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A Critical Analysis of Kazuro Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* from a Posthumanist Perspective

Nur ÇÜRÜK*
Ankara University
Institute of Social Sciences

Abstract

Set in England in the late 1990s, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005/2021) deals with the theme of human cloning and raises ethical questions related to the limits of humanity. In the story, the 'clone' students of the Hailsham boarding school are raised and 'educated' to be used as organ donors for the cure of certain illnesses of humanity and for the extension of human life. Through the tragic struggles of those clone students to come to terms with their pre-determined lives, the story provides a fertile ground for the critical analysis of the use and manipulation of science and technology for the sole benefit of humanity. Thus, this paper aims to analyze Ishiguro's work from a post-humanist perspective and attempts to offer a criticism of anthropocentrism through the examination of the 'tragic' experiences and struggles of its main clone characters, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, respectively as 'students', 'carers', and, eventually, 'donors'.

Keywords: *Kazuro Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go, human, clones, posthumanism, anthropocentrism.*

* Ph.D. student at Ankara University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, English Teacher at Abidinpaşa Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School. E-posta: nurcuruk86@gmail.com

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Özet [TR]

Kazuo Ishiguro'nun *Never Let Me Go* (2005/2021) adlı eseri, 1990'ların sonlarında İngiltere'de insan klonlama temasını ele alır ve insanlığın sınırlarıyla ilgili etik soruları gündeme getirir. Hikâyede, Hailsham yatılı okulunun 'klon' öğrencileri, insanlığın belirli hastalıklarının tedavisi ve insan ömrünün uzatılması için organ bağışçısı olarak kullanılmak üzere yetiştirilir ve "eğitilir". Bu "klon" öğrencilerin önceden belirlenmiş hayatlarıyla yüzleşmek için verdikleri trajik mücadeleler aracılığıyla hikâye, bilim ve teknolojinin yalnızca insanlığın yararına kullanılması ve manipüle edilmesinin eleştirel analizi için verimli bir zemin sağlar. Bu nedenle, bu makale Ishiguro'nun eserini post-hümanist bir bakış açısıyla analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır ve ana "klon" karakterleri Kathy, Ruth ve Tommy'nin sırasıyla "öğrenciler", "bakıcılar" ve nihayetinde "bağışçılar" olarak yaşadıkları "trajik" deneyimler ve mücadeleler aracılığıyla insan merkeziliğe yönelik bir eleştiri sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Kazuo Ishiguro, insan klonlama, post-hümanizm, antroposentrizm.*

**A Critical Analysis of Kazuro Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*
from a Posthumanist Perspective**

Set in England in the late 1990s, Kazuro Ishiguro's dystopian science fiction novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005/2021) deals with the theme of human cloning and questions the limits of humanity through the ethics of human cloning. In the story, a class of clones is created and raised at the Hailsham Boarding School to be used as organ donors for the sake of prolonging the life of a certain section of society. Comprised of three parts, the novel explores the 'tragic' experiences of the clones from their childhood to their 'completion', namely death, usually caused by their fourth organ donations at a certain age. Focusing on the struggles of the three clones Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, the story gradually explores these three clones' increasing awareness of the horror of their pre-determined and exploited lives. The story is narrated from the viewpoint of the 'clone' Kathy who is now a young adult and looking back at the events that occurred when she was once a student at Hailsham. The novel first opens with Kathy's such reminiscences of the Hailsham school where the 'clone' students were surrounded and 'educated' by a set of guardians for the improvement of their physical health and artistic skills. As the novel proceeds, it reveals that the 'clone' students were initially unaware of what the future had in store for them. They began to question the unsettling nature of their lives and the purpose of their existence only when one of their guardians, Miss Lucy, implied that there was no point for them in planning their future. There was no point in planning their future because it had already been determined by their 'creators'. As the novel proceeds into the second part, the students begin to face the reality of their ultimate function in the wider society. Leaving the school as young adults, they were sent to the Cottages where they would live a communal life with the 'veterans' and would discover the outside world while waiting for the time to become a 'carer' for those who had already donated. Following the second part of the novel, ending with Kathy's decision to become a carer, the story comes to an end through the final part in which Ruth and Tommy lose their lives respectively to their 'unfortunate' donations, and Kathy eventually decides to become a donor. Exploring such 'tragic' experiences of the clones created for the sole benefit of humanity, Ishiguro's novel provides a fertile ground for its analysis from a critical posthumanist perspective. In this respect, this paper aims to offer a critical analysis of the novel through an emphasis on the 'clone' characters' inner conflicts and struggles caused by the whole project of human cloning. Thus, the study attempts to take a critical approach to the human-centred way of thinking that focuses on nothing more than enhancing the human condition.

