
Art as Humanity: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* raises and brings to the crisis some of the most interesting debates on the function of literature and the arts and its relationship with politics. The novel can and has been read as a dystopian cautionary tale on the ways in which intervention of science and technology can destabilise our understanding of what constitutes being human. The paper examines how Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* challenges the impassioned defence of the Humanities and the limitations of such claims within neoliberal societies. It scrutinizes the dark intentions framing the conceptual and infrastructural discourses on good citizenship, care-giving, professional commitments, and social behaviour.

Keywords: Literature, empathy, solidarities, human relationships, Humanities.

Talking about the function of the literary imagination in public life and the fundamental role literature performs in democracy, Martha Nussbaum argues that literature expands our capacities for empathy which is crucial in the development of a moral imagination. Placing empathy at the centre of being 'human', Nussbaum avers that the ability to imagine difference is fundamental to political solidarities and democratic politics. Nussbaum believes that the role of education is to develop and cultivate "the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation" (Nussbaum 6). The deep and intrinsic relationship between education and democratic citizenship that Nussbaum delineates in her work is premised on a certain notion of being 'human', that can be learned from the Humanities and the arts (Nussbaum 7).

Nussbaum's defence of Literature is partly a response to the steady denunciation and marginalization of the Humanities in neoliberal economies. With the privatization of higher education, the blatant convergence of education and private enterprise and businesses, and the rising demand for techno-sciences, the value of a Humanities education is fast declining. Considered to be metrically 'intangible' without measurable outcomes, Humanities departments suffer massive cuts and defunding of projects. The shrinking space for a Humanities education and the concomitant suspicion of critical thinking in public life have led to an attrition in democratic politics in all neoliberal economies.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* raises and brings to the crisis some of the most interesting debates on the function of literature and the arts and its relationship with politics. The novel can and has been read as a dystopian cautionary tale on the ways in which intervention of science and technology can destabilise our understanding of what constitutes being human. Yet, though the novel uses the tropes of science fiction, there is very little discussion on the scientific aspects of human cloning. Instead, Ishiguro situates the narrative within the framework of a coming-of-age novel, written in the form of a memoir. Set in 1990s England, the novel is about a group of human clones raised in a secluded, private boarding school to be ultimately 'harvested' for their organs. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Kathy H, a 31-year-old 'carer' at the time of writing her memoir, who talks about her friends and their childhood and early adulthood in Hailsham. The autobiographical trope draws the reader into the story who unwittingly expects a coming-of-age narrative. The fact that Kathy H is a clone is not revealed at the outset. Terms like 'carer', 'donor', 'complete' which are used in quotidian life take on nightmarish associations as it is gradually revealed that the human clones follow a set trajectory- they are employed as carers of those who go through stages of organ donation before ultimately becoming donors themselves. The final stage of the donating process which ends in death is innocuously termed 'complete'.

The autobiographical mode presupposes a distinct subjectivity from which the world is accessed, understood and narrated. An autobiography/memoir typically reveals the process through which that subjectivity is constructed which explains the significance given to the formative (childhood) years of the author's life. Ishiguro uses the humanist trope to introduce Kathy H., and then goes on to problematise the universal, and invites the reader to ask challenging questions of the category. As mentioned earlier, the fact that Kathy is a clone is not revealed at the beginning of the novel. This occlusion presses her address to the reader when she says, "I don't how it was where you were..." (Ishiguro 13), to identify with a 'non-human'. In retrospect, it provokes an examination of the conditions of empathetic identification of the reader with the narrator. According to Shameem Black (2009), the

readers are forced to wonder how they could have missed the “sinister significance of such words as “donor” and “carer.” Our own comfortable sense of empathetic solidarity with Kathy ultimately constitutes the horror of the novel’s rhetorical technique” (Black 792).

