

## KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*: AN ALTERNATE HISTORY OF CLONING

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*Never Let Me Go*, the sixth novel of the celebrated contemporary British novelist and the Nobel Laureate Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, is a unique book in many aspects, in terms of its novel theme of human cloning, its technique of a “quasi-science fiction” (Menand), its creation of an alternate Britain where the clones concur with the humans and its allegoric meditations on the philosophical issues of mortality and futility of human existence. Published in 2005, the novel won a Booker nomination, along with the Arthur C. Clarke Award for the best British science fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It got featured in the list of twenty best novels of the twenty-first century, according to the Swiss news paper *Tages Anzeiger* and was one among the hundred best English language novels selected by the *Time Magazine* from 1923 to 2005. The novel was thrice adapted. The first was a British movie bearing the same name in 2010. The second attempt was a Japanese play titled *Watashiwo Hanasanaide* in 2014 and the third was another Japanese tele-play of the same name in 2016.

Popularly known as “sci-fi,” the science fiction is a genre of highly speculative, imaginative and futuristic literature that covers a wide variety of topics, settings and ideologies that are still plausible according to the scientific understanding of its zeitgeist. Based on their accuracy of details and heavy reliance on scientific laws, the sci-fi can be “hard” or “soft”. According to *Literary Terms. Net*, those texts that strictly follow the scientific principles of natural and physical sciences, written by scientists themselves and making nuanced predictions based on the then scientific and technological

innovations fall into the realm of hard science fiction. The softer ones concern themselves more with the laws of social sciences like anthropology and sociology. They are composed by literary artists and focus on the scientific possibilities of human behaviour. Right from the days of veteran sci-fi writers like H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Isaac Asimov, science fiction has been a combination of both hard and soft elements and has dealt with such diverse themes as time travel, space travel, aliens and extra-terrestrial life, parallel universes, paranormal existence, post-apocalyptic life, enhanced humans, mutants, manipulated DNA and genetic engineering.

Widely recognized as a novel belonging to the genre of dystopian science fiction and cloning, *Never Let Me Go* demands some reference to cloning. The National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) of the U.S. government defines cloning as a process that produces “genetically identical copies of a biological entity”. As a mode of asexual reproduction, cloning exists naturally in the biological world. The technique of grafting, for example, by which the vegetative propagation of plants like potato and banana takes place, is a type of natural cloning. In fact, the etymological derivation of the term “clone”, from an ancient Greek word meaning “twig”, brings out this horticultural connection. The NHGRI classifies artificial cloning into three types, based on the purpose and product of cloning. These are gene cloning where copies of genes and segments of DNA are produced; reproductive cloning where identical copies of whole animals are produced like the now famous Dolly the sheep and the therapeutic cloning where embryonic stem cells are cloned to grow new tissues in the place of injured and diseased ones.

Ishiguro combines the scientific premises of both reproductive and therapeutic cloning to create his parallel world of the clones. The

readers are given to understand that the clones are “hatched” out of murky laboratories and allowed to grow into adulthood solely with the intention of harvesting their vital organs. Some of the more fortunate ones get entry into boarding schools like Hailsham. Here an illusion of a proper childhood is created under the care of their teachers whom they call “guardians”. Ishiguro makes use of and extensive, artificial and euphemistic jargon to describe them. The clones during their school-going age are called “students”. Before becoming donors themselves, they are called “carers” and are trained to look after the donors who are recuperating in the nursing homes between their donations. Although it is understood that by their fourth donation, a donor “completes” or dies, the clones stoically accept their fate without any protest and none of the carers or donors thinks of escaping their destinies, by blending themselves into the lives of ordinary human beings whom they call the “normals”.

As already stated, the novel deserves multiple labels and problematizes clear-cut genre classifications. While the theme of human cloning easily connects it with science fiction, Ishiguro's favourite technique of memory narration by a single protagonist, reminiscing her childhood and youth in the nineteen eighties and late nineteen nineties, imparts the text with the structure of a what-if novel of alternate history. As it is, the text conceptualizes a post-war Britain during “the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly”, thereby curing “so many previously incurable conditions” (257). This is done with the help of the vital organs harvested from the bodies of the human clones such as the protagonist and her friends. However, these fictitious “historical” details come only towards the climax of the novel, which until then carries the attributes of a coming of age story, involving student-life, the relations among students themselves, their

friendships, enmities and petty quarrels, their relations with their teachers and a host of other activities that characterises an ordinary student's life. They are under pressure to create artworks as well. The clones are also reminded to contribute or repay the society for their upkeep.

Divided into three parts, comprising the clones' childhood in the idyllic and insular boarding house of Hailsham, their lives in the Cottages, followed by the subsequent stages of their existence as carers and finally as donors who complete their lives by their fourth donation. The story bears unmistakable resemblance to the Harry Potter series. If J. K. Rowling portrayed her hero and friends as super-humans possessing magical abilities as contrasted from the unmagical “muggles” or ordinary humans, Ishiguro's protagonists are sub-human clones, whose artwork are, at best, suggestive of their creativity and their souls, the presence of which are thought to be proof enough to equate them with the “normal” humans. If Hogwarts trained its inmates with spells, skills and portions required to enhance their magical capabilities and coached them to be proper wizards and witches in future, the education provided at Hailsham was pointless, meant only to distract the students from the horrible fate and bleak future that awaited them, keeping them temporarily absorbed in the art, arithmetic, geography and Victorian novels that their teachers poured into them.

