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When Boundaries Dissolve: The Abjection of Clones in *Never Let Me Go* From a Kristevan Perspective

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Drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this paper explores the existential predicament of clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*. It argues that clones are constructed as the "ultimate abject" within a modern biopolitical context. This abjection operates on three fundamental levels. First, the clones' origin in genetic replication lacks a maternal body from which to separate. Second, their physical bodies are rendered boundaryless containers, disassembled through organ harvest. Finally, society performs a symbolic cleansing of these abject beings with euphemism like "donation". By tracing this trajectory, the paper reveals how Ishiguro's novel exposes that certain lives are systematically reduced to an inhuman state.

Keywords: abjection theory, Julia Kristeva, *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro, clones

Introduction

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro (2006) constructs a weirdly tranquil world of memories, where clones are carefully raised and educated in a closed environment, only to face the determined fate of organ donation. Beneath the calm narrative there lies a profound existential unease, which stems not only from the clones' tragic destiny but more importantly, from the uneasy similarity and difference between clones and humans. As Judith Butler puts it, "There are 'subjects' not quite recognizable as subjects, and there are 'lives' that are not quite—or, indeed, are never—recognized as lives" (2009, p. 32). This ambiguous state of existence thus is the focus of this paper.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, proposed in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, offers a profound framework for understanding this existential predicament. In her view, abjection is not mere revulsion or fear, but a more fundamental experience. Abjection hovers on the boundaries between subject and object (1982, p. 4), where identity, order, or system is thrown into disarray. The abject can neither be fully assimilated into the symbolic order nor completely excluded, thus being a mixture of judgment and affect, condemnation, and exaltation. Kristeva uses the example of food loathing to illustrate the immediate and intense reaction to the abject: "When the eyes see or lips touch that skin on the surface of milk…I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly" (pp. 2-3). "But since the food is not an 'other' for me…I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (p. 3). The adjective reaction caused by clones may not as immediate or intense as that of food aversions, yet they are like a dizzying void, forcing the subject, normal humans to confront the fragility of their own boundaries.

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The Absence of a Maternal Body

The subjectivity of the individual is born from separation from the maternal body. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this separation marks the child's entry into the symbolic order, which Davis describes as "the indoctrination of the child into the phallocentric system of cultural institutions" (1995, p. 5). Kristeva both inherits and revises this Lacanian framework by focusing on what must be expelled for this entry to occur. She invokes the concept of "chora", drawn from Plato's Timaeus and generally translated as the "maternal space", a primordial, chaotic place that precedes all order and form. For the infant, the mother's body constitutes an environment of pleasure, warmth, nourishment, and comfort. Entry into the symbolic order, however, demands the rupture of this bond. As Kelly Oliver explains, "The not-yet-subject with its not-yet, or no-longer, object maintains 'itself' as the abject. Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother" (1993, p. 60). To become a subject, as Pournami succinctly puts it, the child "must renounce its identification with its mother, drawing a line between itself and her" (2024, p. 37).

For clones, however, this entire trajectory is foreclosed from the very beginning. Brought into existence through genetic replication, the clones are the *memes*, duplicate through bioengineering (Pradip, 2023, p. 8). They have no biological mother, also no chora to be expelled, and therefore no primal boundary to draw. In the normal world, a child's legal guardians are typically parents or immediate relatives. The clones, by contrast, have only "guardians" at Hailsham, like Miss Emily, Miss Geraldine, and others who oversee their upbringing. In the absence of a maternal body, there is no primordial impulse to exclude for clones to establish subjectivity. The "original" thus becomes a distorted substitute for the clones absent maternal body. *Never Let Me Go* depicts such futile search in scenes where clones, represented by Ruth, seek out their originals: "Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 137). Clones scan crowds in cities; study faces in shopping malls and roadside restaurants, searching for the person whose genetic material they may carry. When Ruth glimpses an advertisement in an elegant magazine, she imagines her original as a respectable professional woman and travels with her companions to Norfolk to find this figure. This relentless pursuit reveals the clones' profound identity anxiety, as if the discovery of the model might confer meaning upon their copied bodies. The clones' abjection, in this sense, begins with the lack of maternal origin and the failure to establish subjectivity itself.

