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Clones as the liminal space between human and the animal in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) portrays a dystopian world where cloned bodies are commodified for organ harvesting, revealing the ethical and philosophical crisis of biopolitical control. This paper explores how the novel reflects capitalist utilitarian ethics that commodify human life, blurring distinctions between the human and nonhuman. Drawing on the theories of Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and Nussbaum, it examines how the clones' bodies symbolize both "flesh" and "meat"—sites of transformation, exploitation, and disgust. The politics of disgust function as a mechanism of dehumanization, justifying systemic violence and emotional detachment from the clones' suffering. Through parallels with historical body commodification and eugenic practices, the study highlights how marginalized bodies are rendered disposable under the guise of medical and social progress. Ishiguro's narrative thus serves as a powerful critique of posthuman ethics, bodily autonomy, and the utilitarian logic governing biotechnological societies.

Keywords: Posthumanism, biopolitics, body commodification, politics of disgust, *Never Let Me Go*

Introduction

In the race to defy mortality, medicine has relentlessly tried to experiment on the human body, often by making unethical compromises. One such milestone was the first successful kidney transplantation that occurred in 1954 which was revolutionary in medical history (Merril *et al.* 277). Ever since then, the demand for organs has rapidly increased and significantly outpaced the supply. The waiting list of the United Network for Organ Sharing can be evidence to this as it increased from 21,975 names in 2000 to 32,722 by 2008 (The Economist 85-87). What began as a breakthrough in preserving life also exposed debatable ethical dilemmas surrounding bodily commodification of human organs in a capitalist utilitarian industry.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), (*NLMG* from here on) takes this biomedical reality pushed into dystopian extremes by envisioning a world where cloned bodies are commodified for state-controlled organ donation programs that benefit the human animals. Instead of portraying organ donation as a voluntary act of altruism (Dalal 44), the novel explores the intersection of biotechnology, capitalist utilitarian ethics through posthuman development magnifying the fragile boundaries between the human and the animal.

Through the lens of posthumanist theorists such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti and Katherine Hayles, the body is seen as a site of transformation and interchangeable codes which can be manipulated through technology (Braidotti). In Ishiguro's speculative world, the body commodification is institutionalised through the creation of clones, whose value is measured solely by their capacity to extend the lives of human beings. According to Sheehan "the zombie and the cyborg, the clone has come to represent the most clear-cut posthuman body of all—where the 'post' is decisively severed from the human" (Sheehan 253); it is the replication of the human flesh/meat that complicates the distinction of humans and clones, thus questioning the entire understanding of the "human" as we know it through years of humanism. I refer to flesh/meat in Deleuzian and Merleau-Ponty's understanding, which is explored below.

This paper aims to critically explore the intersection of the cloned body, utility and disposability depicted in *NLMG*. It investigates how the novel frames organ donation as a biopolitical mechanism driven by capitalist motives and state-control bodies into disposable

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commodities. Additionally, examining the politics of disgust and social othering, as a method of dehumanization through the Deleuzian concept of “meat” and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” I draw how cloned bodies are viewed as both flesh/meat. The last part of this paper draws historical parallels between marginalized bodies and cloned bodies, or how clones act as a metaphor for marginalized bodies.

NLMG is an exploration of body, identity and ethics in the context of scientific progress. Set in a dystopian version of contemporary England, cloned individuals are raised for organ harvesting and denied any right to autonomy over their bodies. Through the personal narrative of Kathy H., Ishiguro recounts a story of loss and existential crisis. The clones are not rebelliously working towards changing the system, rather quietly accepting the structure that dehumanizes them into biological resources. This enforces society to confront uncomfortable truths about societal complicity and systemic exploitation, making it impossible to look away from their ordinary yet tragic lives.

Before I delve into the idea regarding politics of disgust and disposability, I would like to touch on the framework of this essay. The distinction between human and the animal has been one that has been contested since Aristotelian times when humans were classified as “rational animal” (Berns 177). However, to dive into this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, instead I will focus on the human and the non-human concepts from the Deleuzian framework, following Memon’s interpretation of it.