The humankind has usually tended to regard itself as the 'sovereign' species of the universe due to its ability of reasoning that separates itself from the other species on earth. This perception of the human as the 'most privileged' species on earth was rooted in the Enlightenment period when the human 'reason' was glorified as the chief source of knowledge and authority. Descartes (1998), who laid the groundwork for much of the debates developed during that period, highly contributed to that perception of the human by drawing a sharp distinction between the mind and the body. He described the mind as the 'substance' of the human, and the body as a 'machine' that just carries the mind or the soul. For Descartes (1998, 19), the soul and the mind do

not need the body to exist; the mind is “a substance the whole essence or nature of which is simply to think”, and it “has no need of any place nor depends on any material thing” to exist. For this reason, he contends that “I think, therefore I am” because according to him, the key precondition for the existence is ‘reasoning’. This perception of the humankind as a ‘privileged’ species due to its possession of ‘reason’ has caused the instrumentalization of the universe and of everything in the universe for the sake of the human since the Enlightenment period. According to this perception, the human may have the ‘right’ to dominate the whole world through its possession of ‘reason’. In other words, Cartesian bodies may have the right to ignore all other bodies or other forms of beings on earth.

Posthumanism essentially emerged as a field of critical discourse towards this ‘privileged’ position of the human. There have been different approaches regarding the exact emergence of this new critical perspective on the human condition. Cole-Turner (2022), for instance, pointed to the early twenty-first century, and described posthumanism as a reaction to the humanism of the modern Western Enlightenment and as a critical approach to the Eurocentric, rationalistic, anthropocentric, and patriarchal assumptions of humanism. Unlike Cole-Turner, Wolfe (2010, xii) argued that the beginning of posthumanism could be traced back to an earlier period, “the mid-1990s”, during which “the term of ‘posthumanism’ itself seems to have worked its way into contemporary critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences”. To Wolfe (2010, xii), posthumanism’s “roots” could also be traced further back to “the 1960s” through Foucault’s “*The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences (1966)*”, in which the concept of ‘man’ was problematized as “an invention of recent date” that is “perhaps nearing its end.” As for Kashi and Ladani (2017, 20), they maintained that the term of posthumanism became popular in “the 1980s”.

Posthumanism, having emerged as a critical discourse towards the ‘privileged’ position of the human, essentially offers “a new way of understanding the human subject in relationship to the natural world in general” (Bolter, 2016, 1). It invites to reconsider what it means to be human. But, in this reconsideration of the human nature, posthumanism attempts to provide “a new epistemology” which would not necessarily be “anthropocentric” and accordingly “not centered in Cartesian dualism” since it aims to “undermine the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological” (Bolter, 2016, 1). In other words, it “criticizes anthropocentric humanism and opens its inquiry to non-human life: from animals to artificial intelligence, from aliens to other forms of hypothetical entities related to the physics notion of a multiverse” (Ferrando, 2012, 10). In so doing, posthumanism decentres the human. The humankind is no longer placed at the very centre of everything in the universe as the possessor of the ‘reason’. It is no longer distinguished from all animals or nonhuman entities as a ‘distinctive’ and ‘superior’ species. The human has been decentred and placed on an equal and a linear basis with all the nonhuman entities. Therefore, it is no longer an authoritative centre or a norm, according to which all the other creatures on earth are defined, described, and treated. The hierarchical position of the human in the universe has been deconstructed through the posthumanist thought, and the humankind has become a ‘mere’ part of the whole nature, or of the whole universe, like all other ‘nonhuman’ entities.