The children at Hailsham live in a highly controlled environment, with set rules of mobility, a prescribed education with a focussed outcome, and a programmatic schema to prepare them for a certain relationship with their bodies. There is pervasive knowledge and acceptance of the fact they are raised to be ‘harvested’. The clones are raised to donate their organs to the ‘normals’, the term Kathy uses to refer to the humans. The novel repeatedly evokes the distinction between the clones and ‘normals’ as categories but the denotative assumptions of the two terms are left ambiguous. The institutional instruments of control, the stagist and final outcome of clones’ lives are organised with detailed precision. But at the centre of this elaborate structure is a troubling ambiguity about whether the clones have a soul. The importance of this question is instrumental rather than philosophical because the organs are life-saving for the ‘normals’. The education system in Hailsham is structured to instruct the students in the Humanities. There is a special and emphatic attention on art-making. Miss Emily clearly articulates the reason as to why the students are expected to create and exchange art. She says, “...your art will reveal your inner selves” (Ishiguro 254). In Hailsham, social and institutional acceptance depends on the clones’ ability to create. The humanist position on the significance of the arts as a means to civilisational salvation is implied ironically in the novel. The criticality that the study and the creation of arts are meant to provoke, on which rests the defence of a humanities education, is shown to produce compliance in the novel. Tommy’s inability to create ‘sensible’ art makes him an outlier. He exhibits his rebelliousness by refusing to comply with the pressure of creating art. If the underlying presumption is that engagement with art is a conduit to the human soul then the novel problematises this premise.

The creation and circulation of art in Hailsham has a well-defined economy. The novel uses terms like ‘token’ and ‘exchange’ to describe the circulation of art in the school. Some of the art is bought by Madame who purportedly exhibits the art she collects from the school in a gallery. The name of the patron, the gallery where the art is exhibited are left vague for the students. The guardians urge the students to create art, telling them that the best of it would be exhibited to the world. Inspiration serves as a subtle form of control, yet rumours in the corridors of Hailsham, passed on generationally, indicate that their artwork is used as material proof that the clones possess a soul. Within the school, students during “Exchanges,” buy each other’s art which they call ‘collections’ to make their living spaces aesthetic. Though the narrator is credulous of the implications of these terms and speaks nostalgically about her time at Hailsham, the logic and terminology of capitalistic economy

are

made abundantly explicit. The novel cynically subverts the liberal humanist ideas of the construction and function of art. The instrumentalised production of art in Hailsham mirrors the production of the clones for ‘harvest’ and consumption. It is gradually disclosed that the entire process of art making is created to normalise the extraordinary sacrifices demanded of the clones. Mark Rollins points out that the guardians “deliberately blur the distinctions between gifts and commodities in order to condition the clones to accept the removal of their organs” (Rollins 351). The clones are taught to call themselves as ‘donors’, thus creating a language of passivity. The discrepancy between the actual process of ‘donation’ and the language that veils the cruelty is most intimately represented in Kathy’s uncritical style of narration. She says, “it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well (Ishiguro 3). It is unveiled later that Hailsham was an experiment, an advocacy programme for a more humane treatment of the clones. The art the clones produced was meant to evoke empathy and identification in ‘normal’ people. This empathetic identification was meant to create a discourse on the ethical treatment of the clones. When Kathy travels across England, from centre to centre as a ‘carer’, she encounters clones who lived in miserable conditions. Hailsham was like a dream to them, and Kathy’s indoctrinated illusions about her school are never dispelled or critically understood.

Critics like Kelly Reich read *Never Let Me Go* as a critique of modern governmentality with its creation of the social aggregate through panopticon infrastructuralism. She says, “the novel forces us to contend with the disappearance of the individual and the emergence of the social aggregate...” (Reich 632). The programmatic state control of individuals is exposed in the way the clones are raised and educated. It is interesting that Hailsham is a private institution. The novel is set in the 1990s, as neoliberal policies steadily take over resource control and distribution in England. The chilling aspect of economic reform, growing class and race divide, and the declining bargaining power of the vulnerable classes is manifest in the way the cloning project functions. When the clones imagine their origins, they search for them in pornographic magazines, billboards, in the lower strata of society. While the clones are brought up in the eerily beautiful greens of Hailsham, they do not have the right to choose their futures. The ameliorative surroundings of the privately owned Hailsham produces ‘subjects’ who consider themselves ‘lucky’, obscuring the cruel realities of their instrumentalised lives. The illusion of choice that consumerism and capitalism produce is strikingly apparent in the novel, as the clones actually have no real choice. The art they produce too has to fit into a predetermined schema, their responses and circulation are institutionally determined. In this context, Tommy’s art is disconcerting and fails to adhere to the set conventions. It is important to note that Ishiguro chooses Kathy and not Tommy or Ruth as the narrative medium in the novel. Kathy’s flat, uncritical narrative position testifies to the success of the ideologically deceptive discourse

of the biopolitical cloning programme. Kathy's acceptance of her utilitarian subjectivity creates a sense of chilling dread. The novel shows the process of how the Humanities and the art curriculum at Hailsham is instrumentalised to generate collaboration and compliance of the clones with their predetermined destinies.

