

Original Paper

Body Writing and Identity Construction of Clones in Ishiguro

Kazuo's Science Fiction Novel *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Never Let Me Go is a science fiction novel written by Japanese-English author Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-) as a representative Nobel Prize winner in literature. This work has attracted a wide range of attention to the ethical issues related to the heated topic of cloning. The novel focuses on the body writing, through which Ishiguro portrays the clone's physical health conditions, organ donation, existence of soul, and ultimately, the clone's demise, in order to depict the difficulties the clones face in finding their place in human society. Such a profound exploration represents one of the major ethical issues coexisting with the anxiety caused with the cloning technology throughout human life.

Keywords

Ishiguro Kazuo, Never Let Me Go, clone, body writing

1. Introduction

Never Let Me Go is a novel written by Japanese-born British author Kazuo Ishiguro, which was published in 2005 initially. Since its publication, it has sparked extensive academic and public discussions in society regarding ethical issues related to cloning technology, the existence of cloned individuals, and the construction of their identities. It is highly acclaimed to be an excellent novel. *New York Times* highly praises this novel "An oblique and elegiac meditation and mortality and lost

innocence...” What Ishiguro has done so artfully in these pages is not only assemble a chilling jigsaw puzzle, but also create a distinct fictional world” (Ishiguro, 2006). Currently, academic researches mainly focus on the essential topics including the abolitionism (Shaddox, 2013, pp. 448-469), the ethical dilemmas faced by cloned individuals (Ma, 2015, pp. 53-55), narrative strategies employed in the writing (Wang, 2017, pp. 141-143) and the construction of ethical identities (Du, 2014). Many theoretical studies also revolve around the remarkable ethical issues, such as in the fields of medicine ethics (Wang, 2022, pp. 65-69) and political science (Zhi, 2021, pp. 100-106).

However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the novel places the great emphasis on the depicting the body, making it the central focus of such a long narrative. This highlights the uniqueness of identity construction for the cloned individuals and, based on this, they try to construct their seemingly social identity to achieve social recognition while also causing the dissolution of their own self-identities. The healthy physical condition of a cloned individual serves as the foundation for their biological, social, and cultural existence as a human being, yet it has not yet formed their social identity. The harm inflicted upon the bodies of cloned individuals highlights the possibility of their ambition of integration into human society and the natural acquisition of identity, while simultaneously dismantling their cloned identities.

However, they are unable to integrate themselves into society fullfillingly. The concept of the soul for the cloned individuals aligns with the traditional Western notion of human nobility, but it is completely denied by human beings. The final separation of the cloned individual’s organ from their old body leads to the hollowness of their original body, metaphorically indicating the impossibility of their physical existence and the fragmented existence of their organ fragments, making it difficult to construct their true human social identity.

2. The Healthy Body of Cloned Individuals and the Construction of Social Identity

In the human society, the cloned individuals are generally hardly considered as true human beings at all with distinguished traits. However, they possess a strong consciousness that identifies with human identity. Superficially, it seems as though human beings are fulfilling this long-standing wish for cloned individuals. The fulfillment of this wish by human beings appears to stem from their respect for the lives of cloned individuals. However, in reality, their concern for the cloned individuals’ bodies signify merely as an extension of their own concern for human’s own life, especially their usurping the cloned’s organs to prolong human’s own life expectancy and quality, which can be explained from the following aspects.

Firstly, schools actively promote the idea that cloned individuals should take care of their own physical bodies. The school principal earnestly advises students at the whole school assembly that smoking is harmful to their bodies and reminds them to practice safe behaviors to avoid contracting diseases. The school arranges regular health checks for the students every week. Consequently, every week, the

school schedules a fixed time for students to undergo medical examinations, rigorously inspecting the development of their various organs and enforcing habits that maintain their physical health. Given the lack of self-motivation among cloned individuals, these admonitions and measures undoubtedly serve as means and measures for human beings to obtain healthy organs for themselves. Ultimately, these measures benefit the cloned individuals in the short term, thus protecting their rights to live, namely, their natural rights. The human body serves as the biological basis for human survival and the continued existence and development of individual organisms.