In the light of this ‘posthumanist’ criticism of the human nature, Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005/2021) provides a convenient basis for the critical analysis of a human-centred world with a post-anthropocentric view. This is because

the humankind is portrayed in the novel as a 'superior' and 'privileged' being that uses all its scientific and technological knowledge and developments for the sole benefit of its own species. In the story, a class of clones is created and raised for only one purpose which is to provide vital organs for humans and to prolong their lives. They are created solely to serve humanity; to improve their health conditions and to save their lives. To this end, the clones are expected to complete a certain process of donation throughout the novel. In the first phase of the project, alienated from the outside world, they are raised and 'educated' by a set of guardians at the Hailsham school through a variety of classes such as poetry, drawing, and biology. They are specifically expected to preserve their own physical health and to improve their artistic skills. When they reach a certain age, they are sent to the Cottages to wait there for the right time to become 'carers' and look after those who have already donated. Finally, in the last phase of the donation programme, the clones are expected to start to donate their vital organs until they eventually 'complete', or die, after their fourth donations. During all this process, the clones gradually become aware of what in fact awaits them in the future. While they initially feel happy and even lucky as the students of the Hailsham school, they later begin to feel confused and worried as they gradually realize their main function in the wider society. All these inner conflicts and struggles experienced by the clones towards their inevitable 'completion' contribute to the questioning of the limits of humanity and of the ethics of human cloning.

The story of the novel mainly revolves around the three characters all of whom are clones. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy grew up together at the Hailsham school where they always felt lucky and even proud to be a student of that institution. In the opening scene of the novel, for instance, Kathy appears to boast that she is a Hailsham student. Comparing herself to other carers who are as good as her but cannot "get half the credit", she feels lucky to be a Hailsham student. She thinks this fact is "enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up" because her school is one of the other few "privileged estates" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 3). In some other scenes of the novel, Ruth and Tommy also appear to feel lucky to have grown up at Hailsham. The clones' boasting of their school is a significant detail in that it shows how the administration and the staff of the institution succeeded in 'legitimizing' their whole project of human cloning. The legitimizing attitude of the headmistress of the school is once revealed in Tommy and Kathy's conversation with Miss Emily and Marie-Claude (Madame) towards the end of the novel. During that conversation, Miss Emily, who was the headmistress, frequently underlines that unlike in many other institutions, they did their best to provide their students with the best possible conditions. She argues that their school had a more 'humane' way of carrying out a cloning project: "Hailsham was considered a shining beacon, an example of how we might move to a more humane and better way of doing things ..." (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 253). Miss Emily's praises of her own school as attempts to legitimize their human-cloning project show that she has been trying to soothe her conscience. She seems to be aware of how they have transgressed the limits of humanity by both creating human clones and letting them die after a painful process just for the sake of humans. For this reason, she asks Tommy and Kathy to appreciate the efforts they made to 'secure' their students and for the 'good' lives they provided their students: "I hope you can appreciate how much we were able to secure for you. Look at you both now! You've had good lives, you're educated and cultured" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 255). Miss Emily's use of the words 'educated' and 'cultured' is significant because 'education' and 'culture' are among the ideals of the Enlightenment. In this respect, Miss Emily symbolizes the Enlightenment thought which post-humanism criticizes for its obsession with the

reason and for its anthropocentrism. Apparently, Miss Emily does not care about the fact that those created clones will eventually die for the sake of humanity. She boasts that they 'educated' and 'secured' those clone students at their schools, but she does not really question why one day they are supposed to die for the sole benefit of humans. Thus, Miss Emily's human-centred thinking assigns value to another species only in accordance with the degree to which that species provides utility to human beings.

Besides Miss Emily's 'human-centred' attitude, the three main characters' inner conflicts and struggles in each phase of their donation process provide significant examples for the critical analysis of the use and manipulation of science and technology for the sole benefit of humanity. In this respect, each of the three parts of the novel presents Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy's subjection to a particular different phase of their donation process and explores the 'unfortunate' effects of that subjection on the 'clone' students. In the first part of the book, the clones are at Hailsham; they have been isolated from the outside world and are not allowed to go beyond the fences. The clones do not break this rule since they have been frightened by certain horrible stories told by the guardians. One of those stories is about a boy who had a quarrel with his friends and ran off beyond "the Hailsham boundaries." According to that story, the boy was "found two days later, up in [the] woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 50). Isolated from the outside world through such frightening stories, the clone students are isolated from the human world through the fences that symbolize the boundaries between the human world and the nonhuman world. They are isolated from the human world because they are not needed there yet; their existence in the human world will make sense for humanity only when they reach a certain age when they will be able to begin to donate their vital organs for humans. This detail indicates that the human is at the centre of everything in the novel. The human is the centre according to which the position or the life of all other species is determined. In the novel, everything that awaits the clones in the future is being determined by humans.

