

Research Article

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Voices from the Margin: Subaltern Existence in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Within the field of postcolonial studies, subaltern literary theory constitutes a foundational framework, foregrounding the voices and perspectives systematically marginalized and excluded by hegemonic power structures. Antonio Gramsci coined the term “subaltern” to describe groups that are socially, politically, and geographically subordinated from the colony or empire’s dominant power structures. The term has developed in literary and cultural theory to address the agency and portrayal of underprivileged populations. In *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, the author deftly crafts a story that tackles the terrifying ramifications of human cloning while also offering a thought-provoking analysis of marginalization and quest for identity. Ishiguro creates a bleak future in *Never Let Me Go* where clones are produced exclusively for organ donation. Despite being supposedly given care and instruction, these clones are essentially ignored and denied agency. The novel uncovers the institutional dehumanization that clones experience through the first-person narrative of Kathy H., a clone who describes her existence at Hailsham and her later work as a career. Kathy’s observations

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show how the restrictive systems that govern her environment, determine her life and sense of value, revealing the complex interplay between societal standards and personal identity. Through textual analysis this research paper analyzes the work within the framework of Subaltern theory, highlighting the systemic marginalization of clones and the novel's critique of societal and ethical norms.

Keywords: Subaltern, Clones, Power Struggle, Oppressed, Disparity, Identity, Ethical implication

Introduction:

Subaltern literary theory, particularly the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, serves as a framework for evaluating marginalized literary voices. Her seminal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, has been crucial in helping people comprehend subaltern experiences as it examines how oppressed groups are unable to communicate within dominant discourses. Although *Never Let Me Go*'s issues of identity and ethical consequences have been extensively studied, there is a dearth of thorough studies that particularly examine the clones as subaltern figures. By carefully analyzing how Ishiguro depicts the marginalization of the clones and its consequences for more general concerns of power and autonomy, this paper seeks to close this gap.

This study uses a textual analysis methodology, closely examining significant passages with an emphasis on the application of subaltern theory to analyze the clones' marginalization and lack of agency. 2017 marks the publication of Nobel Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro's sixth book, *Never Let Me Go*. The book is set in a late 20th-century parallel England and paints a terrifying picture of a dystopian future in which human clones are raised solely for the purpose of organ donation. Substantial issues of identity, liberty, and human rights are brought up in the book. The idea of the subaltern—groups that are marginalized and excluded from power—is fundamental to its story.

The narrative is recounted by Kathy H., a thirty-one-year-old "carer," who reflects on her experiences at the purportedly exemplary boarding school, Hailsham. She revisits her interactions with the guardians, her relationships with fellow clones from Hailsham—particularly Tommy and Ruth—and the events that shaped her life in the years that followed. She tells how in their early days they were kept in dark and told nothing to very little of their purpose and the world outside Hailsham. "She said we weren't being taught enough, something like that." What she was talking about was, you know, about *us*. What's going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that" (Ishiguro, 28).

At Hailsham, the students, who are clones, were under constant observation, taught the value of creating art and maintaining good health, and told that smoking was not acceptable. The school emphasized creativity and self-expression, with art and writing being integral parts of the curriculum. The children were encouraged to produce art, which was believed to be a way of reflecting their inner selves and providing a glimpse into their humanity. Kathy became close friends with Ruth C and Tommy D, two other pupils. As Tommy was bullied, Kathy grew fond of him and spent time in private conversing with him. A woman in a suit, whom they addressed as Madame chose the greatest artwork created by the students for a gallery. Kathy

couldn't understand certain things herself like why Madame used to take their paintings for her gallery which she thought it might be linked to donations. Did the gallery exist, they were unsure. "What *is* this gallery? Why should she have a gallery of things done by us?" "...they never mentioned the Gallery, and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence" (Ishiguro, 29). This passage reflects on how the actions of clones, encompassing their educational and social activities, were predominantly governed by institutional control, underscoring their lack of agency. Furthermore, the clones are deliberately kept unaware of the mechanisms and operations of the system that dictates their lives. The administration seems complicit about keeping them in the dark. This lack of information and knowledge is one of the strategies of oppression.

Ruth came up with the theory that Madame, Marie-Claude, was scared of them rather than being snooty. They decided to put this theory to use. Madame dreaded if one of them would brush against her. "...she just froze and waited for us to pass by. She didn't shriek, or even let out a gasp." "And I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it; it was like we'd walked from the sun right into chilly shade. Ruth had been right: Madame *was* afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how we would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders" (Ishiguro, 33). They wondered who they were, wanting to know how they were different from others. Nonetheless, they did not look further into Madame's matter as they were not yet ready to deal with it.

They were given hand down stuffs from outside - clothes, toys, etc. When they behaved badly Miss Emily lectured them and called them "unworthy of privilege" and "misuse of opportunity." (Ishiguro, 40) This reflects the moral and social judgments placed upon the characters, underscoring the tensions between societal expectations and individual worth and role in society.

