

Dehumanising Transhuman & Blurring Bioethics in Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go

¹Kanu Priya , ²Dr. Piyushbala

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi, Jharkhand-834008.
kanupriya.694@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi, Jharkhand-834008.
singhpiyushbala@gmail.com

How to cite this article: Kanu Priya , Piyushbala (2024) Dehumanising Transhuman & Blurring Bioethics in Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 27545-27550

Abstract

Human intelligence was succeeded by artificial intelligence, a subordinate enabling us to maximise human capabilities by automating complex and tedious tasks. It made room for us to be less laborious and more creatively productive. However, the human-machine boundaries started blurring with the introduction of emotive AI. While its positive aspects are aimed at the healthcare sector, its negative aspects are influenced by consumerist and political hidden agendas. The contemporary Emotive AI landscape presents a profound ethical dilemma that resonates with the themes explored in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Ishiguro presents a scientific utopia of a cultural incubation centre for clones that trains them to qualify as near-human creatures and to serve the needs of the human community by donating their organs. Revolving around the struggles of clone kids, Ishiguro pictures scientific utopia turned dystopia and the unaccountability of science towards the predicament of their failed experiments. This paper will analyse the challenges posed by emotive AI to human society and the dehumanisation of humanity in *Never Let Me Go*. The paper also examines the role of science in reshaping societal norms and values and the problematic transformation of its identity as a religion, which aims to obsessively solve all human problems rationally to make human life easier and longer.

Keywords: Transhuman, Humanity, Dystopia, Clone, Emotive-AI, Bioethics.

Introduction

Technology is advancing at an unprecedented speed, and so is the need to make our lives more techno-efficient. Kazuo Ishiguro presents us with a world of 'human-serving clones' in his *Never Let Me Go*. The world from the perspective of clones, their challenges, and their struggle with meaning. The sole purpose of bringing these clones into the world is to donate organs to those in need. An army of clones is prepared to tackle the healthcare crisis of the modern world. Modernisation has resulted in the elevation of lifestyle, the rise of technology, and an increase in the consumption of food and medicine at the same time. We have become advanced in all fields intersecting human science with space science. With great knowledge come great responsibilities, which, if disavowed, could result in great consequences. We have control over our lives and surroundings more than ever in terms of knowledge and science, which also has given rise to anxiety associated with it. The need to 'fix' everything and have control over all aspects of nature has been a major preoccupation of the human mind in today's world and future. Things that once were left to fate are now being handled, not only in terms of precaution but also in terms of control, modification, and manipulation. Medical emergencies have seen a shift in prioritising future needs over the present ones. We have refused to leave things up to fate and have taken the project of fixing disease to fixing genes. Human capacities are being pushed scientifically; it started with the dissection of the human body and eventually progressed to transplants, IVFs, genetic engineering, cloning, etc. Scientific dystopia can soon become a reality with the changing dynamics of medical science and geopolitical unrest among nations. The COVID era

has caused worldwide massive disruption in the fields of medicine, psychology, biotech, and border issues. Dr. Kaliouby, Affectiva co-founder and author of *Girl Decoded*, subtitles her memoir 'A Scientist's Quest to Reclaim Our Humanity by Bringing Emotional Intelligence to Technology'. The idea of reclaiming humanity by empowering AI with EI reflects utopian optimism of science by overlooking the adverse predicaments.

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Nagasaki-born Japanese-British novelist whose works have a major theme of time, memory, identity, and war, reflecting his understanding of identity struggles in challenging scenarios. His works present us with the setting of pre-war, post-war, and dystopia, which questions the characters' values and ideals being challenged and thus shattering the notion of identity. Techno-utopian societies portrayed in literature often focus on how this imagined utopia turns into a nightmarish dystopia. Transhumanism is broadly concerned with the extended influence of technology in improving the human condition to increase life longevity to the level of defying even the limits of death. Earlier poets wrote verses on the eternal beauty of the beloved, and now science has come up with the formulas of anti-ageing and age-reversal. The concept of transhuman comes in between humans and posthumans, who possess the qualities of humans but are not superhumans with extraordinary abilities; they are designed to cover up the shortcomings of human society. Ishiguro, in his novel 'Never Let Me Go', talks about a scientific utopia that turns into a humanistic dystopia. The world of Hailsham School and its clone kids, who are made culturally appropriate to qualify as near-human creatures, in order to serve the needs of the human community by donating them organs. Revolving around the story of three clone kids, Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy, Ishiguro pictures the internal emotive struggle of these science slaves and the unaccountability of science towards the predicament of their failed experiments. Science majorly backs its innovation by stating the need for healthcare, but it doesn't limit itself to it; the consumerist, capitalist, and political-nationalists find their ways to use it in their favour soon. It is interesting to note that these clones are made capable of most human aspects like joy, grief, imagination, pleasure, and pain, but certain more human aspects have been excluded from their identity: the ability to procreate and, surprisingly, the intellectual faculty of rebellion. They are intelligent and creative enough to produce poetry, painting, and pottery, but they show no signs of resistance or rebellion. Society curates them solely to meet its needs, not to pose a threat. By disabling them to reproduce, resist, and rebel, science made their product successful.