In this respect, the clones are allowed to live only within the spaces whose boundaries have been drawn by their 'creators'. Within that confined space, the clones are not informed in much detail about what exactly awaits them at the end of their donation process. They are not informed in detail on the grounds that they cannot understand even if they are told. In a scene in Chapter II, Miss Lucy implies this when Tommy asks her why Madame is taking away their best works: "... it's for a good reason. A very important reason. But if I tried to explain it to you now, I don't think you'd understand" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 40). In another scene of the same chapter, she says to Tommy that they "weren't being taught enough" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 29). This is a significant detail as it indicates the human's 'inferiorizing' attitude toward the nonhuman, which is based on the lack of 'reason'. In addition to this, there is another example illustrating the human's inferiorizing attitude towards the nonhuman. It is regarding Tommy's lack of artistic skills. Within the boundaries of Hailsham, the clones are expected to attend certain classes such as drawing and poetry and to achieve excellent performance. However, Tommy who cannot make beautiful drawings is constantly humiliated by his schoolmates who have also been affected by the counsel of perfection of the institution. Tommy is so negatively affected by such humiliations that he suffers from loneliness and depression for a time. Once, fortunately, he begins to feel better when Miss Lucy relaxes him, saying that he should not worry about his lack of artistic skills. But, after a while, she thinks she has "made a mistake" and corrects herself by saying to Tommy that he should "worry about being creative"

because “there was no excuse for [his] art being so rubbish” (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 101). Thus, at Hailsham, the clones are subjected to a process of ‘education’ in which they are made to feel obliged to achieve excellent performance. They are also expected to preserve their physical health and fitness so that they can become ‘appropriate’ and healthy donors for humans.

In this first part of the novel in which the clone students are ‘educated’ at Hailsham, it is apparent that the clones are not aware of their main function in the wider society. They do not seem to be aware of the ‘final’ end in their donation process because they dream about their future. They think about what they want to be in the future. To exemplify, in the scene where Miss Lucy guards the students for rounders at the pavilion of Hailsham, the clones talk about their future dreams. Peter talks about what it would feel like if they became “actors”; he wonders what kind of a life it would be if he became an actor (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 79). Peter also says to another clone student named Gordon that “[he]’d have to go to America to stand the best chance” (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 79). Miss Lucy, who overhears those students, experiences an emotional outburst since she feels sad for the clone students dreaming or making plans about their future. She cannot help saying that “none of [them] will go to America, none of [them] will be film stars” (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 79). She adds that “none of [them] will be working in supermarkets” because “[their] lives are set for” them (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 79). All such dreams of the clone students indicate that they do not know the full extent of what awaits them in the future. However, as the novel proceeds towards the end, these clone students will gradually become aware of the main purpose of their existence in the wider society and of the impending ‘completion’ they will eventually experience in the final phase of their donation process.

In the second part of the novel, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy leave their school and are sent to the Cottages where they would wait for the right time to be ‘carers’. At those cottages, the three friends would also discover the outside world for the first time. They do not just begin to discover the outside world that belongs to the human; they also begin to discover what it means to be human. Sex, for instance, is no longer a taboo for them; Ruth and Tommy begin to make love more freely. As for Kathy, she also feels freer for sex and sometimes examines porn magazines. Thus, Ruth, Kathy, and Tommy get closer to ‘humanness’. On the other hand, they also begin to learn how to behave in public as they spend time together with the veterans at home. Initially, the three friends cannot easily adapt to the new conditions of the outside world and do not even get out of the cottages for a time. Kathy once admits that most of them have missed the guardians of Hailsham, but she also remembers something that was told them over and over at their school: “... after Hailsham there’d be no more guardians, so we’d have to look after each other” (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 115). In the same part of the novel, there also happens another significant event that brings the clones much closer to the human world. However, this confrontation with the human world disappoints the clones. In the end of their first winter at the cottages, the veterans named Chrissie and Rodney tell Ruth that they have found her ‘possible’ in Norfolk. Fascinated by the prospect of seeing her ‘possible’ model, Ruth goes to Norfolk with their friends. However, when they get the chance to watch Ruth’s ‘possible’ at close range in the Portway Studios, where she was conversing with another woman, they no longer feel excited about the idea of seeing a ‘possible’. Kathy thinks if they had “left it at seeing the woman through the glass of her office”, or even if they had “followed her through the town then lost her”, they could have returned to the cottages “excited and triumphant” (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 160). But in the gallery, “the woman was too

close, much closer than [they]'d ever really wanted" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021,161). This confrontation with the 'possible' becomes a confrontation with the human's world, and it makes the clones feel frustrated at what they see in the human.