They were taught about soldiers kept in prison camp in World War 2 during English lecture. "It's just as well the fences at Hailsham aren't electrified. You get terrible accidents sometimes." (Ishiguro, 69), highlights the condition that they were bred in, that they were to be thankful that their confined place (Hailsham) wasn't electrified. Their isolation highlighting their lack of freedom and the control exercised over them by the institution.

In a rare instance, Miss Lucy, the student's guardian, informed the class that they cannot choose a life for themselves for they were being raised with the primary purpose to be organ donors later in life. "The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand... 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 what 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.... 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, 71). This statement underscores how the clones were explicitly conditioned to accept that their sole purpose in life was to serve others, reinforcing their status as subalterns whose value was determined entirely by their utility. Consequently, Miss Lucy's dissent led to her expulsion from the school, a development that the pupils passively accepted as an inevitable aspect of their predetermined fate.

'Unzipping' of organs joke also went about. They were unconcerned of Miss Lucy's worries reflecting how they still couldn't grasp the severity of their situation.

Kathy's narrative also focused on her relationships with Kathy and Tommy, who developed a close friendship that eventually evolved into a romantic relationship. The intricate relationships among the three characters were characterized by a volatile interplay of jealousy, love, and betrayal.

When Ruth, Tommy, and Kathy moved into the Cottages at age sixteen, they attempted to view Keffer as a guardian, but they weren't and instructed clones to take care of themselves. There, life was exhilarating but also a little perplexing. They were allowed to go outside for the first time, but they still spend much of their time in their own small world. Ruth and Tommy were still together, and Kathy occasionally engaged in sexual contact with other men. Their housemates were not from Hailsham, and they all had social skills issues. The elderly couple appeared to have adopted several TV-related habits. Their behaviors and interactions reflected their limited exposure to life outside their confined life at Hailsham, illustrating the constraints imposed on them by their upbringing and societal role and their personal development which further revealing the deep psychological effects underscoring their struggle to find authentic connection and meaning in a world that treats them as outcast.

Ruth was informed by two older housemates who had traveled to Norfolk and encountered a "possible" individual, suggesting that this woman might be the original person from whom Ruth was modeled. While traveling to see her, the five of them talked about a rumor that the elder clones have heard: that if a couple can demonstrate their love; their donations would be 'deferred'. They mistakenly assumed that everyone knew how to apply for the privilege since they thought it was exclusive to Hailsham students. Their keenness to find "possible" suggests a search for a shared understanding or a way to make sense of their experiences and relationships in a world that often dismisses their humanity. They undertook the trip and discovered the possible in an office, but the likeness to Ruth was just superficial. "We all know it. We're modelled from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from. We all know it, so why don't we say it? ... 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 came from" (Ishiguro, 144). Ruth complains angrily that they must all be clones of lesser socioeconomic groups showcasing their marginalized position in society.

During their travel, Tommy and Kathy decided to go hunt for a duplicate of a music cassette tape that Kathy misplaced at Hailsham. The strength of Tommy's affections for Kathy was evident in his recall of the recording and his desire to locate it. After discovering the tape, Tommy told Kathy that he believes Madame gathered their artwork in order to identify which couples were genuinely in love. Tommy based this opinion on a guardian who claimed that the artists' creations revealed their souls. Tommy suggested that paintings and poetry revealed their soul and it was the way Madame judged if a couple was truly in love and got their donation deferred. "...things like pictures, poetry, all that kind of stuff, she said they *revealed what you were like inside*. She said they *revealed your soul*" (Ishiguro, 153). "There's probably people higher up than her, people who never set foot in Hailsham. I've thought about this a lot, Kath. It all fits. That's why the Gallery was so important, and why the guardians wanted us to work so hard on our art and our poetry" (Ishiguro, 154). These quotes highlight their desperation for a chance at survival.

Kathy eventually left to be a carer which entailed her separation from others for years. Being a carer was easy for Kathy, worst part was when a donor couldn't make it & they were left demoralized. "You're always in a rush, or else you're too exhausted to have a proper conversation. Soon enough, the long hours, the travelling, the broken sleep have all crept into your being and become part of you, so everyone can see it, in your posture, your gaze, the way you move and talk" (Ishiguro, 179) shows their exploitation and the deplorable condition they were in. Eventually, exploited and profited from, they become underdogs.

She met Laura at a parking who informed her of Ruth's declining health after a botched first donation. After hearing, Kathy takes up Ruth's care, and both of them know that this will likely be Ruth's final donation. Ruth urged that Tommy go on a trip with her and Kathy. Ruth mentioned how Chrissie completed after her 2nd donation only. Ruth had a break out how Kathy or any carer would know how donors feel. Ruth brought up the past, seeking forgiveness and that she regrets keeping Tommy and Kathy apart. She asked them to try for 'deferral'. In an effort to patch things up, she gives them Madame's address and advises them to request a postponement. After her second donation Ruth "completes," which is slang for passing away.

