

Posthuman Agency and Question of Autonomy in *Never Let Me Go*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Viriline Jenitta Raj, V., and S. Mangaiyarkarasi. "Posthuman Agency and Question of Autonomy in *Never Let Me Go*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S3, 2025, pp. 141–45.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS3-Apr.9074>

V. Viriline Jenitta Raj

(Reg No. 19213154012019), Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English
S T Hindu College, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Nagercoil

Dr. S. Mangaiyarkarasi

Associate Professor, Department of English, S T Hindu College
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Nagercoil

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let MeGo* offers a poignant exploration of post-human identity through its portrayal of clones, beings who are biologically human yet socially marginalised and existentially constrained. This paper explores how post-humanism questions traditional ideas about identity, what it means to be human, and the idea of personal freedom. It discusses the lives of cloned individuals who exist in a space between perceived freedom and predetermined futures. Even though they lack control over their destinies, their experiences influence their self-perception and understanding of the world. Through the lens of post-human theory, this study examines how Ishiguro critiques the ethical dimensions of human action and the institutional frameworks that regulate autonomy and identity. Although the clones reflect many human qualities, their lives push us to rethink what it truly means to be human. Their existence highlights a world struggling to come to terms with the ethical consequences of biotechnological progress. *Never Let Me Go* becomes more than just a story, it is a quiet reflection on how easily personal freedom can slip away and how delicate the idea of human value becomes in a world shaped by post-human realities.

Keywords: Post-Humanism, Autonomy, Identity, Human Condition, Bioethics, Agency, Cloning.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, published in 2005, belongs to the science fiction genre and is set in a dystopian version of 1990s England. In this speculative narrative, Ishiguro envisions a world where human clones are created solely for the purpose of organ donation. The clones grow up in secluded places like Hailsham, where they are given an education and care that mimic a typical childhood. But it is all part of a carefully crafted illusion. At the heart of the story are three main characters, whose lives to follow as they slowly uncover the truth about who they are and what their future holds, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, as they grapple with the reality of their predetermined fate. Through the personal journeys and emotional bonds of its characters, *Never Let Me Go* explores powerful ideas such as memory, love, and the essence of being human. Ishiguro offers a quiet yet striking critique of a society that treats life as something to be used, raising difficult questions about autonomy, identity, and the value of a human life.

Within this disquieting reality, clones are purpose-built to function exclusively as organ donors. Their existence is predetermined from birth, and their physical forms are regarded not as autonomous entities, but rather as resources for medical application. This unsettling reality invites to look at the novel through a post-humanist lens, pushing to rethink what it means to be human, especially when it comes to having agency and the freedom to choose. Despite the harsh system they live in, Ishiguro brings the inner lives of these characters to the forefront. The characters' feelings, memories, and desires, along with all these facets of their being, powerfully demonstrate their humanity, a truth the world around them ignores. Consequently, *Never Let Me Go* offers a critique of the ethical implications of scientific advancement and poses critical questions about the possibility of human autonomy in an era increasingly dominated by genetic engineering and biopolitical control.

Post-humanism, as a philosophical framework, challenges the humanistic belief that humans are the central focus of moral consideration and the measure of life. By examining the blurred boundaries between the human and the non-human, as well as the natural and the unnatural, post-humanism seeks to understand the limitations of individuality and identity in a scientifically moderated world. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro envisions a society in which clones, biologically human yet artificially produced for utilitarian purposes, live in a state of existential uncertainty. These clones, while physically indistinguishable from non-cloned humans, are denied social recognition and autonomy, as their lives are entirely dictated by the needs and desires of others. This tension is captured in Ruth's reflection when she asks Tommy, "Do you think she'd have talked to us like that if she'd known what we really were? What do you think she'd have said if we'd asked for her? 'Excuse me, but do you think your friend was ever a clone model?' She'd have thrown us out" (Ishiguro 164). Through such moments, the novel highlights the dehumanising consequences of reducing individuals to mere biological instruments, highlighting the post-human struggle for identity and recognition.

The clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, come to understand their predetermined roles from a young age. Even though the clones become aware of their purpose early on, they still struggle with a deep desire to find meaning and identity beyond the roles they have been given. Their quiet reflections show them as post-human figures, biologically similar to humans, yet denied the freedom to truly shape their own paths. Without the ability to make choices for themselves, their identities are reduced to their bodily function, compelling them to view their value in terms of usefulness rather than essential value. At the heart of the novel lies an ethical dilemma, the creation of human-like beings only for organ donation not for their own living. This reduces their existence to a means to an end, robbing them of identity, autonomy, and dignity. Seen through a post-humanist lens, the novel questions the deeply rooted belief that being human automatically implies freedom, moral agency, and the right to have their own identity. The clones are not recognised as beings with fundamental rights or personal freedoms; instead, their worth is measured solely by their biological utility to so-called "real" humans. This dehumanisation is articulated by Miss Lucy, who tells the students: "None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you" (Ishiguro 80). Through this portrayal of the clones' lives, Ishiguro critiques a society that values productivity more than personhood. He draws attention to how easily human identity can be diminished or erased in a world shaped by biotechnological control, where efficiency often takes precedence over empathy and individuality.

The way *Never Let Me Go* presents the cloning process mirrors the broader ethical concerns that come with modern biotechnological advancements. As developments in genetic engineering and cloning push the boundaries of science, they also force to reconsider what it truly means

to be human. While these technologies promise medical breakthroughs, they bring with them difficult questions, about how cloned beings are treated, whether they have the right to make choices about their lives, and how easily they could be exploited in the name of progress. Ishiguro addresses these issues through the institutional dehumanisation of clones, as seen in Miss Emily's statement: "Before that, all clones—students, as we preferred to call you—existed only to supply medical science" (Ishiguro 256). This comment highlights how clones were historically viewed not as sentient individuals, but as biological resources. The novel thus prompts readers to consider the moral implications of scientific progress and the urgent need to redefine ethical responsibility in the age of biotechnology.

The moral implications of cloning are emphasised as Kathy and her companions begin to reflect on the purpose of their existence, though they never directly challenge the system that governs their lives. Raised in an environment like school is carefully designed to make their predetermined fate seem normal, but the clones are taught to accept their roles in the society without question. This powerlessness to imagine any other kind of future reveals a deep psychological limits, one that speaks to a sense of post-human alienation and a loss of self-agency. Their quiet compliance highlights how completely their identities and destinies are shaped by the institutions and the people around them. Ishiguro's critique goes beyond the act of cloning itself. He turns the spotlight on the societal structures that allow such ill treatment to occur without real moral reflection. By creating a world in which genetically modified beings are denied autonomy and the chance to question their surroundings, *Never Let Me Go* becomes a powerful analysis on the ethical limits of scientific advancement, and the social systems that quietly uphold inequality and strip individuals of their humanity.

A key theme in *Never Let Me Go* is the exploration of self-discovery and how the clones' sense of independence is systematically stripped away by the circumstances that control their lives. From a humanist perspective, autonomy means having the freedom to make independent choices that reflect one's own desires and goals. But in Ishiguro's world, this fundamental aspect of personhood is never granted for the clones. From the moment they are created, their destinies are already decided, their existence solely to become organ donors. Their lives are tightly bound to their purpose to donate, leaving no space for their dreams, ambitions, or the chance to shape a life of their own. This lack of autonomy is highlighted by Miss Emily's statement: "It's one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme" (Ishiguro 259). The setting here reinforces the dehumanizing logic of the system, which views the clones not as individuals, but as utilitarian creations. Through this, Ishiguro critiques the ethical cost of sacrificing personal freedom and identity in pursuit of scientific and medical advancement.

Although the clones occasionally express a quiet resistance to their predetermined fates, their actions remain confined within the rigid boundaries assigned to them as donors. Kathy, for instance, spends much of the novel looking back on her past and the close relationships she shared with Tommy and Ruth and her other friends at Hailsham. The novel filled with Kathy's, memories, moments of love, jealousy, and longing, reveal a rich emotional world that highlights her deep sense of humanity. Through her reflections, despite the constraints placed on her life, Kathy experiences the same emotional complexities as any other human being. "The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them" (Ishiguro 280). Despite this emotional richness, these human qualities are overshadowed by the grim awareness that their futures have been predetermined by others. The clones in the novel deep longing for love, connection, and freedom is constantly suppressed by the rigid social structures that define their existence. This creates an agonizing distress between their very human emotions and the post-human limitations forced on them. Through this difference, Ishiguro draws attention to the loss of personal agency and the emotional toll of the inability to shape their own lives.

