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**“We’re modelled from trash”: Confronting Transhumanism and Critical Posthumanism in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go***

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**Abstract**

In an era when “posthumanism” and “transhumanism” have turned out to be topics of philosophical and scientific enquiry, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) pushes forward the conflict between critical posthumanism and transhumanisms. Transhumanism, as it aims at human enhancement through science and technology, still centers on the idea of anthropocentrism. On the other hand, critical posthumanism, rejecting the idea of human uniqueness, proposes that the human co-evolved with other life forms depending upon each other. Cloning being the prominent aspect of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel in order to constitute a better future society, (unbeknown to them) the cloned ‘individuals’ are designed to be only the organ donors to the humans who need certain organs to survive. And that has become normal in that speculative world of Ishiguro, until one of the three main characters Ruth, after finding her “possible” (on whom Ruth is cloned), reveals that they are modelled from “trash”. This revelation somehow questions the notion of human uniqueness casting away the anthropocentric viewpoint. Thus, through the characters’ view, this paper seeks to examine how the text itself somehow rejects the notion of human uniqueness thus propagating critical posthumanism, while transhumanism is inextricably embedded in the text. The dichotomy between these two notions deserves to be designated through this paper. And finally, this paper also focuses on the very dystopian nature as portrayed in the text and its relations to various aspects of posthumanism(s).

**Keywords:** Posthumanism , Transhumanism, Cloning, Critical posthumanism, Speculative fiction.

**1. Introduction:**

Posthumanism goes beyond the universal question "who we are?" and Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) rightly and accurately portrays this notion of posthumanism in its thematic presentation. The novel tells the story of three characters- Kathy, Tommy and Ruth who are designed as the clones mainly to serve one particular purpose i.e. to donate organs. And this purpose has been institutionalised through the Hailsham<sup>1</sup> School. All the students of Hailsham including the three protagonists are clones made to serve their respective "possibles"<sup>2</sup>. These clones portray certain aspects of identity crisis which is evident throughout the novel and that leads to the question who they are and beyond. They are actually the ones who are dehumanised, animalised, politicised and ultimately trashified.

After coming back from a casual trip (chapter 14) led by Tommy and others, Rodney, a veteran from the “Cottages”, tells Ruth that he encountered a woman in Norfolk who might

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be Ruth’s so called “possible,” meaning the woman on whom she is cloned. Rodney and his girlfriend Chrissie arranges another trip and convince Ruth to go to Norfolk with them and naturally Tommy and Cathy go along. There, they finally find the woman who may be Ruth’s “possible”. But when they follow her to an art gallery and get a closer look, they realize the woman doesn’t look like Ruth at all. Frustrated not finding her possible, Ruth has an outburst, shouting at everyone that they are all cloned from “trash”: meaning addicts, prostitutes and criminals.

Posthumanism<sup>3</sup> as a philosophical approach rethinks the very idea of human subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals. It also calls for a more inclusive distinction of life, and “a greater moral-ethical response, responsibility, to the non-human life forms in the age of species blurring and species mixing” (Nayar, 2014, p.19). Posthumanism therefore has a definite politics in that it interrogates the hierarchic ordering and this is where Critical Posthumanism<sup>4</sup> is born. Unlike the transhumanists<sup>5</sup> who wish to overcome the human form, critical posthumanism does not seek to do away with embodiment. Critical posthumanism sees embodiment as essential to the construction of the environment in which any organic system exists. The human body is such a system. But this embodiment is embedded embodiment, in which the human body is located in an environment that consists of plants, animals and machines. In his seminal work *Posthumanism* (2014), Dr. P. K. Nayar says:

Critical posthumanism shifts away from the moral transhumanist position in one very significant way. Moral transhumanism believes we can accentuate and enhance specific human qualities for the greater good of life on earth- but with this it retains a very clear idea of the desirable qualities of the human. The human is still the centre of all things desirable, necessary and aspirational. In the case of critical posthumanism, it treats the 'essential' attributes of the human as always already imbricated with the life forms, where the supposedly 'core' human features, wheather physiology, anatomy or consciousness, have co-evolved with other life forms. Where moral transhumanism seek enhancement of supposedly innate human features and qualities, critical posthumanism rejects the very idea of anything innate to human. (22)

These sorts of distinctions between these two major philosophical notions are deep-rooted in the text where the so called students of Hailsham are created in order to enhance specific human qualities of the "possibles". Transhumanistic features are the only things that the "possibles" desire for. On the other hand, the clones are presented not more than animals and objects which dehumanises them and cast away their human identity or human uniqueness.