Kathy becomes Tommy's carer, and the two eventually start dating. Inspired by Ruth's final desires, they visit Madame's home in an effort to postpone Tommy's fourth donation, using Tommy's newly acquired artwork as evidence of their romantic intentions.

Madame extends an invitation to the clones. "I don't know if she recognised us at that point; but without doubt, she saw and decided in a second *what we were*, because you could see her stiffen—as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her" (Ishiguro, 216). They get to know Miss Emily, their guardian, resides with her. "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*" (Ishiguro, 227). She informed them that they rather had a privileged upbringing at Hailsham which shielded them from the full extent of societal neglect and suffering that others face.

"Look at this art! How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?" (Ishiguro, 228). She informed them that the gallery was intended to show the outside world that the clones are, in fact, normal human beings with souls and should receive better care. The two ladies admit that deferrals do not exist and that Hailsham guardians did attempt to provide the clones with a humanistic education more than other institutions. They held movement to give better life and recognition to clones but deferral was not in their realm. After World War 2, they could even cure cancer through donations; there was no going back to no clone. They shared the Morningsdale event- possibility of having child with super intelligence which frightened people as they wanted clones to be behind shadows and didn't care of their condition. It is implied that Hailsham has closed since the ethics experiment was unsuccessful in defying popular opinion and they could help them no further.

Tommy asked to stop the car on their way back, got into a muddy field; he went bonkers like he used to back at Hailsham when angry. Tommy's frustration reflects the limited effectiveness of their attempts at resistance and the feeling of powerlessness in changing their predetermined roles.

They return for Tommy's fourth donation, he asks Kathy to resign as his carer, but she continues to see him. Tommy "completes" the narrative at the end. She went to Norfolk (lost things found there, as they believed) and hopes her memory doesn't fade leaving her to reflect

on everything. She doesn't let fantasy overtake her & went off to where she was supposed to. Kathy's acknowledgment of the inevitability of their fate and the need to accept it illustrates the reality of their existence and the internalization of their marginalization.

Conclusion:

Using the lives of its cloned characters—that each represent unique people with unique relationships, feelings, and struggles—*Never Let Me Go* explores what it means to be human, emphasizing the inventiveness, humanity, and need for deep connections that all human beings share. The society that produced the clones marginalizes them. They are viewed more as objects whose main value is contained in their organs than as complete members of society. This is a reflection of the subaltern experience of not being acknowledged as a whole person but rather as a tool. Their own lives and futures are not entirely in their hands. They live under the control of a system that doesn't ask for their consent or provide much input. Their inability to change their predetermined roles within society is a crucial component of their subaltern status, as they lack agency. Characters frequently accept the roles that have been placed upon them. They often embrace their fate as a necessary component of their existence, but they battle with identity and self-worth. Because the dominant cultural framework frequently fails to offer alternatives, subaltern groups may eventually come to accept their disadvantaged situation as an integral part of who they are. This internalization is a reflection of this process. The clones demonstrate some resilience, even though it is restricted, in spite of their mistreatment. They question their roles within the system, form relationships, and seek personal meaning; however, these efforts remain constrained by the overarching limitations imposed by the broader social structure. Their resistance is often subtle and restrained, highlighting the complexities of fighting against an oppressive system when one's existence is so tightly regulated. In the hierarchy of social positions, they are at the bottom. The novel invites readers to consider how power structures diminished their capacity to stand up for themselves in public and dehumanized them as people. The sad and reflective tone of the narrative offers a potent commentary on the importance of human existence and the effects of dehumanization. The clones accept their positions and the certainty of their end throughout the book. There are times when, in spite of the dire situation, one yearns for a deeper comprehension of their existence. Sometimes the characters hold onto the hope that anything will change or have meaning, but these are usually ephemeral moments. By the end, Kathy H. and her friends had come to terms with their limited time remaining and their role as organ donors. This acceptance highlights the dehumanizing characteristics of the society they live in and serves as a source of sorrowful resignation, reflecting their roles as simple organ donors. The protagonists' emotional and physical isolation is emphasized in the novel's conclusion. The novel's gloomy tone is influenced by the breakup of relationships and the inevitable parting of ways with loved ones. The conclusion emphasizes how much their assigned roles have impacted their interpersonal relationships. The way society treats and marginalizes clones is the true ethical problem, not the clones themselves. The planned nature of their life and the clones' lack of autonomy highlights moral concerns about individual freedom and self-determination. In the book, the society deprives people of their rights and regards them as nothing more than tools. In the context of cloning, the idea of informed consent presents significant challenges. The fact that the clones are not given a true choice or chance to voluntarily accept their fate raises moral concerns regarding the propriety of imposing roles on people without their express consent. Justice and equality are two more ethical issues that are raised. The fact that clones are not granted the same chances and rights as non-clones

highlights a systemic injustice that reflects broader themes of inequality and discrimination, and their marginalized status in society.

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