In the final part of the novel, the clones now completely face the reality of the human world. When Tommy and Kathy visit Miss Emily and Madame to ask about the rumor of deferrals, they confront the reality of the human world because they learn all the details regarding their existence; they are now told why they have been created by humans and what awaits them soon. They learn what it means to be an organ donor for humans. They notice that they are not actually treated by Madame and Miss Emily as 'equals' or human beings. When they first arrive at Miss Emily and Madame's house, Kathy feels that Madame did not approach them as 'human beings'; but as 'something' that is not alive. She cannot decide if Madame could recognize them, but she is so sure that Madame "saw and decided in a second *what [they] were*" since one could see "her stiffen—as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 243). After they enter the house, Madame continues treating Kathy and Tommy in the same manner. This time, Madame cannot believe in the possibility that these clones may fall in love with each other. She gets baffled when they ask if it is possible for a couple in love to get a deferral from organ donation. She thinks such clones do not even know what it means to love or to be loved: "Sure that you're in love? How can you know it? You think love is so simple?" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 247).

Madame's 'inferiorizing' attitude towards Kathy and Tommy goes on when Tommy asks her about the Gallery of Hailsham. Tommy thinks that their best works were being collected at the Gallery of Hailsham because all those gathered things would help Madame in learning which of the couples applying for a deferral were really in love. In response to Tommy's question about the Gallery, Madame again looks down at these clones by using an offensive term: "Poor creatures. What did we do to you? With all our schemes and plans?" (Ishiguro, 2005/2021, 249). Madame asks herself what they have done to such 'clones' through all their schemes and plans. This questioning seems to involve both a sense of failure and a sense of superiority. This is because Madame thinks they did their best to carry out their human-cloning project in the best possible way through a variety of schemes or plans, but they were just able to create such clones who could ask 'nonsense' questions. This sense of failure is being fed with a sense of superiority; she seems to question how humans as the possessors of 'reason' and of the ultimate power over everything else could create such clones who cannot think reasonably. This indicates the hypocrisy of the human who both inferiorizes the clones as beings 'unable to reason' and expects them to act reasonably.

In the light of all these examples examined in each part of the novel, it can be suggested that Ishiguro's novel provides a convenient basis for the critical analysis of the human-centred-world from a post-humanist perspective. This convenient basis has been provided through the 'clone' characters who have been created for the sake of improving the human condition and prolonging the human life. In the novel, although the clones are considered by humans as mere 'tools' to improve their health conditions, they are also portrayed as 'real' human beings who have strong emotions, inner conflicts, struggles, dreams, or ambitions. The portrayal of the clones as 'real' humans and the exploration of their 'tragic' experiences from the viewpoint of a 'clone' narrator in each part of the novel contribute to the questioning of the limits of humanity through certain ethical questions. In the first part of the book, the clones are isolated

from the human world and subjected to an education process that often makes them feel 'inadequate'. They dream or make plans about their future as they are not informed about the full extent of what awaits them in the final phase of their donation process. In the next part of the novel, the clones, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, who are sent to the Cottages feel unready to face the outside world. Having lived an isolated life under the surveillance of the guardians at Hailsham, they experience difficulties in adapting to the human world and even in looking after themselves. As the novel proceeds towards the end, the clones are exposed to the 'cruel' reality of the human world through the 'painful' completions of Ruth and Tommy. In the novel, the exploration of all these 'tragic' experiences from the viewpoint of a 'clone' narrator undoubtedly makes an important contribution to the novel's criticism of the human-centred world, and inevitably invites the audience to see and question that human-centred world from the perspective of those clones.

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About the Author

Nur ÇÜRÜK is an English teacher at Ankara Abidinpaşa Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School. She has a master's degree in English Language and Literature from Ankara University, Turkey. The title of her master's thesis is "Psychiatric Power in Contemporary British Drama: Tom Stoppard's *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, Sarah Daniels's *Head-Rot Holiday* and Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*". She is now a Ph.D. student in the same department at Ankara University. Her main research interests include British drama and political theatre.

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