence at the centre of every discourse. For this reason, the emergence of "posthumanism" can also be deemed as the deconstruction of the concept of "Man". Posthumanism turns its stringent attack against the grounds on which traditional humanism exempted certain categories of the human from the purview of subjecthood and identity. It connects past injustices and atrocities perpetrated in the name of race, sex, and creed to new forms of exclusion practised in the contemporary world by reactivating old Humanistic philosophies and presenting them under the guise of Transhumanism.

The Transhumanist view of human enhancement is best exemplified by Max More, a self-proclaimed Extropian, who claims that human beings can transcend their biological flaws with the help of advanced technology. He believes that human beings have already reached a posthuman phase and that they can consciously take control of their lives. His exuberant claims about the acceleration of transhuman progress are critiqued by some theorists as a form of "Resurgent Prometheanism" (Bendle 3). Luca Valera also joins the attack against More when he argues in his article "Posthumanism: Beyond Humanism" that "technology is not configured as an extrinsic way through which the living being progressively eliminated its limitation, but rather, as an intrinsic possibility of living being" (486). Valera's explication also points to the fundamental shift between posthumanism and transhumanism. Whereas posthumanism understands corporeality and technology as mutually entwined, transhumanism posits the somewhat dangerous idea that technology is external to the human body. In Ishiguro's novel too, it is this transhumanist idea of human enhancement, rather than posthuman orientations, that are criticized.

Donna J. Haraway is a posthuman thinker who has given a new lease of life to the term "cyborg", which was used since its emergence in a somewhat restricted sense to refer to an entity that combined both cybernetic as well as organic qualities. Haraway's work, which expands metaphorical implications of a cyborgian ontology, calls for the reconceptualization of human beings themselves as cyborgs. She says that in today's world, on account of the technologization of our bodies, it is impossible to harbour any cherished view of the human as an intact figure constituted only by organic elements. She argues that it is not only the use of prostheses and artificial implants that have turned us into cyborgs but also the spate of a series of radical ideas in the field of postcolonialism, radical feminism, and postmodernism that have demolished the essentialist prejudices of the human subject. The cyborg is, then, the paradigm case of the "confusion of boundaries" and is characteristic of the defiance hurled in the face of attempts to keep opposing fields separate. As Haraway says in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "We are cyborgs, both machine and organism. Even more: the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (8).

Posthumanists emphasize the importance of respecting not only human life but also all kinds of life, be it animals, birds, or even parasites. The posthuman angle of bioethics is best exemplified by the arguments raised in the book *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* co-authored by Tom Beauchamp and J.F. Childress. The four main principles the authors enunciate in their work—respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice—are at present used in bioethical research and decision-making to

ensure that ethical boundaries are not transgressed at will. Ishiguro's novel can be seen to portray a future world where these principles are not only disregarded but also blatantly encroached upon.

While most people look upon human cloning as a distant possibility that has no immediate repercussions for their life, the truth is that the only factor preventing science from taking the extra step and populating the world with clones who will be raised as "donors" in special communities is a set of complex ethical considerations. This crisis of conscience in biotechnological research is succinctly summarized by Francis Fukuyama in his *Our Posthuman Future*. He says, "the discussion [on cloning] remains mired at a relatively abstract level" with "one camp that would like to permit everything and another camp that would like to ban wide areas of research and practice" (10). He goes on to argue that "the ultimate prize of modern genetic technology will be the 'designer baby'" (76). He envisages a future in which geneticists will identify the genes for a various special characteristics like intelligence, height, beauty, etc. and employ this knowledge to create genetically enhanced children. Fukuyama also identifies somatic gene therapy and germ-line engineering as the two ways by which genetic engineering can be accomplished.

Rearing clones as "non-human" organ sources is one of the menacing surprises technological advance is bound to spring on us in the near future. *Never Let Me Go* weighs the pros and cons of cloning and highlights the existential crises that clones have to grow up as a warning sign against biotechnological advances that do not take pertinent psychological factors into consideration. The status of clones as mere vessels for organs, with no family to lend them emotional sustenance, or any rights that ordinary human beings are born with, makes us question whether human cloning can be justified at all. The novel paints a sombre portrait of a world where reproductive cloning has been legalized in order to harvest organs. Human clones are artificially engendered in laboratories only to be taken apart bit by bit when their organs are ripe enough to replace those of their sponsors. The life of the cloned individual is caught in a maze of deprivations and illusions. From the very moment of their conception, they are waiting to fulfil the destiny they were created for.