In the novel, the clones exist as a liminal space where boundaries between the human and the nonhuman collapse, which makes them rather an indiscernible entity- neither human nor entirely nonhuman. This ambiguous existence parallels with Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “flesh” which is “not matter, is not mind, is not substance” (Merleau-Ponty 139). He presents “flesh” as a decentering “of the objectivist ontology of the Cartesians” (Merleau-Ponty 183). Drawing from Ponty’s idea of “flesh” Memon asserts that “[f]lesh is the differentiability of all things and non-things” (Memon 22) making it “the ‘common inner framework’ of everything there is” (Merleau-Ponty 227). Hence, “flesh” is the intersection of tangible and intangible elements—or in other words it bridges the human and animal existence by denying their clear ontological hierarchy. In *NLMG*, the clones’ existence exemplifies, what he calls as “interanimality” or existing in between being biologically human and socially “less than human”. Interanimality finds its clearest expression in his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he describes it as a “man-animal intertwining” (Merleau-Ponty 274). It is the “flesh”, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, that humans consider as the commodity, and it is the interanimality that humans consider to be the profitable element, a continuation between human and animal, wherein human bodies can benefit from the clones’ organs through harvesting.

On the other hand, for Deleuze, “[m]eat is the common zone of man and the beast, their zone of indiscernibility” (Deleuze 21) which emphasizes the collapse of the boundary between the human and the animal. In this context, “meat” represents bodily vulnerability and material existence. The “zone of indiscernibility” is the space where categories lose their fixed meanings. It is here that we place the clones at, existing as reminders of mortality and body frailty. Deleuze’s “meat” is the existential state of being reduced to corporeality which is stripped of any individual identity.

The clones embody this notion of “meat” as they are reduced to biological material and it is this notion of “meat”, in Deleuzian context, that evokes disgust in humans, referred to as “guardians” in the novel. As the clones exist as reminders of their own bodily vulnerability, as their science cannot provide immortality, they are disgusted by this “meat”. Hence, the clones’ bodies serve as a symbol for both human longevity through “flesh” and as body fragility because of the “meat”.

This paper is divided into two parts, the first analyses the role of disgust as a mechanism of exclusion of the vulnerable minority, drawing from the Deleuzian concept of “meat” and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of “flesh”. Bridging Nussbaum’s ideas on politics of disgust and the fear of contamination, I place the clones as liminal beings between the human and the animal, simultaneously regarded and disregarded through the different aspects of their bodies. In the second section, I attempt to read clones as a metaphor for marginalized bodies, often subject to society’s utilitarian practices. By examining the clones’ role as “carers” their emotional labour is also extracted, commodifying compassion to ensure no aspect of their existence is put to waste. This shows the entire range of exploitation within the novel’s dystopian society.

“Being the Spiders”: The Politics of Disgust and Revulsion in *Never Let Me Go*

“Madame was afraid of us, but she was afraid of us in the same way that someone might be afraid of spiders” recalls Kathy in a chilling anecdote of when Madame, one of the “guardians” brushed past them and her disgusted gaze fell on the clones leaving them questioning their lives (35). Nussbaum discusses “projective disgust” as follows:

People seek to create a buffer zone between themselves and their own animality, by identifying a group (often a powerless minority) who can be targeted as quasi-animals and projecting onto that group various animal characteristics, which they have to no greater degree than the ones doing the projecting: bad smell, animal sexuality, etc. The so-called thinking seems to be: if those quasi-animal humans stand between us and our own animal stench and decay, we are that much further from being animal and mortal ourselves (Nussbaum 5)

The clones occupy this liminal space of the buffer zone, identified as “quasi-animals” by humans. Liminality started off as a description of the in-between spaces or the “rites of passage” as Van Gennep puts forth. The term in the present context is used widely to illustrate the “imprecise and unsettled situation of transitoriness” (Horvath 10). “Liminality is a universal concept: cultures and human lives cannot exist without moments of transition, and those brief and important spaces where we live through the in-between” (Thomassen 4). However, in Ishiguro’s novel, the clones themselves do not go through a bodily transformation, instead it is their organs that are subjected to the transitional phase, moving from one body to the next through the act of donations. Here, politics of disgust plays a central role in dehumanizing and othering the clones. It operates symbolically and materially, distancing humans from their own mortal reality while justifying the exploitation. The clones’ bodies exist as material flesh, existing as

consumable entities. It is the “flesh” or the “common inner framework” that humans embrace here, as the framework allows them to extract organs from the clones.

Similarly, Davey’s assertion that disgust as an emotion, related to animals that are harmless, arises from the association of these creatures with illness or spread of disease (Davey 3457). The clones, who are “poor creatures” (249), evokes discomfort though they are harmless because they remind humans of their biological fragility and mortal reality. The “meat”, the part that can be disposable, becomes a site of projected disgust.

