

Non Omnis Moriar : Politics of Isolation and Degrees of Loneliness in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract : The problem with science fiction is that contemporary readers are always scrutinising and finding faults with the science in it; yet so much of it becomes real so soon that it is no longer fiction. Immortality has been a favourite idea of much science fiction, and may be traced as a branch of the same tree of thought that gave us Mary Shelley's posthuman, Frankenstein. What will human beings, as Ishiguro penned in his novel in 2005, not do to live beyond their biologically possible years? This paper explores the dystopic world of organ donation so I selected Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), his take on a futuristic soulless world where young men and women, clones of healthy people whose own bodies fail due to age or illness, are raised up in boarding houses as future donors of organs to those rich or affluent till they "complete". The text appropriately raises questions on relationships between body, soul, art and its functions in society and shocks and disturbs in equal measure. *Never Let Me Go* weaves a tale of a cultural imaginary where the augmented survival of a handful rich are ensured by raising their clones, only with the horrible twist of being sentient, displaying complete range of emotional intelligence, apart from being resigned to fate. In the form of a movingly written memoir of Kathy H., one of the three clones characterised, bred to legally provide organs for originals who remain implied in the narrative, these are unfortunate marginal beings condemned to die an early death after three or four donations. They go about their business willingly with remarkable passivity, till they "complete". Generically puzzling, though critically much acclaimed, the novel is in the sub-genre of alternative history and sometimes seen as a cross between bildungsroman set in the shadowy backdrop of genetic engineering and associated technologies. *Never Let Me Go* situates itself at a very contentious space between science-fiction and a post-truth world.

Keywords:

Organ donation, Clone, Science-fiction, Illness, Creation, Isolation, Island, Orphan, Completion.

Published in 2005, a little short of two centuries—187 years to be precise—after Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*, that being the name of the scientist-creator of the monster who himself remains anonymous, Kazuo Ishiguro's choice of inhabiting his dystopic world with children seems deliberate and political. Children may depict disempowerment and vulnerability; they may also depict intuition and unsullied imaginative depth untainted by reality. They may grow up only to partially examine their life, as the narrator in *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy H. is able to do. Set in late 1990's England, Ishiguro's fictional memoir of Kathy H., one of the three children who grow up to form the romance triangle that drives the interest of the story forward, just as the three ideas of art, soul and love intertwine in the quest for redemption of all those looking for escape from the prison in *Never Let Me Go*, has often drawn parallels with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Keith McDonald in "Days of Past Futures: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as Speculative Memoir" considers the novel as a pathography, "where the illness of those cared for is given testimony, with the reader acting as witness to trauma and loss". While observing that childhood is not a natural and unproblematic cultural and biological occurrence, McDonald observes that it is a social construction, "fundamentally involved in a nexus of ideological forces, where the notion of childhood is often bound up in a register of nurturing, benevolence and protection that can also reveal social injustices and discourses of power."¹ Hailsham house is a prison and the children are "schooled", in other words, "educated". Education is a euphemism for the psychological conditioning they receive to donate their vital organs and just as when they have finished donating the third or fourth organ they "complete", another euphemism for dying.

Never Let Me Go weaves a cultural imaginary where the augmented survival of a handful rich are ensured by raising their clones, only with the horrible twist of being sentient, displaying complete range of emotional intelligence, apart from being resigned to fate. They are bred to legally provide organs for originals who remain implied in the narrative; Tiffany Tsao² who conducts after Sarah Dillon a "palimpsestuous" reading of Ishiguro recounts the incident of Ruth,

1 MCDONALD, KEITH. "DAYS OF PAST FUTURES: KAZUO ISHIGURO'S 'NEVER LET ME GO' AS 'SPECULATIVE MEMOIR.'" *Biography*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 74–83. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23540599.

2 Tsao, T. "The Tyranny of Purpose: Religion and Biotechnology in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Literature and Theology* 26 (2012): 214–232. Web.

Tommy and Kathy H. seeking out Ruth's "possible" later in the story. Ruth's gaze through the glass window at the original world, of which she is living a copy life is pathetically similar to Frankenstein's longing gaze at the De Laceys through a chink in the wall. Readers have wondered what keeps them from walking up and saying 'hi' to the "other", calling these incidents 'plot holes'. But the chink in the wall is not a plot hole. Narrative strategization has ensured that they isolate themselves. Distant guardians, Madame shuddering at their touch, the several indictments about not having sex outside their kind, reverse truths that they were "special", "gifted", extreme caution regarding their bodies, advisory against falling ill, as if they were museums of some sort—these and numerous other instructions have already ensured their powerless political self-isolation and what was supposed to be an exhilarating self discovery by way of seeking out her original turns into the following rant of Ruth:

"We're modeled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from...If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all come from."³

Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein* feels that he is "wretched, helpless and alone" when he catches his own reflection in the mirror, he feels, "At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification"⁴ Bio-technology has replicated or given life to bodies but engineering has not been able to replace a shared imagination; in this mechanical world stories are not told after dark for children to sleep. Nothing is passed on, the power structure is roundly exploitative, investment-minded, narcissistic and merciless.