In *Never Let Me Go*, all the clones living in Hailsham are depicted as human beings possessing emotional versatility as well as self-awareness. They are educated and have creative abilities just like normal human beings. However, they are treated as "non-human" since the only purpose for which they have been created is to supply their prototypes with organs. Every other ability they have is subsumed under their larger role as organ-donors. Because of this they are denied the rights ordinary people enjoy and take for granted. The clones are literally imprisoned in Hailsham and are prohibited to cross the school boundary. They even have to wear an electronic ID bracelet for health check and are monitored regularly just like livestock which are fattened in view of day of the feast.

The teachers in Hailsham are called "guardians" and their role is to reconnoitre the movements of the clones all the time. It is Miss Lucy, one of the guardians, who breaks the truth to the clones that all students in Hailsham are cloned from their human lookalikes and that they are raised solely to provide organs. Once the clones graduate from Hailsham, they are assigned to "cottages" where they have to wait for the donation to begin. A particular clone may do up to four or five donations after which he/she "completes." The fact that the clones are not accorded a human status is evident from the kind of terminology that is used to paper over the injustice that is done to them. Comparing teachers to "guardians" and death to "completion" is supposed to give the donors a feeling of community and make them internalize the importance of the roles they perform. However, the very processes that are instituted to preserve the façade of altruism and social responsibility serve to expose the indoctrination of clones taking place in Hailsham.

The clones are encouraged to delude themselves by thinking that their lives are destined for "completion" in some quasi-religious heaven where their status as organ-donors is sure to earn them salvation and perennial contentment. However, there are several episodes in the novel where the

characters wake out of their psychological conditioning and question their impending fates. For instance, upon knowing about Tommy's fourth donation, Kathy waxes sad. She reasons that after the fourth donation, there will be "no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; ...nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off (279). This extract proves that Kathy is self-aware just like any other human being and is able to locate organ-donation in a wider context where death looms as an inevitability.

Never Let Me Go demonstrates how difference becomes a mark of pejoration. Although the clones have the same kind of emotions and dreams just like human beings, they do not have the liberty to follow their ambitions. They are completely depersonalized. Even the names they are given prove this. The name of a clone has two parts: the first part which resembles a normal human's name and the second which is a letter like A, B, or H. As soon as the first part of the name creates the impression that the clones are human, the second part, which sounds like alphabetical codes assigned to robots in an assembly line, consciously shatters it. The act of coding clones thus becomes an instance of objectification. Another instance of such discrimination can be observed in the episode in which Peter's dream of pursuing an acting gig in America is thwarted. Miss Lucy, his guardian, disabuses him of the lies with which he has cushioned his prickly contact with experiential reality, when she asserts with grim finality that none of them will ever be free to roam around the world or become what their hearts desire. On the contrary, she says: "You'll become adults, then before you are old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do" (81).

The existential crisis experienced by the clones in the novel can be explained using Giorgio Agamben's concept of "homo sacer". This view is corroborated by the prominent posthuman theorist Promod K. Nayar, who in his essay "The Fiction of Bioethics: Posthumanism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" argues that "the clones are mere bodies/lives that may be killed off by humans through legally and socially accepted procedures without inviting punishment" (10). What constitutes the clones as expendable bodies/lives is their in-between state abutting, on the one hand, on the human, and on the other, on the non-human. Since the clones exist in a predefined telic scheme, beginning with their artificial origin and culminating with their "completion" as useful prostheses, their lives are played out at the crossroads of biology and politics.

In order to understand Agamben's concept better, one should begin with Foucault's articulation of the praxis of domination and power in different set-ups like the family, educational institutions, work places, and so on. Foucault asserts that, coinciding with the Enlightenment, biological life began to be interpenetrated by political techniques that till then had confined their operations to the organs of the state. In the last part of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault refers to this interpenetration as "biopolitics" and attempts to show how devices of power take control of the biological aspects of human life like sex and procreation. Speaking of the permeation of political power in the 18th century, he says, "The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed" (139).