Merleau-Ponty’s interanimality further contextualizes this discomfort, evoked by the human-animal proximity or their ontological intertwining. The clones occupy this interanimal space as both organic and technological beings. While biotechnology offers humans the illusion of immortality, the existence of clones’ “meat” makes the inevitable mortality impossible to ignore.

Miss Emily’s admission, “[w]e’re all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Halisham [...] I’d feel such revulsion” (264) reveals how fear operates on an emotional level. The dynamics of technology and human longevity in Ishiguro’s narrative, frames the clones as living embodiments of what humans dread the most: bodily impermanence and mortality.

Hence the contamination is symbolic, embedded in the boundaries between human and animal. Nussbaum refers to “primary disgust” as an evolutionary tendency to avert from objects that contaminate (Nussbaum 6). This psychological mechanism is reflected when Madame asks “[i]f you aren’t here to give me trouble then why are you here” (243) asks, projecting her disgust from the fear of contamination. In this context, contamination signifies ontological reduction of the clones to “meat”.

When unexpectedly encountering Kathy and Tommy, both clones, Madame’s expression was “cold” and “severe” and her body stiffened “as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her” (243); this serves as an embodiment of disgust rooted in the fear of contamination. The clones, who are not literally filthy but symbolically “polluted” by their “possibles” who were “trash” (164) or societal degenerates such as “junkies” and “prostitutes” deemed to be impure. This “primary disgust” reflects a psychological defence mechanism, that allows human society to remain ignorant of the clone’s humanity while benefitting from their biological utility.

“Insofar as humans behave like animals, the distinction between humans and animals is blurred, and we see ourselves as lowered, debased and mortal” (Rozin 642). The clones are fully human in appearance and emotion, yet their purpose as organ donors, reduces them to biological machines isolated from any individuality. Their lives are managed through necropolitics that denies them agency.

Angyal’s response to disgust is a “specific reaction towards the waste products of the humans and animal body” (Angyal 395). The cloned bodies, destined for organ harvesting, become metaphorically “waste products” of a utilitarian system. By projecting disgust onto the clones, the society attempts to purify itself, without confronting the ethical implications of biological dependence. Here the “waste body” signifies the disposable “meat”, an idea I have explored in the next section.

A core question about this tension arises when Ruth asks “[i]f she really doesn’t like us, why does she want out

work?” While she appears to be referring to the artwork collected for the mysterious “Gallery” (a place where Madame took all of their artworks to) the question is metaphorical. By this time, they “knew a few things about our[them]selves” about how they were different from the “guardians” and the “people outside” (35). I argue what Ruth means by “work” is their organs. Just as their art is collected, displayed and evaluated from a distance, their organs are extracted, stored and used without consent also from a distance due to disgust.

Further, Miss Emily’s actions show “projective disgust” and while attempting to justify it, she maintains a moral concern. Repeatedly calling Kathy and Tommy, as “poor creatures”, she attempts to show empathy but fails to consider them as humans. Her admission to “feel such revulsion” (264) also reveals another dread she faces as a human—the potential of clones’ superiority if they are allowed autonomy. This fear ties to the “*Morningdale Scandal*” (258) which represents the threat of enhanced clones, suppressing humans, which would potentially flip the social hierarchy. The possibility that clones could attain superiority over humans through genetic enhancements would break the “buffer zone” that humans have created to distance themselves from the animals which already is thinning with the clones. Allowing the clones a better life would force the humans to acknowledge their shared humanity to nonhumans and animality to the animals.

The *Morningdale Scandal* also echoes another societal anxiety tied to the disruption of the established social dynamics. The possibility of clones to surpass humans threatens the powerful elite, the ones who rely on clones as disposable biological resources. As Nussbaum puts it, negative traits like animality and filth are projected onto marginalized groups to justify suppression. If clones surpassed humans, this projection would collapse, making humans the new “lesser” beings. This means, if superior clones were genetically engineered from all types of human models, including the social degenerates such as “junkies” and “prostitutes”, the established class system would fall apart. The privileged would no longer be able to distance themselves from the marginalized or “othered” groups as the biological worth of a clone would no longer be tied to the social status of its genetic origin. The fear that genetic contributions from the undesirable or “trash” bodies, could result in physically and intellectually enhanced beings destabilizing the whole societal power structure which assumes that social class and moral virtue are biologically connected.