Hence these 'educated' unfortunate marginal beings condemned to die an early death about which they are remarkably passive. Generically puzzling though it is, *Never Let Me Go* is in the fictional autobiographical format with the meta-referencing, post-modernist, aspect peeking through sometimes with the adult Kathy's attempts at binding herself to her kindergarten self and the adult narrating voice, frequently addressing the reader directly as a technique of selfreferencing, thus effectively erasing authorial presence in the text, Kazuo Ishiguro conveniently slips away. *Never Let Me Go* has been placed between Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (eugenics) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (feminist dystopia), at a very contentious space between science-fiction and a post-truth world. The sense of horror is evoked by the children's calm acceptance of their futures as donors.

Knowledge in Ishiguro's text wavers between hearsay, gestures, body language, whispered half-truths, imaginations and sometimes on fantastic tales shared between teachers and students as in the cautionary story about the dangerous woods outside the Hailsham grounds upon venturing unwarranted where, a young boy's dismembered body was discovered; the details are conveniently left out. The tale is reminiscent of Ramsay Campbell's *The Darkest Parts of the Wood* (2002) where Campbell, Britain's acclaimed Gothic horror writer, himself all praise for Ishiguro, weaves Lovecraftian occult fiction. In fact, Ramsey Campbell rightly emphasizes that the element of horror revolves around the power of suggestiveness. Henry James employed it excellently in *Turn of the Screw* (1898), where, coincidentally or not, amongst two main characters are two children. Ramsey Campbell in an interview by David McWilliam says that by normalizing the donations in the text, by their sheer placidity of acceptance and unquestioned obedience, the children render *Never Let Me Go* – "a classic instance of a story that's horrifying precisely because the narrator doesn't think it is".⁵

The novel takes its name from a song from an album "Songs After Dark" by a fictional cocktail-bar singer Judy Bridgewater. Kathy H. has acquired it from a Sale, one of those that they were allowed to buy from with tokens in exchange of their own works of art, which they were absolutely pressed to produce and the importance of creativity impressed daily on them. Kathy herself being too young to understand and impatient to take on the entire song, later remembers that she just waited for the bit, "Baby, baby, never let me go..." which her fond juvenile imagination had imposed an entirely personal meaning on. The story she imagined went like this: A woman who was told she could never have a baby, and who always wanted one, has a baby as some kind of a miracle. The song she sings is to the miracle she holds in her arms (and here Kathy is slightly vague) because she's afraid the baby will be taken away, or

3 Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, pp166

4 Shelley Mary, *Frankenstein*, pp 90

5 <http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/interviews/ramsey-campbell-interviewed-by-david-mcwilliam/> accessed on 18th November 2018 at 5:30 IST.

fall ill, or some such dire consequence may befall. It became sort of a euphoric release for Kathy H. whenever she had the opportunity, to go into her six bed dorm room while it was empty, put on the cassette player, clutch a pillow as a substitute for the imagined baby, and dance and sway about to the tune of “Baby, baby, never let me go...”

On the occasion she is about to recount, she catches a glimpse of Madame, (the Lady who regularly visited and collected their artwork, about whom gossip flew, and upon whom they had conducted a proximity experiment only to discover to their chagrin that she shuddered at their touch, as if these children belonged to class of arachnids), standing at the half-open doorway watching her, between sobs, while Kathy.H is dancing away in rapture. The meaning of her tears are a mystery to Kathy and understanding dawns at two levels, one inadequate and another, much later, when adequately explained by Madame. Kathy first asks Tommy and uninformed as he is, Tommy deduces Madame’s tears to the ironic fact of the children’s inability to have babies. Only when they later on visit the guardians do Kathy and Tommy come to know that Madame was mortified, by her own confession, of the way these children, let alone have babies, were neither going to have life nor youth, nor families, nor jobs like others. The children, as Miss Lucy angrily declared, were “told and not told”. Knowledge as a form of negotiation between sentient beings can be a healthy exchange in civilized societies, but Kathy H., Tommy, Ruth and the orphans, in other words the clones at Hailsham are social-scientific experiments. They were “told and not told” the words were spoken, but the meanings were not clear, the ears that would receive those words were not ready for the weight and the import of those words. And indeed how could they? Later critics have conjectured that “donations” and “completing” are actually in Ishiguro a metaphor for mortality, as death slowly but surely makes inroads into a child’s world of innocence and the model does seem alluring, but even without such a complicated model of interpretation, adulthood and its accompanying negotiations are often incomprehensible in the real world. What emotional range in a child could grasp the idea that this was anything but a Gothic horror tale designed to scare them out of wits: that she or he is a replica of a human being and is a carrier of organs, being raised, educated, groomed even, forced to become artistic, all for the purpose of “donating” their vital organs to some “original” human being who will need augmented survival of one hundred and thirty years with the help of those organs, and browbeat mortality a little while longer? What cause in Nature makes such hard hearts?