The Body Without Boundaries

Apparently, the sense of abjection of clones does not lie in any deformed appearance or terrifying physiological structure. On the contrary, clones possess almost the same appearance and physical composition as humans. At first glance, this very similarity might seem to trigger what Sigmund Freud termed the "uncanny", the alienation of the familiar under specific conditions, which disturbs cognitive stability and causes unease. Kristeva, however, clearly distinguishes this Freudian uncanny from the more fundamental experience of abjection, noting that "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (1982, p. 5). The distinction is decisive, whereas the uncanny arises from the return of the repressed familiar; the abject provokes horror precisely because it refuses to be recognized as either familiar or strange, self or other. This is the precise register of fear that clones evoke. Kathy recalls of Madame: "Madame never liked us. She's always been afraid of us. In the way people are afraid of spiders and things" (p 263). Years later, Madame herself confirms this visceral reaction: "There were times I'd look down at you all from my study

window and I'd feel such revulsion…" (p. 264). As Pournami observes, "To keep hold of oneself a subject must remain vigilant against that which could reshape the borders of the self" (2024, p. 36). The clone, hovering at the threshold of the human, is precisely such a threat, keeping exerting pressure on the boundaries that secure identity.

Normally, the body is the first and most elementary demarcation, marking the "I" in time and space, establishing the sovereign distinction between self and world. The bodies of clones, however, are deprived of this boundary from the very start. At Hailsham, their physical existence is subjected to constant surveillance and discipline. There are routine medical examinations to monitor their "health", daily activities to be strictly regulated, and their bodies accessible to a power that penetrates. As scholar Zhi Yunbo observes, the carers and doctors exercise the authority to enter a specific "no-man's-land", the internal body, a territory that, under normal circumstances, remains only accessible to medical professionals under strictly delimited conditions (2021, p. 101). Here, the body ceases to be a domain of individual sovereignty and becomes instead a monitored asset, a resource to be carefully maintained for future extraction. The absolute boundary of the "I" is thus abolished before it can ever properly be established.

This dissolution of physical boundaries is also internalized within the clones' own world, mostly in their humor. Tommy's injured arm offers a striking example. As his wound heals, the other clones gather around to inspect it, and those accustomed to teasing him offer a playful hypothesis: If the injury had landed precisely at the elbow, bending the arm quickly might open the entire elbow "like a package". This soon circulates among them as a running joke: "The idea was that when the time came, you'd be able just to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you'd hand it over" (p. 86). The joke, on the surface, maybe a childlike imagination, the kind of dark play. Yet it betrays a chilling internalization of the clones' existential condition. To imagine one's body as a zippered container organs may be casually retrieved is to absorb it into the texture of everyday life. The boundaryless body, when the clones begin to laugh at their own unzipping, has also become a cognitive one. Tommy also endorses, "I'm really fit, I know how to look after myself. When it's time for donations, I'll be able to do it really well" (p. 106).

Notably, the disassembly of clones' organs is not a one-time end to life, but a process in which physical boundaries are repeatedly breached. As scholar Wang Xiangni observes, clones are ultimately reduced to organ storage units for humans; their final state is to be emptied (2023, p. 20). Through successive surgeries, clones continue to linger on in a miserable state, yet their life form can never return to wholeness or complete death. This suspended state, maybe understood as the pinnacle of abjective experience. According to the Brahmin concept of food remainders, Kristeva points out that leftover food is more defiling than any food and emphasizes that the remainder is the residue of something, more disturbingly, of someone (1982, p. 76). This view reflects that clones are like leftover food that has been used, who still retains some partial, instrumental utilitarian value. But their very existence, like food, has mixed with the possibility of contamination. Being the residue of someone, clones defile the bodily integrity and materialize a sense of perpetual danger between life and death (p. 9).

The Cleansing of the Abject

"Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body…to become clean and proper" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 108). For abjects such as excrement and corpses, society must carry out timely physical purification to maintain the stable symbolic order. "It must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth". In *Never Let Me Go*, how clones, as a systematic abject existence, are buried and purified by society? The novel does not directly give answers. In the film adaptation of the novel, Ruth lies motionless on

the operating table after the final organ harvesting, with her eyes unclosed. The camera also refuses to reveal where her body is taken after the operation. The cleansing of clones, instead, may occur more exactly on the symbolic level.