Like all the preceding five novels, *Never Let Me Go* begins in the classic Ishiguro style, with the first-person narration of the protagonist Kathy H., now a thirty-one-year old “carer”, with eleven years of service behind her. She is to be a “donor” in the next eight months, that is, by the end of that year, she would have served a total of twelve years in the capacity of a carer. As a typical Ishiguro protagonist, Kathy goes on to highlight her occupational efficiency as

revealed through the privileges she enjoys such as her car, her bedsit, her education at Hailsham and the recent sanctions to choose donors from her own people. Thus, she remembers how she became the carer of two of her childhood friends, Ruth and Tommy, as well as other multiple donors who were not agitated, “even before fourth donation” (3). This train of thought invariably leads her to reminisce about her childhood in Hailsham, her gang of six, the temper tantrums of Tommy D., the teachers whom they called “guardians” the Madame who occasionally visited their school to collect the best of their artwork for her “gallery” and so on. In all these descriptions, Ishiguro succeeds in creating the appearance of normalcy, letting us imagine that we are reading about a privileged public school, where the students are given utmost care to grow into respectable and responsible future citizens.

Apart from the weird vocabulary, the text does not detail the scientific premise or the technology applied to produce the clones, their pre-school existences, the models from whom they were designed, the expansions of the initials suffixed to their mononyms, the backgrounds of the receivers of their organ donations and so on. Ishiguro substitutes scientific accuracy by resorting to vague, ambiguous references to their asexual method of production such as “shadowy objects in test tubes” (256), whose organs helped to cure many previously incurable diseases like cancers, motor neurone disease and heart disease; and the reactions of repulsion and revulsion exhibited towards them by the normals like Madame: “she saw and decided in a second *what we were*, because you could see her stiffen as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her” (243). Here, one misses the comprehensive yet fictional Bokanovsky's Process of cloning described by Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World* or “exogenesis” described in Poul W. Anderson's “Un-Man”. At the same time, through the legally aborted “Morningdale scandal”,

Ishiguro suggests the possibility of a modern-day Frankenstein taking the cloning process a bit further to create clones of enhanced characteristics, thereby bringing about a superior race of clones who can replace the existing humans (258-59). Thus, viewed as a threat to the humans for whose physical well being clones were created, Ishiguro's clone protagonists are, at best, a subhuman race that is thoroughly exploited by the dominant and the privileged ones.

Time and again, readers and critics have pointed out the stoic acceptance exhibited by the clones of this novel as they willingly march towards the completion or their assured deaths. To be able to complete the fourth donation is a matter of pride for them and to die early is regarded as a shame. This is evident in their conversations. Ishiguro explains this through a circuitous logic. The clones from a very early age were prompted to make significant contributions to the external society. They were held responsible for the healthy maintenance of their bodies and were expected to while away time between their donations in poorly kept recovery centres. This aspect reinforces the futility of their existence. There is a world bereft of facts, newspapers and other media except porn magazines, rumours and hearsays, so that the information they possess cannot be used by them. What prevents them from escaping their destinies by driving away in their cars remains a mystery throughout the novel? The role of the carers also remains a mystery. They occasionally visit their donors in recovery centres, with biscuits and mineral water bottles, holding conversations with them, and prepare them for their final destinies. If these clones were brought to life solely for the purpose of harvesting their organs, why is it that so much time and money are wasted, waiting for them to grow into their youths and training them to be carers in between?

This state of affairs leads us to problematize the very notion of

donation, as used in the novel. Ishiguro refrains from the usage of “harvesting” and instead resorts to “donation”. Apart from the willingness to give up the body parts, the term “donation”, derived from a thirteenth century French word, is an “act of giving or bestowing that which is gratuitously given, a grant or gift”, especially to a charity (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). If the cloned students of *Never Let Me Go* are donating their body organs to the receivers, it presupposes that they should be the rightful owners of those organs, should be willingly gifting them and they regard the human receivers as the needy ones that accept this charity. If the clones are grown as crops, cattle or poultry, meant for human consumption, we can allay our qualms of stealing their organs. Still, can they be treated as such, especially when they themselves know that these donations lead to their deaths and that they are indeed sacrificing their lives for the humanity. Similarly, if they are treated as “less than human” despicable creatures, the question is how can they feel superior enough to provide the humans with charity. They accept their destinies as irrevocable despite yearning to put it off for a few years and much of the text is concerned with the search to defer their donations and subsequent deaths. Like us humans, they too are apprehensive of the experience of death:

How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way, how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of the line; how there are no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; how there's nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off. It's horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don't want to think about it. (274)

The only explanation possible to all these baffling questions

is that the clones of this novel symbolize the subaltern groups among the humans themselves, who are deprived of their basic human rights and opportunities to lead decent lives. They are cultured only to serve the selfish interests of the rich and the privileged. They are fed with illusory and obsolete ideas of sacrifice, responsibility and the need to make significant contributions so that they are unable to resist dire exploitation and lack the volition to disobey the discriminatory rules that are thrust upon them. Such subgroups could be any of the marginalized, labelled as the black, the woman, the transgender, the migrant, the poor, the aboriginal and so on, that occupy the fringes of the civilized society, catering to the needs of the privileged and the powerful.

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