Tommy's search for meaning offers a powerful glimpse into the post-humanist themes woven throughout *Never Let Me Go*. Despite his sincere efforts to shape his own future with Kathy, Tommy is met with growing frustration, as he realises that the system has already decided to kill his own future. His increasing awareness of this reality fuels an inner conflict, one marked by anger, confusion, and desperately wanted to believe in the possibility of choice for living. Ishiguro uses Tommy's narrative to illuminate how post-human conditions undermine personal agency and blur the boundaries between identity, purpose, and oppression.

Ruth attempts to control her narrative through manipulation and denial, yet she is unable to escape the pressures imposed upon her. Her internal struggle with the lack of control over her life is especially clear in the way she interacts with Tommy and Kathy. At times, she tries to take control of their relationships, perhaps as a way to feel some sense of agency in a life where so little is truly her own. The dynamic between the three of them reflects the broader post-human condition they all face, lives shaped by systems and expectations that leave almost no space for personal freedom. Her actions reveal the conflict between a natural human desire for autonomy and the rigid roles imposed on her from birth. Her story, like those of Tommy and Kathy, highlights Ishiguro's post-humanist critique: in a world where identity and agency are tightly controlled, the very idea of individual freedom becomes fragile.

One of the most striking themes in *Never Let Me Go* is the illusion of choice that shapes the lives of the clones. Even though their futures are already decided by others, they are subtly led to believe they have some say in the paths they take. This imagination of the clones, especially evident during their life at Hailsham, where they are encouraged to explore art and express themselves creatively like normal human beings. At first glance, these activities seem to offer a space for individuality and freedom, but they are part of a carefully constructed system that prepares them for their roles as organ donors. By being told that their creativity matters, that their art has meaning, the clones develop a false sense of autonomy. They come to believe their lives have a purpose beyond donation, even though their destinies remain unchanged. This manipulation of their sense of agency exposes the ethical and philosophical tensions at the core of the novel. Ishiguro shows how easily freedom can be manufactured as a façade, used to pacify rather than empower, in a society built on quiet control and unquestioned exploitation.

From a post-humanist perspective, the illusion of choice in *Never Let Me Go* operates as a subtle yet powerful form of emotional manipulation of the clones. The clones are led to believe they have control over their lives, even though they remain unaware of the tight limitations that define their life in this world. This is especially clear through Kathy's narration, where she often reflects on her past with a tone of quiet departure. Her narrative suggests not so much active choice, but an acceptance of the circumstances she was born into, circumstances that were never truly hers to shape. Her reflections expose how her life, like those of her peers, has been shaped by forces far beyond her control. This shows a central idea in post-humanist thought, that individual agency is often not fully autonomous, but molded by broader societal and technological systems. Ishiguro's novel critiques this dynamic, exposing how these systems can quietly suppress individuality, limit freedom, and redefine what it means to have self-directed life.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro offers a poignant reflection on the human condition through a post-humanist lens. The novel navigates the twisted relationship between cloning, identity, and the idea of freedom. Although the clones are genetically human, they are treated as materials, beings whose lives are controlled by systems and social expectations beyond their understanding or influence. Rather than portraying freedom and identity as natural or self-evident, Ishiguro suggests that these qualities are built and shaped by the environments, institutions, and technologies that surround. The narrative urges readers to reconsider the foundations of autonomy, questioning whether the

sense of self is truly inherent, or if it is subtly molded by the forces that govern lives. Ishiguro uses the clones' experiences to critique the limitations imposed on human autonomy in a world where technology and social frameworks often dictate the terms of existence.

By tracing the emotional and existential struggles of the clones as they search for meaning in lives already mapped out for them, *Never Let Me Go* shades light on the fragile nature of human agency in a world shaped by powerful social and technological forces. Through its portrayal of a society that quietly accepts the exploitation of lives created for a specific purpose, Ishiguro prompts readers to reflect on the ethical boundaries of biotechnological progress. The story becomes a powerful mediation on what risk of losing when individuality, dignity, and moral responsibility are sacrificed for efficiency and control. His novel serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of protecting individual autonomy in the face of powerful societal and technological forces that seek to define and control human existence.

References

1. Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
2. Cooper, Melinda. *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*. University of Washington Press, 2008.
3. MacCormack, Patricia. *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory*. Routledge, 2017.
4. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber and Faber, 2005.