Dehumanising Transhumans

The story of *Never Let Me Go* revolves around Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, the clone students of Hailsham School. Hailsham, located in an anonymous territory, is a cultural incubation centre for clones. They grew up with other clone students in Hailsham under the supervision of 'guardians'. These guardians facilitated the clones to understand the world outside Hailsham and their predefined purpose of life, i.e., to serve the world with their donations of vital organs until they are 'completed' (dead). These clones, from a very young age, are taught to create art—painting, poetry, pottery—which would help in building their personality. These art forms made by clones would be evidence of their humanity—the existence of their soul. It will function as a resume, just like companies evaluate a candidate's resume to determine whether they are employable or not; similarly, the art created by clones will determine whether they are qualified as donors to humans or not. The best of all art exhibits was selected for 'gallery' by Madame, but the clone students were never sure what the whole purpose of the activity was.

"...pictures, poetry, all that kind of stuff, she said *revealed what you were like inside*. She said *they revealed your soul*." (Ishiguro, 2006, p.173)

The idea of revealing souls, in its true sense, is marketing of their humanness. They are convincing the world of their organs' authenticity. There is a desperate need to prove the humanity of the clones to humans to be acceptable as credible donors. In the process of making clones like humans, capable of creative faculties, these clones evolved from being just donor slaves to individual personalities having feelings and emotions, just as humans. Throughout the novel, we have seen how the idea of having souls is determined by the ability to create art, and it has been reinforced upon all the clone kids. However, in this whole process of making them an equally emotional being, they have been deprived of their liberty. With budding creativity, emotions, and compassion, clone kids also start developing desires, which are exclusive to so-called humans and not to these transhumans, which they have manufactured.

'Hailsham' is the clone hostel where they are taught to live and think in a certain way. It is situated in an isolated, unknown location. The walls of Hailsham stand like boundaries between humans and clones, beyond which awaits a dehumanised life for soul-bearing transhumans. The positive connotation of 'Hail' meaning 'to praise'

juxtaposes the negative 'sham' meaning 'bogus/fake'. This mirrors the dual nature of Hailsham as both a nurturing school for clones and a place of deception for everyone inside and outside the premises of Hailsham. Clones are made capable of emotions, imagination, individuality, and humanity for the eyes of the world, but underneath all these humane qualities, they remain a non-rebellious science toy with no independence to experience the so-called breaded individuality. It is this biopolitical control that these clone kids will never be able to surpass. Their course of life is predetermined from the very beginning; there's a structured process of organ donation where clones undergo multiple donations until they 'complete' (die). Their bodies are sites of power execution, harvested for organs to prolong the lives of humans. While Ruth and Tommy, like many others, are donors of the program, Kathy is chosen to be a carer first. Carers are assigned to provide mental support and cheer those who are donating. The role of a carer is designed to soothe these donating clones in order to make them push their limit by donating more and therefore juicing every ounce of humanness that is left in them. Each donation makes them physically weak and mentally exhausted. As they come closer to death after each donation, they start losing hope and question their futile journey of 'being human'. The art forms they made in Hailsham to prove the existence of their soul now make no sense to them when they are going through organ donation. Their suffering ceases to have any meaning. There seems no point in making them capable of emotions when they are supposed to experience the inhumane objectification of their lives and bodies.

