



# Medicalizing Life: Cloning, Organ Donation, and the Ethical Boundaries in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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## Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro in his novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) creates a terrifying reflection on the ethical, medical, and moral boundaries of modern biomedicine. Fundamentally, the novel reveals the disturbing effects of cloning and organ donation by portraying a society where human clones are just used as a store of spare parts. In this imaginary community Ishiguro satirically criticizes how medical practice can turn to dehumanisation in a situation whereby people are now being treated as mere biological usefulness and not as human beings as they are. This paper will argue that by anticipating the experiences the clones will go through; *Never Let Me Go* makes it hard to simplify the narrative of the life of scientific progress. Such ethical dilemmas as autonomy, consent, and medical paternalism come to the forefront of ethical concerns to remind us that the health and longevity always have an invisible human cost. The story written by Ishiguro highlights the immense emotional and psychological cost of lack of self-determination, belonging, and the prospect of a future other than that of their biological purpose. Basing his analysis on the paradigm of bioethics and the medical humanities, this paper places the novel *Never Let Me Go* in the context of more general discussions about the ethics of organ donation, genetic research and biomedical innovation. By so doing, it points out the threat posed by utilitarian logic the greatest good to the greatest number may expedite the loss of dignity and individuality of those who are to be used as tools of medical advancement.

**Keywords:** bioethics, cloning, dehumanization, ethical boundaries, medical humanities, organ donation

## Introduction

The novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005) offers an insightful comment on the morality of pharmacy, especially with regard to cloning and donation of organs. Located in a dystopian setting where human clones are carefully engineered to be brought into existence as an organ source to be used in transplantation, the story explores the complex issues of bioethics, free will and dehumanization. The novel makes the reader think about what could happen

to humans, in case they become biological resources only. Through the lives of Kathy, Tommy and Ruth who are three clones growing up and raised in the remote boarding school of Hailsham, Ishiguro explains the psychological and moral consequences of a society that uses science as a way to commodify the human body. This paper intends to evaluate the moral limitations presented in this novel and to learn how the medical profession has an opportunity to take advantage of people in the name of developing the



society. The paper will also question Ishiguro on his criticism of medicalization of life.

### **The Ethical Implications of Cloning in *Never Let Me Go***

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro presents cloning as a morally troubling reality, where the clones' primary purpose is to donate their organs. This situation raises important bioethical questions about the morality of creating life only to be exploited. The clones, including Kathy, Tommy and Ruth, are aware from a young age that their fates are predetermined. They are nothing but a biologically engineered specimen that breathe only to provide organs. This mode of writing creates a significant ethical dilemma concerning the value of life and being human. From a medical humanities perspective, cloning in the novel critiques the dangers of reducing human beings to biological commodities. Wen Guo in "Human Cloning as the Other in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" opines, "Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* ... brings to view the issues related to the identity, dignity and meaningfulness of human beings in the narrative of clones which are being raised as organ donors." (Guo). The clones' lives are commodified, valued only for their organs, rather than their existence of being a person.

In bioethics, issues such as autonomy, informed consent and medical paternalism are central to the conversation about cloning. But Ishiguro's clones in *Never Let Me Go* have no say in their creation or their purpose of being. This raises overwhelming concerns about human autonomy in medical procedures. According to Peter Singer, "... ethical practices in medicine should be centered on the value of individual autonomy and respect for persons, and the utilitarian justification for cloning in the novel undermines these principles ..." (Singer 45). This portrayal of the clones and their purpose of existence helps Ishiguro in diminishing the clone's personal value which further results in the absence of autonomy at all levels, even to the very end. This rendering of the clones as objects only to be used rather than individuals with rights is a question that lingers throughout this work to be pondered upon. Ivan Lacko in "Dignity, Healing, and

Virtue: Bioethical Concerns in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*" states, "The lives prompt us to ask whether they are part of a social transformation or simply part of the existing distinction between clone-characters in *Never Let Me Go* challenge the bioethical understanding of human dignity, since their nature and artifact." (Lacko 21)

Kathy's recollection of her younger self highlights the inescapability of their fates: "We were told that our lives were not for us, that the purpose of our existence was to give" (*NLMG* 182). This stark reminder of their predetermined role encapsulates the ethical exploitation in the practicing of the cloning process that conditions the clone's to accept the exalted purpose without questioning. Koehler in his "The Euphemism of Escape in *Never Let Me Go*" remarks, "...the clones 'believe...that their love and creativity...will confirm their humanity and thus preserve them from the inhumane death.'" (Koehler 135).

Cary Wolfe comments on the medicalization of bodies, "... treatment of clones in *Never Let Me Go* is indicative of how medical systems often devalue clinical patients as biological organisms that only have intrinsic value relative to their potential for medical use ..." (Wolfe 112). This ethical criticism of cloning raises more general questions and cultural tensions surrounding the relationship between human dignity and scientific advancement.