Here is a rough overview of things that the clones cannot do, as in, have no right to, or are utterly discouraged, to the point of being punished even, soul or no soul, that is their predicament:

a) They cannot bear children. Questions are not tenable. But probably because reproduction can cause damage to the body in many ways they probably aren’t equipped enough. The text doesn’t furnish adequate information on the subject. Immediate parallels arise between Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Never Let Me Go*. Individuals bodies in the age of biopolitics become National resources. Whereas Atwood imagines a dystopia where men lose interest in sex and lose fertility in numbers, women’s reproductive functions are usurped by the all powerful state and their bodies become property of the state, in *Never Let Me Go* agency is handed over for purposes of social segregation seen as a metaphor for class structure. But in Atwood’s text there is anger and dissent, “*Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual*. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.”- Offred (*The Handmaid’s Tale*)

b) They cannot smoke, drink, have random sex with strangers because in the outside world where they would be released sex is accompanied by emotion and sometimes has disastrous consequences which they must avoid. “Smoking” as a trope has been used in Anurag Kashyap’s film *No Smoking (2007)* to signify absence of choice, state censorship over artistic freedom (the fingers cut off as punishment for smoking are the same used to hold a writing or painting instrument). While addiction is certainly to be relinquished, this noir film brings into focus the State’s Leviathan long arm into areas of private expression and hence democratic rights.

c) They cannot hurt themselves or fall ill, let alone die. They are passes to others' long lives. In the 1950s, a founding father of medical sociology, Talcott Parsons, described illness as deviance -as health is generally necessary for a functional society – which thrust the ill person into the sick role ⁶

This role afforded the afflicted certain rights, but also certain obligations, which were described by Parsons in his four famous postulates:

a) The person is not responsible for assuming the sick role.

b) The sick person is exempted from carrying out some or all of normal social duties (e.g. work, family).

c) The sick person must try and get well – the sick role is only a temporary phase.

d) In order to get well, the sick person needs to seek and submit to appropriate medical care. The “sick role” as a sociological model initially did very well to explain the performative aspect of the individual in a neo-liberal consumerist society. Parson's articulation of the famous dictum “Get well!” placed the ill and the ailing fairly and squarely at the receiving end of a full spectrum of a functioning commercial community. It came under scrutiny, however, with the emergence of a sizeable section of a “remission society” as Arthur Frank notes in *The Wounded Storyteller*. The people in this remission society held certain kind of a middle ground and hence were in and out of treatment frequently. Bio-consumerist culture cannot decide if they are assets or liability because on one hand they become non-productive for a period of time, while they may become consumers of medico-scientific procedures, recipients of organs, unintentional labrats, subjects of press-releases, or as in the case of Audre Lorde, a post-mastectomy woman, a rejector of soft, fluffy, artificial breasts which are a huge cosmetic industry.

In the real world illness is grudged, but no one questions the right to fall ill for a human being. Indeed, it is a given that they will. The real humans will fall ill, require organ transplants, and be supplied with organs harvested from these clones. Reciprocity being absent, the clones have no right to fall ill. Their bodies are not their own, but property of the state. They are walking gardens for keeping the organs healthy with food, nutrition, art, education; even sex if done right—is not completely denied them—just so that the hormones would flow well and harvest would be flush pink for the first, second and third and even fourth donations till they “complete” a euphemism for death. Children can intuit surprisingly well and the full disclosure of the horror of her situation is not yet contingent upon Kathy.H, when she sings ‘Baby, baby, never let me go...’ she is mourning, in narrative parlance what is known as *proleptically* (looking forward): she will be a carer for thirteen or so years, her in-depth understanding of others' pains will soothe and comfort many donors, some not from Hailsham, and she will gain a reputation of her own, but these unfortunate children will only romantically love without togetherness of any kind, have sex with temporary fulfilment, never have children of their own, and what she imagines in a tale will come true in her case, as it will come true in case of Ruth as well, only with the added horror that they will lose their own childhood as well without the comfort of growing into ripe old age. Robert Cremins writes in *Ishiguro's Orphans*:

“Now we are on guard against any of this becoming normalized. That need for vigilance, I'd argue, makes some of Ishiguro's work required reading. His novels are often cautionary tales against normalization. As Etsuko, the narrator of that first novel (A Pale View of the Mountain, Kazuo Ishiguro), warns us, “...it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things.” It's a lesson borne out by her sister-in-suffering, Ruth, part of the love triangle at the heart of Never Let Me Go (2005), another novel set in a deceptively tranquil England. Ruth's upbringing — and that of her intimates, Tommy and narrator Kathy — gives us a chilling new sense of the phrase “formative years”: these twenty somethings are clones; their education has inoculated them against the horror of their raison d'être: they are the human equivalent of Kobe cows — relatively pampered and designed for doom. In their prime, with clinical savagery, the trio's organs will be harvested to prolong the lives of ailing “normals.” Ruth's acceptance of this fate has a terrifying carapace of rationality.”