### **2. Human’s Clone and Humane Clone:**

Though the novel centers around the inevitability of loss and death, a major aspect that the novel portrays is the idea that no matter how a human being is created, that very person has desires, feelings, lust, fear, jealousy, love, pain, realization and dreams like everyone else around inside and outside Hailsham. But the student of Hailsham and other similar schools have been designed and modelled as clones and are raised to be living organ donors. The people who nurture and raise them, the so called “guardians”, try to give them a good life to live which is evident in the text and can be found through a meticulous study of the character of some guardians. Guardians like Miss Emily, Madame and Miss Lucy make efforts to convince other people that the clones are like real human beings, like real children, and they deserve to be treated humanely.

Madame, whose real name is Marie-Claude, is a graceful woman who takes the best art from the Hailsham students and supposedly collects them in her art gallery. Using their arts as proof, she tries to prove to people the students have souls and should be treated equally. Miss Emily tries to do everything she can do to make the children's lives pleasant, worthy and meaningful, treating them as thinking and feeling human beings rather than laboratory creation. Along with Madame, she also believes tries to convince the people outside Hailsham that the children are human beings with souls, and she works behind the scenes to advocate what she believes. While on the other hand, the young, athletic and forthright Lucybeing carried away by her emotions tells Tommy he doesn't have to be rather need not to be artistic. She says to Tommy,

Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them have been decided.. So you're not to talk that way anymore. You'll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it's not so far off, the day you'll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you."(Ishiguro, 2006, p. 80)

Eventually she reveals why the children are at Hailsham and how their lives, as a result of planning, have been created to provide organs to people unless or until they "complete" or die donating them.

One more example of their obvious humanity is their reaction when they come to know that the people around them actually fear them. When they try to test the people around, things appear as their expectations. When some of them walk towards Madame to see whether she will back off, they see the extent of her fear and repulsion. Kathy states that she always has the sense that, eventually, she would get to know how repulsive other people find clones like her. However, when it becomes clear to her and the other students that day with Madame, it reduces some of them to tears, a moment Kathy will not forget. These feelings that the "clones" experience are as rare and unique as each human being experience. These feelings are sublime, thoughtful, true and authentic to its extent.

To justify the argument that the clones are not like a mere laboratory creation, it is to be established that they are humans like everyone else, and this argument can very easily be established through many of Kathy's confessions. She tries to build up a connection with the donors and says "I started seeking out for my donors people from the past, and whenever I could, people from Hailsham" (Ishiguro, 2006,p. 4). If she stopped feeling for them, her identity as a carer could not have continued. It shows how the clones like Kathy have the same feelings as other humans and realizes that dealing with someone else's pain or feeling requires equal sensitivity and compassion. Kathy's statement "...how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating'" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 16) allows the reader insight into their prime focus at Hailsham and the way in which they connect witheach other. Their creativity let them "fit in". The creativity shows that every student is an individual with different strength. Kathy's another statement in part 1, chapter 6 "Norfolk came to be a real source of comfort for us, probably much more than we admitted at the time..." (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 66) advocates the same argument. When Kathy and Tommy go to Norfolk and eventually find the cassette Kathy lost, they both feel nostalgic about how they believed as small children that losses are not permanent. The "Norfolk effect" is something that they used to comfort themselves when they were upset about loss. Their need for such comfort is one of the many reasons that they

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are as humans as anyone else.