Hence such acknowledgement would force the higher sections of the society to confront an unsettling reality that the individuals they consider socially worthless have contributed biologically to beings that are superior to them. Thus, the *Morningdale Scandal* suppressed further enhancement and the guardians such as Miss Emily and Madame who could have averted the situation had they “been more alert, less absorbed” did not attempt to do so (259).

Thus, disgust functions within the novel’s dystopian society not just as a personal emotion, but as a structural tool for preserving power. By ensuring that clones remain symbolically and biologically separate, the ruling class preserves superiority, linking biological worth to social status and genetic origin. This construction ensures that clones remain permanently marginalized in a world that

functions through dehumanization and commodification of the “lesser” bodies. Disgust becomes a tool of biopolitical control which sustains social order constructed on marginalization, exploitation and carefully maintained moral denial.

While politics of disgust shapes how clones are perceived and utilized, their fate is determined by a far more calculated system of organ harvesting. The ethical principles regarding organ donation which are typically associated with altruism (Dalal 44) and consent (Gries *et al.* 104) are subverted into mechanisms of exploitation where bodily autonomy is non-existent. This shift from emotional rejection through disgust to systematic control, portrays how the bodies of clones become currencies in a hyper-capitalist, bioindustrial economy. Madame’s visible revulsion toward the students at Halisham proves that she doesn’t view the clones as fully human but as the liminal space between the human and the animal. The clones, as biologically human yet socially alien, embody this liminal existence of the essential and the repellent.

In the next section, we will examine how organ trafficking targets marginalized communities and economically disadvantaged individuals through body commodification by reading the clones as a metaphor for the vulnerable sect. These bodies are viewed as disposable after extracting the utilizable values from them—such as labour and organs. Investigating the marginalization of the clones with real world organ trafficking practices, we will analyse how the bodily rights are violated in both fiction and reality, connecting *NLMG* as a critique to this reality. Thus, the clones are not just victims of disgust, but the products of a society built on their disposability.

Commodified Flesh: Organ Trafficking and the Exploitation of Marginalized Bodies

According to UN’s Global Initiative to fight Human Trafficking, (GIFT 2014), the victims of human trafficking are the illiterate, “who are migrants or refugees, or homeless persons” (qtd. in Fisseha 11). In *Never Let Me Go*, this reality of exploitation of the marginalized bodies is reimaged through the fate of the clones. The clones’ existence serves as a reminder to the historical practices of body commodification and medical experimentation recalling events like the Murder Act of 1752 which sanctioned the use of criminal’s bodies for medical dissection after execution. By connecting eugenic ideologies of “undesirable traits” and Galton’s “civic worth”, this section explores how certain lives are considered disposable for “the greater good”.

Eugenicist Henry H. Laughlin classifies “the feeble minded, the insane, the criminalistic, the inebriate, the diseased, the blind, the deaf, the deformed, the dependent” as “socially inadequate” who halt the social progress (Laughlin 68). This can be read parallel to Galton’s “civic worth” which is “a rough measure of ability and morality combined [...] of an individual correlated with social class” though not exactly “identical to it” (Redvaldsen 63). In *NLMG*, the clones’ inadequacy comes from their origins, as they are modelled from “social degenerates”. Braidotti’s assertion that “sexualized, racialized and naturalized others [...] are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (Braidotti 15) parallels in Miss Emily’s admission that the clones were considered “less than human” (258) making their suffering inconsequential. Their origins are described

as irrelevant—a “technical necessity” (138)—reflecting the utilitarian approach where their humanity is secondary to their biological function. This mirrors the fate of the marginalized groups in real-world historical contexts, where bodies of the “socially inadequate” are reused through medical experimentations to attain maximum utility.

When the judges made dissection the preferred sentence under the Murder Act, they may have been [...] diverting the maximum number of bodies away from being “wasted” on gibbets and towards more useful service by anatomists (Devereaux 144).

This system of body repurposing mirrors the clones’ fate, where “trash” bodies are reused for genetic material. Ruth’s outburst accentuates this reality: “[w]e’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren’t psychos. That’s what we come from” (164).

The clones’ inability to reproduce shows a parallel to Galton’s negative eugenics, where sterilization was used to eliminate undesirable traits from the “bad stock”. According to Wilson, the “cash-for-sterilization program in Chicago, sponsored by [...] CRACK (Children Requiring a Caring Kommunity)” offered the drug addicts \$200 to undergo “tubal ligation, vasectomy or long-term contraceptive such as Norplant” (qtd. in Asbell). This reflects with the implied sterilization of the clones, whose inability to reproduce shows a deliberate effort to erase the possibility of passing down undesirable traits associated with their “socially inadequate” origins.