The novel challenges the impassioned defence of the Humanities and the limitations of such claims within neoliberal societies. Gauri Viswanathan in her path breaking work *Masks of Conquest* traces the historical emergence of English Studies in the British colonies and illustrates the role played by the discipline in creating colonial subjects. She illuminates how the study of English Literature produced the socio-political and ideological framework for colonial governmentality. The intrinsic relationship between dominant ideological projects and literary studies have been interrogated by feminist, postcolonial, and anti-racist movements. Though the novel can be situated within the context of public and scientific discussions on genetic engineering and experiments in cloning technologies, the dystopian aspect of *Never Let Me Go* does not lie in the ethically debatable biotechnological projects, but in the way the novel scrutinizes the dark intentions framing the conceptual and infrastructural discourses on good citizenship, care-giving, professional commitments, and social behaviour. As mentioned earlier, the ordinary provenance of terms like 'carer', 'donor', 'exchange', 'token', 'complete' - the novel exposes dystopian instrumentalisation of the language of ethics to enable ideological compliance, sustain social inequities and invisibilise vulnerabilities. The study of literature and creation of art is part of the same project. The question then is, if the novel too, as a literary text, rescinds its own radical potential. By interrogating the liberal humanist claims about the role of art in producing empathetic understanding and identification, the novel forces the reader to recognise her own ideologically manufactured expectations. The form of the memoir draws the reader into a mode of identification only to challenge her assumptions later. By making a clone, a 'non-human' the narrator, the novel forces an examination of the category of the human and what constitutes humanness. In the novel too, the guardians and the other humans controlling the clones are constantly engaged in a process to determine or ascertain the "humanness" of the clones. Ironically, the proof of their humanity is crucial to legitimise and ethically validate an inhuman project.

Tommy's inability to fit in and Ruth's rages cracks the controlled environment of Hailsham. When Tommy begins to draw his animals, not the kind of art encouraged by the school, he expresses his defiance of the liberal humanist aesthetic. When Kathy sees Tommy's work, she realises- "...what I was looking at was so different from anything the guardians had taught us to do at Hailsham" (Ishiguro 187). Tommy's animated non-human creatures are versions of the human clones. His art demands a recognition of the exclusionary

politics embedded in humanist ideals. Though as a narrator Kathy never fully realises her participation in a system that is created for her procedural extermination, her care of her friends before they ‘complete’ goes beyond this infrastructural remit. It is not their art but the friendship between Tommy, Ruth, and Kathy that attest their humanity. In one of the most poignant moments of the novel, the scene where Kathy listens to the eponymous song “Never Let Me Go” pretending to hold a baby that she is destined never to have, she discovers that Madame had been watching her and then rushes out crying. It is in this scene rather than the collected art from the students that Madame understands the humanness of the clones and the inhumanity of their programme.

Towards the end, the title of the novel offers a deeper resonance. Kathy ‘never lets go’ of her friendship with Tommy and Ruth. The novel ultimately does not abandon the empathetic possibilities of literature nor the category of humanness. Instead, it exposes the exclusions of those from the category. Ishiguro’s *A Pale View of the Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, *The Remains of the Day* evoke the horrors of World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Never Let Me Go* has been read by critics like Black “as a meditation on a world shaped by the eugenic fantasies of the Nazi-era incarceration” (Black 789). The contemporary relevance of the novel cannot be overstated in the context of the genocide in Gaza where the “humanness” of the Palestinians is systematically denied and rhetorically erased. The modern technologies of targeted exterminations efface not only entire populations but reduce them to statistical numbers. Reading a novel like *Never Let Me Go* forces us to recognise the violence in contemporary politics of exclusions.

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