Foucault's analysis of the structures of power is further problematized by Agamben who supplements the concept of biopolitics with the idea of "homo sacer" or "sacred man" *Homo Sacer* is a juridical term borrowed from archaic Roman law to designate an individual who was ostracized as a result of some grave infringement. The condition of being a "homo sacere" meant that from the moment the individual was ritualistically pronounced as banished from the socio-political order, he could be killed by anyone with impunity in a sacrificial ritual, and the usual laws that would apply in the case of murder and bodily injury would remain suspended then. The act of ostracising the "sacred man" exempts him from the purview of all communal laws, with the only law binding him being the one that brands him as an outcaste. This also means that anybody may kill the "homo sacer" without fear of

punishment. The only proviso is that such an act will; be considered a homicide and the body of the victim cannot be “offered as sacrifice (sacrificium) to the gods of Rome” (8).

The figure of the clone in the novel can be considered a case of “homo sacer” since it exists outside heteronormative socio-political systems. Whereas organ harvesting is generally perceived as a crime, in the novel it is considered legal to rear clones as organ donors. No legal or punitive system will interfere with surgeons who operate on the clones since the practice is approved by the state. This also means that even if the clones might wish to protest against the injustice and oppression that is meted out to them, they have no means of obtaining legal representation. The atrocities perpetrated against them are not even labelled as crimes since they are thought to be essential for the survival and wellbeing of ordinary humans. What we have here, then, is an interesting situation analogous to the one that delimits the rights of the “homo sacer”. The clones, being outside the human order, can be disposed of at will despite their manifestly human abilities and thought patterns.

The paper has demonstrated how *Never Let Me Go* presents us with a future in which the principles of posthumanism, founded on boundary-blurring and the endorsement of differences, cannot come to fruition as a result of the overemphasis on Transhumanist values. Society, as presented in the novel, is divided into two classes—that of organ receivers and donors. What this leads to is a dualistic scheme in which the receivers always have the upper hand and the clones are relegated to the position of mere bodies. The clones are considered the Other and treated differently from ordinary humans. There is an uncanny episode in the novel that conveys the full horror of the Other’s encounter with the “human”. Whereas it is usually enfranchised human beings who betray repulsion at the sight of the Other, here the “affect” of uncanniness is revered. One of the clones, Ruth glimpses a woman who looks just like her and collapses at the realization that she herself is “the Other”. She becomes hysterical following the episode and says: We all know it. We’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramp...That’s what we come from. We all know it, so why don’t we say it (166).

Immanuel Levinas, in speaking of the ethical commitment to the other, once coined the phrase “the face of the other.” Levinas does not so much mean the human face in the physical sense as how it is experienced in daily encounters as the living presence of another individual and, therefore, as something experienced socially as well as ethically. The living presence of the other means that you cannot reduce the person before you into a series of ideas or images. The face is the Other’s point of contact with a hostile world. As such, it is the site where the politics of discrimination are reinforced. In Ishiguro’s novel, normal human beings, instead of responding to the “face” of the clones with empathy, act in predefined ways. The clones are readily objectified and considered as inhabiting a lower plane of existence than normal human beings.

Thus, it can be seen that the novel fundamentally advances a very unflattering picture of the future where “real” human beings enact the age-old patterns of oppression against clones despite the latter’s manifest creative abilities and high degree of self-awareness. What the novel calls for is the realization that humans are in no way superior to the clones. It makes us question the grounds on which we arrogate authenticity to ourselves while labelling clones as “artificial”. Ishiguro’s novel is rooted in a posthuman understanding of differences. It does not valorise heteronormativity nor does it look back nostalgically to a time when humans were free of the entanglements of technology. It understands that human beings have been enmeshed in technology since the beginning of history and that their corporeal boundaries have been progressively expanded by this interrelationship. Finally, it argues that privileging anthropocentric and a heteronormative idea in a posthuman age is not only dangerous to our collective survival but also reductive and absurd.

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