### **3. Morale and Equality in Human/ Non-human Duality:**

It is undeniable that Ishiguro, throughout the novel, advocates for the deserving humanness of the “clones”, but unfortunately they are denied the basic human rights or liberty; rather they are made to wait for their inevitable, premature death. While the dichotomy between human and non-human is still seeks further research, the morality regarding cloning puts forward another perspective. In this respect Stephanie Petrillo (2014) observes:

...the cloning that occurs in Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* is morally impermissible, while cloning for biomedical research on embryos less than two weeks old is morally permissible. (p.61)

Now, posthumanist decentralization of ‘human’ is something that can be brought into discussion. The moral or ethical rights that the students of Hailsham are denied can put light on the aspect of equality. The students are being brought up like humans to some extent but they lack the desired basic equality. And this lack of equality eventually gives birth to the human / non-human duality. Thus, the students of Hailsham fall prey to the superior-inferior binary. As a consequence, the students are considered inferior to the “possibles” for whom they donate and “complete” [meaning they die]. This ‘othering’ and the domination of the possibles led the students to immense suffering, exploitation and oppression. They feel it but cannot revolt, they assume it and still adhere to the roll of donors. In this regard, Matava Vichiensing (2017) rightly asserts,

The negative consequence of othering is an oppression and violation of the value of life of the clones. It is only an advantage for the normals by receiving the clones’ vital organs. Furthermore, the othering process in *Never Let Me Go* also reflects the power relations of the inferior that could not have a power to resist against the superior’s power. (p. 134)

Democratic transhumanism<sup>6</sup>, as it appears in the novel, is something that Ishiguro speaks for throughout the text. Since each and every human being in this world seeks equal right, their right is preserved through what we call democratic transhumanism, that is equal access of technological enhancement for all. The students portrayed in this novel seem to be denied their rights thus violating the democratic, ‘of all, by all, for all’ concept of enjoying scientific advancement. This, in other way, is the lack of morale of the “possibles” or the authority of the school which by creating inequality propagate the human / non-human binary.

### **4. “Clones” as Dehumanised, Politicised and Trashified:**

Kathy’s narration of her childhood with friends Ruth and Tommy represents clones as entirely ordinary children, with a love of play, a tendency towards clique politics, and a healthy curiosity about the world around them just like any other children. Yet, like so many other genetic posthumanism stories, *Never Let Me Go* depicts humans (and in this case, relatively compassionate humans) viewing the clones as animals. For instance, when Hailsham’s headmistress Madame shrinks away from the “perfectly civilised” students, she does so “in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders”. (Ishiguro, 2006, pp. 34-35) This juxtaposition of civilised humanity and animalism contains within it the place of the clones within society: somewhere between human and animal. When the clones, as adults, confront their former guardians about their chances of delaying their organ “donations,” the guardians speak frankly of the Hailsham project in a manner which makes their animalisation of the clones unambiguous. According to the guardian Miss Emily, clones were considered “less than human” (p. 258), and, given the rate of scientific advancement, “there wasn’t time

to take stock” of their status or rights (p. 257). The animalisation is continued in Madame’s refrain that the clones are “poor creatures” (p. 267), yet her sympathy is shown to be insincere, given that she reacts to the adult clones “as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her” (p. 243). The repeated references to the clones as spiders is reminiscent of the dehumanisation tactic of likening racial others to vermin. Tommy rages in the mud after his meeting with Miss Emily and Madame, reinforcing his animalistic status. Ishiguro’s choice of the word “cagey” to describe Tommy’s manner after this incident further likens Tommy to a caged animal, as well as expressing his wariness of the guardians. And when finally Ruth comes across their actual situation, she exclaims “We all know it. We’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps”. (p.164)

Moreover the students’ identity is eventually reduced to only numbers, signs, symbols and their importance is calculated through the number of donations they perform. In Martin Semelak’s (2019) words:

In the novel, we can see that clones often refer to themselves according to the number of donations they have already made. But as these donations may occur, in fact, anytime, clones live in a state of permanent suspense, and the amount and frequency of donations is more important for them than their lifespan measured in years. (p. 15)

## **5. Confronting Theories and Thoughts:**

The confrontation between transhumanism and critical posthumanism is always there in the novel which is more evident in the binaries as presented in the text. On one hand, through technological advancements, the authorities of the Hailsham (“possibles” of the clones) seek to achieve better human features. On the other hand, the cloned ‘individuals’ are devoid of any identity. Conflicts between man and society, man and oneself, uniqueness and identity crisis, innocence and villainy are also there in the text. Needless to say, they not only lose human uniqueness, but also they are presented as mere objects created to perform certain duties. They are given the opportunity to prove their humanity through art but it is presumed that they will never be able to do the same. The Hailsham School is presented as a testing lab where the cloned ‘individuals’ face nothing but abuse.