### **Organ Donation and Medical Exploitation**

The theme of organ donor is essential to the story in *Never Let Me Go*. The lives of the clones and characters are entirely subordinate. The clones are only valued as long as they can procure and maintain the organ or organs in place and are alive. To the medical system's requirements, or in essence extradition, they exist to donate and deplete. As they approach adulthood, they are required to undergo 'donations', a euphemism for organ harvesting, until their bodies are fully depleted and advancing to their eventual death. This process of medical exploitation raises significant ethical questions about the treatment of human beings as mere sources of organs, devoid of personhood. But the underlying perception or the



existing dilemma in attributing the clone as humans or as biologically engineered specimens, have also to be given due diligence. The interlaying perspective is that there arises an undeniable pause when the aforementioned question is taken into consideration for deliberation. The fact that the entity (clones) in question has and functions close on par with that source (human). They procure and possess the same senses, thought process, physique and psyche. But it is best to find the answer in plural ambivalence than to try and make it in to a singular being. Xiao in his “A Study on Never Let Me Go from the Perspective of Ethical Criticism” explicates, “In Never Let Me Go the ethical concepts we used to be familiar with are broken and even subverted, and the human-cloning falls deep into the dream of finding their own identity and their own value, and the contradiction between the human and the post-human exploded.” (Xiao 5)

One among the ethical issue that plays the central role in the novel is the lack of informed consent. The clones are preconditioned to accept their destiny from the day they are out of the box. They are never given a real opportunity to refuse or to question the system that controls their lives. Their education at Hailsham, a school designed to train them for their role as organ donors, is centered on art and creativity, but these activities ultimately serve as a form of distraction from the purpose of their real being. As Arthur Caplan points out, “voluntary consent is a foundational principle in medical ethics, particularly in organ donation” (Caplan 68)

In a pivotal moment, Kathy recalls the realization that Tommy, Ruth, and she would eventually have to undergo donations. “We’d been told from the beginning that our lives were always going to be limited, and this was part of it. It wasn’t the whole story, of course, but it was the most important part” (NLMG 194). Anne Whitehead in her “Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*” enumerates, “Of central importance in *Never Let Me Go* is the status of the clones as ‘like’ or ‘unlike’ us, which in turn raises questions of what it means to be human and what meaning human lives may have.” (Whitehead 56). The medical exploitation depicted in the novel suggests that when the value of life is

reduced to its biological function, ethical considerations are often overlooked.

### **The Dehumanization of the Clones: A Medical Humanities Perspective**

One of the central themes in *Never Let Me Go* is the dehumanization of the clones. They are systematically stripped of their already meddled identity by the medical system that controls their lives. From the beginning, the clones are treated as biological specimens that are to be cared for until their need arises. Bred for the sole purpose of organ donation the clones are brought up in a controlled environment where the exploiters normalize the exploitation and irony being the setting of the exploitation is what nurtured the clones as home. The psychological trauma they experience as a result of their status as medical objects is one among the key aspects that Ishiguro critiques when he exposes the negatives in medicalization of life. Michel Foucault explores this concept in his theory of biopower, “... medical systems function as mechanisms of control, turning individuals into subjects whose bodies are regulated and managed for the benefit of others” (Foucault 136). In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are subjected to this form of control, where their lives are governed by medical needs rather than personal desires or human connection.

“The society of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* has also invested in clone technology as a response to the growing medical demand for organ transplants in its population. However, in contrast to *New Earth* and *The Island*, in Ishiguro’s world cloning for the purpose of increased and customised organ supply is expressly condoned by society: that is, the exploitation of the clones is openly sanctioned and, as such, requires different and collective strategies to justify their subjugation to organ harvesting. Whilst the clones are well looked after, they must nevertheless still be categorised as sub-human, even by those most intimately involved with their childhoods... Ishiguro makes more explicit the ways in which discourse differentiates bodies and underpins the power relations that enable the sustainable exploitation of some bodies by others. However,



unlike the discourses of racism and slavery, discrimination against the corporeal other is no longer grounded in assumed associations of genetics and geographical origins; differentiation is not based on outward signs such as colour, dress or religion but on an invisible otherness defined by their personal provenance.”

“In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro cleverly complicates the distances of space and time by imagining a society that, apart from cloning, resonates in all respects with a British recent past. Indeed, he plays down the technology to discomfort us in relation to caring—or what I have called uncaring—about others across a range of contemporary issues.”

“The cloned young people largely accept their destiny as donors. There are perhaps only two moments in the book when the characters dream of bypassing their fate and at no time do they attempt to resist the path laid out for them. Thus, even those exploited by society’s practices accept them, resonant with a Nietzschean concept of the slave morality.”

““When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go.”” — (*Never Let Me Go*, pp. 248–49)

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