Just how abnormal their calm is can be understood when contrasted with another text of organ donation, also involving children's agency, that I shall refer to here. In Jodi Picoult's story *Her Sister's Keeper* (2004) in a setting of a certain fictional town of Upper Darby of Rhode Island, Anna Fitzgerald (the “keeper”)’s older sister, Kate,

6 Parsons, T. *The Social System*. 1951. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

7 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ishiguros-orphans/> accessed on 18.11.2018 at 21IST.

suffers from acute promyelocytic leukemia, a blood and bone marrow cancer. Anna was genetically in-vitro fertilized as a savior sister specifically so she could save Kate's life. The experiment is initially successful, but the cancer continues to relapse throughout Kate's life. Usually willing to donate whatever Kate needs, Anna is told upon turning thirteen she will have to donate one of her kidneys due to Kate's kidney failure. Having been forever in and out of operating rooms and pricked and prodded every which way for the benefit of her sister Anna has only acquiesced till she learns that the surgery required for both Kate and Anna would be major; it is not guaranteed to work, as the stress of the operation may kill Kate anyway, and the loss of a kidney could have a serious impact on Anna's later life. Anna petitions for medical emancipation with the help of lawyer Campbell Alexander, so she will be able to make her own decisions regarding her medical treatment and the donation of her kidney.

No such respite for the orphans of Ishiguro's fiction. The bodies suffer, the minds look for relief. There is no theological framework to anchor them in their helpless situation, and their docility renders it unviable. Trapped in their shared destiny, they suffer from the same kind but various degrees of loneliness. A love triangle is formed—Kathy H., Tommy and Ruth. Tommy and Ruth are together but the attraction is largely sexual and Ruth initiates the relationship to separate Kath and Tommy, who have an instinctive, childhood connection. Kathy H. is lonely, suffers alone and becomes a caregiver to the donors for thirteen years in the course of which both Ruth and Tommy have separated and undergone donations. Kathy H. comes across a badly doing Ruth after her second donation after which she “completes”, but not all of her dies. Tommy and Kath are told by Ruth that they can have a “deferral”, by applying to the guardians, proving to them that their's is “true love” and exhorts them to exhibit their artwork to the guardians, to bare their soul. In a terminal horrible twist of tale, this is another of those untruths doing the rounds. As the guardians deny the couple their last remnant of hope and tell them that the purpose of all those years of coercion to art was to “find out if they had a soul at all” and as Kath and Tommy go out holding hands, carrying their drawings rolled in the other, one old lady takes the drawings from Tommy's hands. They are nice, after all; she would like to hang them on her wall. The guardian is the loneliest of them all as Kazuo Ishiguro sings of these our dark times to come, if we are not cautious.

Etymologically the word *isolated* meaning “standing detached from others of its kind,” 1740, a rendering into English of French *isolé* “*isolated*” (17c.), from Italian *isolato*, from Latin *insulatus* “made into an island,” from *insula* “*island*”, isle (n.) carries the affect of passivity, lack of agency about it. English at first used the French word (*isole*, also *isole'd*, c. 1750), then after *isolate* (v.) became an English word, *isolated* became its past participle.⁸ The Japanese have eleven or so words for “*Lonely*”, *sabishi*, *samishi*, *hitoribotchi*, *kokorobosoi*, *wabisi*, *sekizen*, *kodokuna*, *kokoro sabishi*, *hitonatsukashi*, *hitozatohanareta*. Japan being an island nation itself, would know things about separation, isolation, loneliness. Towards the fourth donation, Tommy declares that he would not like to have Kathy as his caregiver as he does not want to be seen by her in his most miserable of states and as he exhorts Kathy to find him another carer he says: “I keep thinking of this river somewhere with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it's just too much. The current's too strong. They've got to let go, drift apart. That's how I think it is with us. It's a shame, Kath, because we've loved each other all our lives. But in the end, we can't stay together forever.” Ishiguro's clever ploy is to give his novel the exact opposite title, filled with layers of nuances that really talks about letting go, while adding a “never” to it. This bit of “never” may be memory, nostalgia, autobiography, storytelling, etc. etc. but the reader is caught like a bit of plastic in the barbed wire of a master spinner's tale.

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8 <https://www.etymonline.com/word/isolated> accessed on 22.11.2018

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