Kathy, the protagonist, loved listening to a song track named 'Never Let Me Go' by Judy Bridgewater; she would dance on it with a pillow in her arms, imagining it to be a baby. The fact that these clones were not capable of reproduction had an unconscious impact on Kathy. The song track was more about lovers but the way Kathy interpreted it and acknowledged that "the song was about what I said" (Ishiguro, 2006, p.70) showed us the desire to be more than a donor, the desire to be a mother. Madame saw Kathy dancing and the usual strict face had tears in her eyes, as if pitying Kathy's futile emotions. Soon Kathy lost her song tape, indicating that it might have been taken away secretly by Madame. Kathy's little happiness was lost with that tape, and as Kathy says "the very fact that we had such needs would have felt wrong to us at the time" (Ishiguro, 2006, p.73), indicating how some part of them felt so human and the other part was denied the humanity they deserved. 'Never Let Me Go' is the inner voice originating from the soul of transhumans, appealing to humans to allow them their share of humanity and to not let them go from their world. Another incident where the clones expressed their desires and were bashed to think so is seen when Peter says, "We were just talking about what it would feel like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be" (Ishiguro, 2006, p.79). Miss Lucy, one of the guardians, who was always sweet and participated in little jokes along with students, seemed annoyed with these words of Peter. Miss Lucy is frequently seen being upset with the whole situation at Hailsham. Although she engages with them like a friend, at incidences where kids show up with any worldly desires, a sense of frustration and uneasiness appears on her face. She finally speaks,

"None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets... You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided... you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you" (Ishiguro, 2006, p.80)

The creative faculties that were encouraged and developed by clones were also regulated by guardians as per their convenience and the convenience of human needs. They could draw, paint, write, and sing, but they couldn't dream. They were transhuman—the enhanced humans who transcend humans. Their humanity was regulated by science and society so that they didn't become a threat to us; a relationship of master and slave was established between humans and transhumans; their evolving humanity was dehumanised with the force of authority.

"Have We Gone Too Far?": Blurring Bioethics

Michel Foucault explained the concept of biopolitics in his lectures at France (2009) as governance of population not only through political strategies but also through biological ones. Exerting control over bodies and lives of citizens through *biopower* mechanisms like laboratories. Biopolitical control is represented in the very existence of clones; it is an artificial race created by the state for the sole purpose of organ donation to serve the medical needs of the human population. The 'donation program' has been normalised for humans as well as clones, like a duty or job, consuming them towards their death with their consent. As there is no concept of consent for them, they are man-made slaves serving their creator. They are made to believe that they are mere objects of the 'donation program', thus inferior to the human race, and in no position to question 'the schemes' of humans, which involve their lives. They are capable of emotions and ambitions, but they don't know what to do with them as they have no power over their own lives. It is the state which has all the power in its hands, leaving clones in a

hopeless situation. This deep conditioning of clones to accept their roles without any resistance is a subtle form of biopower. Throughout the novel, not a single clone showed any sign of rebellion against the donation program, accepting it as a natural course of events in their life. This creates an internal conflict that the clone faces throughout their life; despite internalisation of their duties, their individuality struggles to make space. We can see this in Tommy's commitment to his art, which gives him emotional fulfillment. His drawings attempt to assert his individuality and humanity, even though it doesn't change his course of life.

"Poor creatures. What did we do to you? With all our schemes and plans?" (Ishiguro, 2006, p.249)

These are the words of Madame, the brain behind Hailsham, who is pitying the clone kids Kathy and Tommy, who came to meet her to get some answers. She, who once was optimistic about this experiment of enculturation of clones with humanness, is now regretful about how humanistic feelings of clones are left in despair and how other members of the science fraternity have exploited the existence of clones. The remorseful tone of Madame not only pities these inhuman 'creatures' but also pities her own situation as a creator. By calling them 'creatures', she made them 'other', someone different than humans, like a whole different species. There is a sense of guilt and responsibility on the part of clone-creator scientists who oversaw the cloning program. The well-thought-out "schemes and plan" had a clear agenda, yet it failed. The experiment was started with the optimism of a fair world for both humans and clones, but this optimism was shortsighted. With the normalisation of clone culture, there was an increase in the scientific appetite, which led to the Morningdale scandal. Scientist James Morningdale took his research beyond legal boundaries and invented the possibility of having children with enhanced characteristics, 'humans superior to the human race' by their superior intelligence, athleticism, and more. This case frightened the people; it made them insecure about having a race superior to them in health and intellect along with equal rights and status in society. This possible race could threaten the existing power dynamics and civic order. And thus this scandal led to the shutdown of Hailsham and other clone centres.