Although the fate of the “possibles” or models from whom the genetic material was extracted, is left ambiguous, it is plausible that they were either paid or forced into sterilization aligning with historical eugenic practices which aimed at eliminating “undesirable traits” or stopping the reproduction of the “bad stock” (Lemar 50) while maximizing utility.

Ishiguro highlights the clones’ sterilization through the “guardians” discomfort when it comes to their sexual activity. As they were “normals”, “for them sex was when you wanted babies” but they “couldn’t quite believe we wouldn’t end up with babies” (94) suggesting biopolitical control to secure the future “purity”. It transforms the clones into complete biological resources absent of agency or autonomy.

Kathy’s reflection on discarded objects is a powerful metaphor for the clones’ bodies:

I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it [...] (282)

These discarded objects is a commentary on the “waste”fulness of their bodies. This imagery is particularly important as a visual representation of the clones’ fates—after fulfilling their role as organ donors, their bodies are metaphorically washed, stripped of all value and forgotten, finally becoming the “meat” that is devoid of any value or personhood. The “shore-line” where lost things accumulate, becomes symbolic of the clones’ resting place.

The clones' utility extends beyond organ donation. Through their temporary roles as "carers"—the utilitarian logic is further employed in the novel's dystopian society. Kathy introduces herself as a "carer", positioning herself within a clone's biographical trajectory—students, carers and finally donors. Carers are the clones that provide medical treatments after the donation processes. The clones are expected to serve a purpose even in their lives, without being a "complete waste of space" (1). Their role as carers delays their fate as organ donors, ensuring that every stage of their existence contributes to the broader medical purposes. This maximizes their benefit through emotional labour. It acts as a dual function which extends their usefulness beyond their role as "donors" while maintaining the illusion of personal agency—"I've been pretty much allowed to pick and choose who I look after" (1). The system grants them temporary status as "carers" to ensure a smoother functioning of the donation process wherein the clones have accepted and familiarized their fate as donors. Kathy's pride in her work reflects the deep-rooted utilitarian conditioning that shaped her identity. She is forced into an emotionally draining role as a carer, and her donations are even postponed because of how good she is at her job to maximise efficiency. This is also how their compassion is commodified to benefit the broader medical goals. This exploitation further solidifies the extremes of utilitarian logic, where lives are valued only in terms of productivity and contribution to the "greater good". Their lives are managed through the lens of economic efficiency to a point that no moment of their lives is "wasted" until the organs are harvested. Subject to a moral economy, where even emotional labour becomes currency, it is a critique on the societal framework where humanity is equated with usefulness and disposability with worthlessness.

In *NLMG*, the politics of disgust function as a mechanism that enables the systematic dehumanization and commodification of the clones. By reducing them to "lesser than human" status, it justifies exploitation of their bodies under the name of necessity and social welfare. Madame's revulsion towards the clones and the institutional discomfort surrounding their existence expose how disgust is weaponized to create emotional and social distance. This aligns with Nussbaum's concept of "projective disgust", where marginalized groups are cast as impure, allowing the society to use them by denying shared humanity. The clones' artistic creations, initially believed to be the symbols of their individuality act as metaphors for their ultimate utility. Through their forced sterilization, predetermined deaths, and their roles as carers, the clones embody a system that maximizes bodily utility at every stage of their lives.

The novel serves as a reminder to the historical practices such as the Murder Act of 1752, which allowed dissection of criminals' bodies for medical research reducing the socially inadequate people to mere biological tools. The clones' inability to reproduce ensures that undesirable traits linked to their "trash" origins cannot persist, while their harvested organs extend the lives of the privileged, hence maintaining the rigid social structure that serves a particular section of the society.

The effect of disgust and utilitarian ethics, results in the reduction of the clones to biological commodities which are initially essential but later disposable. The "flesh" that connects all beings, is turned into the commodity through which the clones are exploited while the "meat" becomes

symbolic for the systematic oppression by linking it to the politics of disgust as they exist in the liminal space between the human and the animal. The clones' humanity is projected in their relationships and their emotions are systematically ignored because "people did their best not to think" and if they did "they tried to convince themselves [...] that you [the clones] were less than human, so it didn't matter" (258).

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