Based on the composition of human attributes, humans possess both natural and social attributes. As in a biological organism, humans possess natural attributes, which also encompass their bodily consciousness. Therefore, when the body enters into the realm of sociality, human understanding of the body reaches a philosophical level. On the one hand, Western art glorifies the beauty of the human body, with Greek painters and artists elevating the artistic creation of the human body to new heights. The body is considered sacred, and a healthy physical condition symbolizes a noble soul. When Michelangelo depicted the separation of God and Adam in his artwork, he emphasized the well-developed muscles of both figures with exquisite lines, thereby highlighting their divine souls. However, just like the gap between the fingers of God and Adam, even though Adam and his Creator maintain the same form, there is still an insurmountable chasm between them. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, the healthy bodies of all cloned individuals can be seen as an essential condition for satisfying their human identities, representing a healthy physique and even a noble soul. In essence, the intention behind maintaining students' physical health and conducting regular physical examinations is not primarily focused on cloned individuals but rather a measure taken by the school to ensure the smooth execution of future organ transplantation, with a true emphasis on the importance of organs. Their prioritization of organs supersedes their concern for the life and death of cloned individuals. For example, the process of Ruth's unfortunate death during her final organ donation surgery is vividly depicted. In this close-up, human indifference is clearly displayed. As the heart monitor signals cardiac arrest, the doctor continues to complete the organ removal procedure expressionlessly, following procedures in an emotionless manner. Finally, the doctor simply tidies up the operating table and leaves without paying any attention to Ruth's feelings or caring about her life or death. It can be seen that doctors do not consider cloned individuals as individual lives equal to human beings, but merely as biological entities that provide organs to humans.

As a result, cloned individuals lack ownership, dependence, and control over their own bodies. As a matter of fact, in the eyes of human beings, cloned individuals are not considered the ultimate ends in themselves but a means to provide organs for humans. Therefore, the process of constructing their identity as cloned individuals ultimately teeters on the verge of collapsing. Cloned individuals have no control over their own bodies and cannot ultimately determine the fate of their own bodies, thus lacking a definitive outcome for identity construction.

3. The Physical Harmness and Identity Construction of Cloned Individuals

The health and perfection of the body are the basis and prerequisite for the perfection of the human soul. However, once cloned individuals escape from school and enter human society, they abandon their healthy lifestyle habits, which impose significant burden and harm on their bodies. Additionally, their bodily organs will eventually be sequentially donated to humans, leaving their own bodies hollowed out and disregarded. Their life missions are also declared to be terminated. In order to achieve social integration, the cloned individuals go to fast food restaurants, imitating humans by ordering hamburgers, French fries, and cola. These fast foods impose a heavy burden on their bodies and are considered taboos in their diet for they will never be allowed to have a taste of such junk food by their teaching supervisors. However, they still believe that this is the most direct, prominent, and effective way to integrate into human society.

Eating fast food and chatting in restaurants are demonstrations of human social abilities and forms, showcasing their enjoyment and integration into popular culture. It is evident that in order to achieve the social integration and identity construction, cloned individuals are willing to sacrifice their physical health. On the one hand, this demonstrates their desire for social identity construction, and on the other hand, it highlights the cost of physical health associated with it. The relationship between humans and food is highly important. Since humans are supposed to absorb the necessary nutrients for their bodies through the healthy diet style, however, besides that ultimate purpose, human usually takes the special forms and manners of eating as a means to achieve certain social purposes and creating the social taste and class segregation is one of them. The selection of ingredients, cooking methods, and even the dining environment are closely related to the social class of the interaction partners and the appropriateness of speeches and behaviors, emphasizing the hierarchy of social relationships and etiquettes. For example, the noble people would like to develop a series of eating manners to segregate them from inferior classes, which in return protect them from being mingled with the people of lower class. Thus, it can be considered as a means for them to develop their own class rights and preserve their class nobility and highness. From this perspective, when observing cloned individuals like Tommy and Kathy, we can find out that they confidently and casually enter fast food restaurants, ordering similar fast foods like hamburgers, French fries, and cola as other customers with the aim to achieve acceptance from human beings and thus superficially construct their seemingly social identity. However, they are still regarded as outsiders and incompatible with other humans, and cloned individuals themselves are also confused about their actions. It is due to their great laughters over the meal that makes them conspicuous and different from people surrounding them that makes them contemptible by human beings. It is clear that instead of similar food choice that makes them the same as human beings, but the manners that means much in view of identity.

Moreover, their eating habits will affect the development of their bodily organs, ultimately causing them to lose the value of donating organs to humans. However, this may provide them with an

opportunity to passively escape their cloned identity and serve as a form of identity construction. Furthermore, the ultimate fate of each cloned individual is to donate organs and await death. Organs will be donated one by one to save human lives, while their bodies are left incomplete, finally dying on the operating table. When they are strapped to the operating table, they lose the autonomy and decision-making power of their bodies as individual beings. Their bodies are forcibly dissected and their organs are taken away by human doctors. Their bodies are at the mercy of human doctors, losing the ability and right to control their own bodies. In the human world, organ donation is also based on personal consent, requiring the signing of relevant agreements when expressing consent. The organ donation process is also humanized, as donation can only be performed after declaring medical death, and human doctors express respect for the donors during the whole surgery. However, the situation is vastly different for that of the cloned individuals. They have no opportunity to express their consent and their donation is involuntary, rather than voluntary and active. Furthermore, cloned individuals are still alive when their organs are donated. But in the eyes of human doctors, they exist solely as sources of healthy organs and therefore, when extracting their organs, the doctors do not consider their vital signs and physical state, but rather the health indicators of the organs and their suitability for humans.