How far is too far is the central dilemma, which majorly concerns the advancement of artificial intelligence and technology. Hailsham was the first of its kind when Marie-Claude and Madame started it. They were the torchbearers of the 'cultural incubation centre' concept; they challenged the existing ways in which donation programs were run. They became an example by demonstrating how they 'reared' clones in cultivated and humane conditions and made clones sensitive and intelligent just like humans. Before Hailsham, clones were considered 'shadowy objects in test tubes', grown in vacuum. People were not much concerned about the origin of organs, as it was a post-war era that needed cures for incurable conditions at that time. That wasn't the time for asking sensible or ethical questions when a nation is in need of more people on the borders and in the country to fill up for those who have lost their lives in war. The idea of the origin of clones in the post-war era throws light on the question: why were clones needed for organ donors in the first place? To compensate for the sudden decline in human mortality due to war and its effect on the economy. In Foucault's term, it is the play of 'biopolitics' that acts as a driving force for science to push its boundaries whenever time demands, as per the convenience of those in power.

"Do I go too far? And now: Do we continue?" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 249)

Madame questions this to herself, which is also a question for the science fraternity, the question of responsibility. Kathy and Tommy, with their innocent hopes, showed up in front of Madame to ask for a few years of deferral. Deferral to live life a little longer, to pause the donation process and enjoy life like a normal human being for a while. There's a display of power dynamics between a creator and its creation, with scientists being life-giving gods to the clones. Tommy stands here in a desperate situation, twined between his duties as a clone doner who is near his death and a young boy who wants to make love and live life. He is discovering his talent for miniature art and his true self, but it feels as though time is slipping and it's too late to walk down the road of contentment. He is trying his best to convince Madame of his humanity.

Morality has always been confusing; drawing the moral line has posed more challenges than drawing national borders. The moral-ethical decisions that we take define our essence, our humanness. Responsibility demands reasoning for our actions. The question of greater good has always posed a dilemma for scientific ethics. With the power of science, we are in control of many things now that our ancestors wouldn't have dreamt about. We are now not limited to electricity, space, and the internet, but our horizons have broadened to make humans out of machines. Emotive AI, also called emotional artificial intelligence, has fascinated the world with its ability to carry everyday conversations and understand human emotions just like a human would have done it. Technology knows us more than we know ourselves; specialised Facebook feeds, Instagram reels, customised advertisements,

and product suggestions show us things that interest us, even a part of us. Our online behaviour pattern has been thoroughly analysed and is used to manipulate our consumerist needs. Emotive AI is an upgrade to know us deeper, tracking our emotions through changing facial expression, voice modulation, body posture, and pulse rate. Live tracking all aspects to identify what's inside our mind and heart. Robots are able to articulate and carry a sensible conversation with us. Emotive AI combines computer science with psychology and cognitive science to understand and respond to human emotions. It can identify facial cues and evaluate tone, pitch, and pace of speech to detect emotion. This data can be utilised to improve customer-company relationships, to track emotions of patients in healthcare, to enable adaptive learning in the field of education, and it will also enable AI to generate more humanistic, emotionally intelligent interactions with humans based on context. With such great powers to read human emotion live, it is an intriguing invasion of privacy and can be used to exploit human emotional vulnerabilities for profit; it breaches ethical standards of beneficence.

Affectiva, a neuromarketing 'smart eye' firm, uses eye-tracking technology to measure consumer response to advertisements by analysing pupil dilation and other aspects of facial cues. They define their objective as 'Humanising Technology with Emotion AI'. It uses emotive AI and eye-tracking technology to measure consumer response to advertisements, which includes pupil dilation. One can take a free demo at their website by just enabling their webcam while watching an ad, and it will show real-time reactions. While you watch the ad, AI will draw a real-time graph of your emotions on different parameters, which include valence, expressiveness, attention, brow furrow, brow raise, disgust, inner brow raise, lip corner depression, and smile. Dr. Rana el Kaliouby is the company founder and author of the novel 'Girl Decoded: A Scientist's Quest to Reclaim Our Humanity by Bringing Emotional Intelligence to Technology'. The subtitle of the book itself poses a strange case of human conscience. Kaliouby states how emotive AI can be used to tackle autism, early detection of Parkinson's, and identification of changes in mental health. With its brighter side facing the healthcare domain, the darker side faces consumerist and political hidden agendas.