The first mechanism of symbolic cleansing is spatial segregation. As scholars Zhang Helong and Qian Yu observe, the sovereign authorities adopt spatial segregation to achieve the abnormal disposal and legal utilization of clones' bodies while preserving moral standing (2018, p. 104). Hailsham itself embodies this logic of secluded containment. It "stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides", and even "the gate itself was still a fair distance off", requiring any approaching vehicle "to take the gravelled drive" past shrubs and flowerbeds before reaching the main house (p. 34). The Cottages, where clones reside after graduation, are situated on "a deserted and idle farm" (p. 114). Kingsfield Recovery Centre, where Tommy undergoes his donations, is likewise a closed system, operated internally by clone carers and medical staff (p. 212). Each of these sites is carefully constructed or selected by political power to maintain the clones in a state of information blockade. Physical invisibility thus secures the condition of being "out of sight, out of mind".

More effective still is the segregation of category. Clones are incorporated into the grand narrative of medical progress and classified as medical resources, who's killing never marks the breach of law because of his socio-cultural exclusion (Pradip, 2023, p. 9). The novel traces this categorical exclusion through three authority figures. Madame says to Kathy and Tommy, who come to apply for a donation deferral, "they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (p. 258). The life process of them is thus reduced to a functional cycle of "growing up—donating—completing", in which moral doubts, if any, should be overwhelmed by technical rationality. This is the biopolitical logic that Roberto Esposito identifies in *Bios*, a regime in which "politics are biologized and biology is politicized" (2008, p. 147). Miss Emily, being the speaker of medical power behind, gives voice to this logic, "after the war…there wasn't time to take stock, to ask the sensible questions". When all new possibilities "laid before us", new ways to "cure so many previously incurable conditions", questions that might been asked were simply deferred. In a world that regards cancer as curable, there was no way to "go back to the dark days" (p. 257). What the novel exposes, then, is a system of medically rationalized sacrifice, a regime in which, as Margaret Atwood (2021) puts it, the prosper of the population is purchased through the "cannibalisation of others", with clones serving as "human sacrifices, offered up on the altar of improved health for the population at large".

Most central is the cleansing of the linguistic system. Chapter Two of *Powers of Horror* is titled "Something to Be Scared of". In this chapter, Kristeva analyzes the famous case of Little Hans' fear of horses and reveals how fear is constructed, from an internal anxiety into a recognizable symbolic object through language, especially with the help of the transformation of voice. By grammaticalizing fear as "I am afraid of being bitten" (Kristeva 1982, p. 39), Little Hans successfully projects and fixes the inexpressible internal anxiety onto a namable threat, the "horse" (pp. 34-35). The horse becomes the clear agent, and the "I" is defined as the object of the action, an entity with clear boundaries. If this logic is applied to the world of *Never Let Me Go*, it becomes apparent that clones are systematically deprived of this grammatical transformation. Syntactical passivation, according to Kristeva, "heralds the subject's ability to put himself in the place of the object" and is "a radical stage in the constitution of subjectivity" (p. 39). The core vocabulary clones inculcated with, like "donation", "completion", "caring" are almost entirely in the active voice. Scholar Wang Taohua and Cheng Tongxin points out that literally, "donation" and "donor" imply that the donor gives voluntarily, for donation should be a purely voluntary act from the heart (2019, p. 30). Victoria Eskedal Amundsen also broods that a donation is supposed to not be forced

or coerced (2015, p. 36). Yet the "donation" in the novel is not a voluntary act but rather a passive act, and at this point, the meaning of "donation" is equivalent to "being led to the slaughter", and the donor thus becomes the "slaughtered". What is ultimately foreclosed, therefore, is not merely the clones' capacity to name themselves as victims, but the very grammatical possibility of a speaking subject. The active voice here, is weaponized to erase the violence of the biopolitical order. To say "I donate" is to mistake the inexorable for the voluntary.

Therefore, the cleansing of clones as the abject is mainly a complete symbolic exclusion, which renders them invisible through segregation, dehumanizes them through classification, and ultimately sanctifies the process through language. Clones are progressively and quietly flushed away from the symbolic order, as if they never existed as complete humans.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper ultimately leads to a real predicament: How can humans coexist in a civilization that cannot entirely reject a certain technology, yet cannot calmly accept its moral consequences? Through Kristeva's theory of abjection, readers gain insight into the essence of the clones' tragedy in *Never Let Me Go*; they are "non-beings" suspended outside the symbolic order. The question the novel leaves us with is not how to prevent the creation of clones, but how to recognize the abjection we are already practiced in not seeing.

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