4. The Body and Soul of Clones: Identity Construction

In Western culture, the relationship between the body and the soul has always been intertwined. The 19th century English poet William Blake celebrates the human body for he believes that it was full of charm and that the muscular contours portray the noble soul. The soul in the second generation of Romanticism poet Shelley aligns with the mainstream of thinking on the body and soul at the time. Shelley believes that after death, the soul can separate from the physical body and ascend to a higher level. In his famous narrative *The Queen Mab*, through the symbolic death of a young girl's sleep, her soul ascends with the Queen Mab to experience the celestial wonders and perceive the warmth and coldness of the world. In Shelley's heart, it can be seen that the body represents a constraint on the soul, and humans can only achieve the eternal soul by freeing themselves from the physical body. In this regard, Ishiguro also emphasizes the connection and confrontation between the soul and body of clones in his novel.

Under Ishiguro's pen, clones are depicted to have the opportunity to receive education based on human's conflicting comprehension and understanding of clones, i.e., whether clones have souls as a judgment and testing criterion. In this sense, the novel can be roughly divided into two aspects: some believe that clones do not have souls and cannot receive education, while others believe that clones have souls and can receive education. Moreover, education is seen as both a means and an end. It is to a certain extent to believe that through education, clones can gain knowledge about the world and others, ultimately becoming equal to normal human beings. If two individuals fall in love and can prove their genuine love, then they can delay the time for organ donation process by 3-4 years to enjoy their

affective feelings. As a matter of fact, this gives them the time for their souls to persist in their bodies. From the perspective of humans, they hope that this can confirm that clones can gain identity recognition from humans. In the novel, two clone students, Tommy and Kathy eventually realize their true love for each other and obtain the headmaster's address from Ruth. They go to visit the headmaster sincerely with their own drawn paintings and the genuine inner love, hoping to gain the headmaster's approval for their relationship. However, they ultimately fail their attempts. The headmaster denies the existence of this rule and points out that human beings would rather believe that the transplanted organs are grown in a experimental tray than admit that they come from the clones. It can be seen that humans always doubt that fact that clones have souls and never authentically admit this point. In essence, humans are not suspicious of this matter itself but subjectively unwilling to acknowledge the existence of life forms similar to themselves. In their view, clones only serve the function of providing organs for humans, and humans do not desire to recognize the identity of clones at all. This verifies Foucault's concept of the "medical gaze," stating that "medical observation is being formed in a new way...it is no longer just the gaze of an observer, but the gaze of a doctor supported and affirmed by a certain system, a doctor who is empowered to decide and intervene". In this case, doctors are not just those specifically involved in extracting organs from clones, nor are they just institution administrators; they represent all of society, and they observe clones as social others, viewing them as outsiders.

However, Ishiguro tries to depict those clones's efforts to prove the existence of their souls that are similar to those of human beings. Tommy constantly draws animals, just as he contemplates the distinction between humans and animals and contemplates the distinction between himself and humans or which group he should identify with and how. The headmaster's acknowledgement of Tommy and Kathy's humanity also demonstrates human's recognition. The way she forms her impression of their identity is not based on their names, but on their characters, for she cannot deny and has to admit Tommy's noble character and recognize Kathy's kind and gentle nature. At the same time, Tommy and Kathy do not hold a resolute resistance to organ donation but rather see it as a seemingly inherent noble mission. The formation of this sense of mission, although seemingly absurd, reflects their inner desire for self-realization, which Maslow has clearly explained in his well-known Maslow's pyramid. In Maslow's theory of personality psychology, he divides personality into five levels, with the highest level being the need for self-actualization, which "promotes the realization of individual potential and can be said to be the desire to become increasingly like the person one hopes to be, accomplishing everything that corresponds to one's own abilities" (Maslow, 1987, p. 168). It can be seen that the psychological development of clones has reached the advanced stage of human psychology, where self-worth is achieved.

5. Conclusion

Ishiguro bravely captures this sensitive topic—clones by using their physical depiction to portray their life value and identity construction. However, in fact, his depiction of the body is filled with obvious paradoxes. On the one hand, clones long to control their own bodies but gain nothing in vain. They long for a noble soul but are not recognized at all in human society. They long to integrate with humans but are deemed worthless in the eyes of humans. In the end, clones struggle to assimilate into human society. This struggle is not just considered as a physical one, but also a psychological and emotional one. Clones are constantly confronted with the reality that they are different from humans, and this difference is often met with rejection and discrimination. In fact, Ishiguro's writing is not intended to make humans accept clones, but to represent the marginalized groups, represented by clones that are excluded by humans. These groups hope to gain respect and redemption from humans.

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Note(s)

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