Science Replacing Religion

The clones of Hailsham spent their growing years learning the art of being human. The authority in power decided what attributes should be incorporated into their personality, which would make them acceptable to the world. They were taught the ways of the world—how humans build relationships, procreate, read, write, and enjoy their lives. It is the same way our societal norms decide which attributes are considered good and bad, defining our characters as per these norms. We end up chasing these good-tags throughout our lives, forgetting to live at all. Tommy, who was not talented at creating art, became a social outcast among Hailsham students. He was bullied, disrespected, and looked down upon for failing at creativity. When Kathy took his side once among her friends about the bullying not being fair to him, Ruth justified the unfair treatment by saying "he's got to change his own attitude" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 15) and should create art to be liked and respected. This reflects a lot about human society; rather than exploring our individuality, we are expected to fit into the conventional pre-specified personalities curated to please the society and its so-called standards. Who gets to decide the boundaries of rationalization? Rationalising human needs, scientific curiosity, and societal and religious norms. The decision of science to discover all possibilities to make human life easier and longer is becoming problematic day by day.

Religion is defined by Georgios Gaitanos as "a system of beliefs and practices that relate to supernatural beings and are intended to organise and define the environment in which the religious community operates" (Gaitanos, 2019, p. 11). Science is slowly transforming its identity as a religion, which aims to solve all human problems scientifically and rationally. The scientific community defines the objectives of what needs attention and, through faculties of rationale and logic, curates a hypothesis and explores all possible methods to find a solution to a novel problem. The existing concept of religion and related rituals is often termed superficial and imagined notions; it is this concept of shared ideologies and rituals that gives a sense of meaning to a community. But what science aims to achieve seems no different: the need to fix all human problems, the desire to achieve the unfathomable domains of uncertainty, from Mars to the moon, astrology to astronomy, and from humans to transhumans, satisfying their curiosity of scientific temperament by curating a problem statement.

Conclusion

Kathy, when she saw a clown with balloons in hand, visualised the clown as the owner of little tribes of balloons held together with strings securely twisted and tightly held. She kept worrying about the possibility of the balloon unravelling and sailing off in the sky. Clowns, strings, and balloons can be seen as symbols for concepts or ideas

that give meaning to our lives and hold us together to have a sense of community. The moment strings are cut or unravelled, there wouldn't be any real sense in which way those balloons belonged to each other. With the loss of belonging, there will be a loss of meaning and sense of life. We associate ourselves with different notions of belonging, be it religion, class, caste, culture, etc. When science decided to humanise clones or AI robots, they enabled them to feel human in every aspect. Robots are programmed to perform specific tasks with more accuracy than humans. Recently, in June 2024, the world's first "robot suicide" happened in Gumi, South Korea. This "robot supervisor was not just a mere machine but a valued civil servant" (Eliacık, 2024). It may sound absurd to the human world, but scientists are shocked at how he abruptly fell from the staircase one day. He was operational from August 2023, navigating the premises with absolute accuracy. Different theories propose of him being overworked and distressed, which might have led to a technical malfunction. The superiority given to science over humanistic morality poses challenges to our understanding of human morals in this post-science era, where solutions are more important than the actual problems. The rapid advancement of technology in modern society prompts a re-evaluation of human identity and purpose, as depicted in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. By pushing technological as well as biological boundaries to create transhumans, it depicts our obsession with 'power' and 'control'. Ishiguro shows us how these near-human creatures are dehumanised when they ask for a normal life for themselves. The boundaries of biology are being crossed unproportionately. With the advancement of science, there's an addition to these existing notions; concepts have been redefined along with the age of truth and post-truth, with science being considered critical in understanding post-truth notions.

Bibliography:

- [1] Ishiguro, K. (2006). *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber.
- [2] Gaitanos, G. (2019). Definition of religion. ResearchGate. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12358.22085>
- [3] Foucault, M., Senellart, M., Ewald, F., Fontana, A., Davidson, A. I., & Burchell, G. (2008). The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA8747801X>
- [4] Eliacık, E. (2024, July 9). The First "Robot Suicide" Just Happened—Dataconomy. Dataconomy. <https://dataconomy.com/2024/07/09/robot-suicide/>