Scientific and technological enhancement like cloning bears the evidence of transhumanistic features throughout the text. Hailsham School, as a symbol, also carries the mark of human enhancement through scientific advancement. While on the other hand the tape that contains the very song “never let me go”, the drawings and other creative artifacts created by the soulful, unique students of Hailsham show how even after being exactly like humans, rather more like humans their humanness is ignored. How even after living in a world of advanced technologies, the unique human identity of the students is denied.

Critical posthumanism focuses on de-centering the human from the primary focus of the discourse. It no more allows advocacies of the Renaissance Humanism or anthropocentrism as humans being the center of the world. Casting away the Vitruvian model of patriarchal portrayal of the world, critical posthumanism universalizes the notion of man being the co-inhabitant of the other life forms in this world. Earlier in this paper, it is shown that the students of Hailsham are no less than any human being. Still, time and again the students of Hailsham fell into the chains of animals or rather pets of the possibles. Their humanness, unbeknown to them, is being destroyed and replaced with animality. In one hand, the world created by Ishiguro is highly transhumanistic one embedded with latest rather futuristic, speculative technologies. On the other hand, the portrayal of the students of Hailsham as less than ‘unique’ humans establishes the argument of critical posthumanism that they are not special or unique, rather they are like any other living beings on earth. They aren’t like their “possibles” who seeks to become unique and more precious, in some way or the other, than the donors. Rather they are more ordinary and more common like that of the

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other life forms on earth.

The entire novel is the outcome of Kathy’s act of remembrance of her past spent at Hailsham which from the very beginning tells the story of the students’ being normal like that of others around them. Her passive attempts to become normal, common human being are obvious from many of her statements. The statements of others like Tommy, Ruth or Miss Emily are something that worth mentioning to showcase the very human nature of the students and their desperate attempts to convince the outsiders the presence of their souls. Such a statement by Miss Emily clearly shows her empathy for the students when she says, “Look at this art! How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?” (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 256). Confrontation of the two mentioned theoretical ideas is not the only thing that the novel portrays, but needless to say, these confronting ideas are the ones that appears frequently and most evidently throughout the text. However intriguing these subject matters are, it is evident from the study that the critical posthumanist approach brings out the true self of the “clones” in the transhumanist world of Ishiguro.

### **Notes:**

1. Hailsham, in the novel, is the very school that is in charge of growing the clones as other human beings. The guardians of the school make the students create creative artifacts. By having them create art; they try to prove to the world that the clones have souls and are therefore human beings.
2. The word “possible” has been frequently used in the novel to indicate the supposed characters on whom the clones, most specifically the students of Hailsham, have been created. A “possible” is a person who resembles a possible figure for one of the students.
3. Posthumanism, according to Cary Wolfe (2010), comes both “before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms,... But it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore” (p. xv).
4. Critical posthumanism is a theoretical idea that seems to discard the age old notion of human uniqueness or anthropocentric viewpoint. The human in this critical posthumanist outlook is a ‘dynamic hybrid’ of ‘ontologically different elements’. (Jons, 2006, p. 559)
5. Transhumanism says that human enhancement can be brought through science and technology. While talking about science and technology, we must not think only about science and technology that are happening today. We have to think also about the speculative/ futuristic (imaginary) frames, for instance cryonic.
6. Democratic transhumanism advocates the notion of equal access to technological enhancements for all, which could otherwise be limited to certain socio-political classes and related to economic power, consequently encoding racial and sexual politics.

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