

# A Quiet Dystopia: Ethics, Control, and Dehumanisation in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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## Abstract:

The abstract encapsulates the central argument of the paper by framing *Never Let Me Go* as a dystopian narrative that departs from traditional representations of oppression and authoritarian control. Rather than depicting violence, rebellion, or overt surveillance, the novel presents what may be described as a “quiet dystopia,” where domination is subtle, institutionalized, and emotionally normalized. The abstract emphasizes that ethical breakdown in the novel occurs through routine social practices education, care, and gradual disclosure of truth rather than through explicit cruelty. By foregrounding themes of ethics, control, and dehumanisation, the abstract explains how cloned individuals are systematically reduced to biological resources while being granted limited emotional recognition. The study employs close textual analysis informed by biopolitical and ethical theory to examine how power operates through passive consent and moral disengagement. Ultimately, the abstract argues that Ishiguro critiques a form of technological rationality in which scientific progress is detached from moral accountability, revealing how societies can maintain a façade of humanity while participating in profound ethical injustice. In doing so, the abstract signals that the novel serves as a warning against systems where exploitation becomes normalized and unquestioned.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Bioethics, Dehumanisation, Social Control, Memory, Consent, and Instrumental Life.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction situates *Never Let Me Go* within dystopian literature while emphasizing its distinctive narrative restraint and emotional subtlety. Unlike conventional dystopian texts that rely on dramatic oppression or revolutionary resistance, Ishiguro’s novel presents a world that appears calm, humane, and orderly. The introduction explains that the story unfolds through the memories of Kathy H., whose reflective narration emphasizes friendship, childhood experiences, and emotional attachment rather than political struggle. This narrative choice is crucial, as it reveals how extreme injustice can exist beneath the surface of ordinary life. The clones raised at Hailsham are not subjected to visible brutality; instead, they are gently prepared to accept predetermined roles as organ donors. The introduction highlights this contrast to show how the novel exposes a form of dystopia sustained by emotional conditioning rather than force. The introduction further develops the argument by examining the institutional role of Hailsham as a site where control is exercised through education and managed knowledge. Students are not completely deceived about their fate; rather, information is revealed slowly and ambiguously, limiting their ability to imagine alternative futures. This process fosters internalized compliance, as the clones grow accustomed to viewing donation as inevitable and meaningful. The introduction identifies this conditioning as the central ethical problem of the novel: the absence of rebellion does not indicate consent freely given, but consent carefully produced. By framing the clones’ acceptance as socially constructed rather than natural,

the introduction challenges readers to reconsider conventional assumptions about freedom, choice, and agency.

The introduction concludes by situating the novel's ethical concerns within broader contemporary debates surrounding biotechnology, instrumental rationality, and human dignity. It argues that *Never Let Me Go* is not merely speculative fiction but a profound moral allegory that questions societies willing to sacrifice certain lives for the comfort and survival of others. The novel demonstrates how ethical collapse can occur quietly, through politeness, institutional routine, and emotional attachment, rather than through overt violence. By foregrounding these themes, the introduction establishes the paper's central thesis: that Ishiguro exposes a deeply unsettling truth about modern systems of power namely, that the most dangerous forms of dehumanisation are those that operate without hatred, resistance, or visible cruelty.

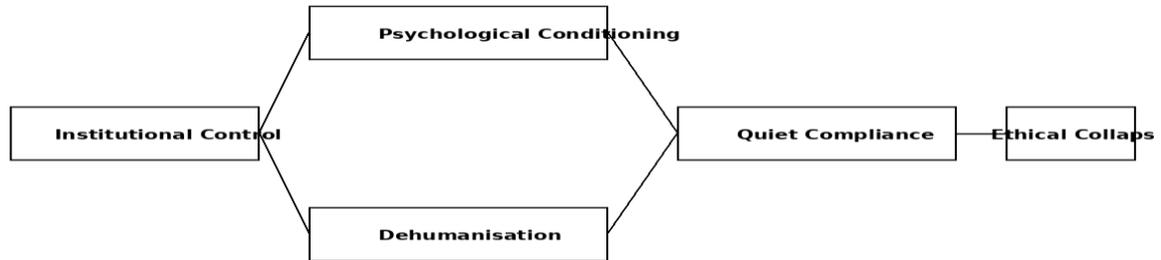
## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary scholarship on *Never Let Me Go* has increasingly examined the novel's ethical implications and biopolitical structures, demonstrating how Ishiguro's work continues to resonate with posthuman and bioethical concerns. Recent studies frame the experience of cloned individuals as a critique of commodification and moral detachment within biotechnological societies; for instance, Sharma and Joshi (2025) argue that the positioning of clones as organ donors exposes their lived reality as commodified "bare life," wherein guardianship and routine care mask systemic exclusion and exploitation, raising questions about what it means to be human in ethically compromised contexts (Sharma & Joshi, 2025). Complementing this ethical reading, Sajith (2025) interprets the clones' bodies as liminal sites between human and nonhuman conditions, showing how capitalist utilitarian logic dehumanizes them by equating bodily "flesh" with exploitable "meat," and how this logic supports emotional detachment from their suffering (Sajith, 2025). Such analyses highlight how novelistic portrayal of clones reflects broader anxieties about the erosion of moral boundaries in posthuman bioethics.

Parallel to ethical debates, scholars have explored identity and subjectivity through posthumanist lenses. Kirmani (2023) uses speculative critical theory to suggest that the narrative destabilises traditional human agency and autonomy by foregrounding clones' emotional development and constrained selfhood, thereby interrogating the boundaries of personhood itself (Kirmani, 2023). Rai (2024) furthers this by situating clones' artistic expression as a form of symbolic resistance within an oppressive power structure, drawing on posthuman ethics to show how memory, creativity, and narrative voice both reflect and subvert imposed identities (Rai, 2024). These works indicate a shift in the literature toward integrating posthuman frameworks with ethical critique, moving beyond earlier interpretations that treated the novel primarily as dystopian narrative.

Additionally, interdisciplinary readings have begun to engage with cultural and philosophical critiques of technology and commodification. Lateef and Mutlib (2024) adopt Donna Haraway's cyborg theory to examine technological objectification of clones, contending that the novel's depiction of consumption and hybrid human-machine identities exposes the deep cultural entanglements of technology and capitalist demands (Lateef & Mutlib, 2024). Such studies demonstrate how Ishiguro's fiction resonates with critical theory on humanity, technology, and exploitation. Collectively, scholarship from 2015 to 2025 reveals an evolving focus on *Never Let Me Go* as a complex text that challenges readers to rethink ethical, posthuman, and identity-related questions against the backdrop of contemporary debates in bioethics and social theory.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



The theoretical framework of this study conceptualizes dystopia in *Never Let Me Go* as a system of interconnected mechanisms through which power, ethics, and dehumanisation operate silently. At the foundation of the framework lies institutional control, represented by Hailsham and the broader medical system, which structures the clones' lives from childhood onward. Rather than relying on overt force, this institutional apparatus governs through education, routine, and selective disclosure of information. The clones are gradually introduced to their biological purpose, ensuring that their awareness develops alongside emotional dependency on the system. This controlled upbringing restricts imagination and prevents the formation of alternative futures, establishing the structural basis of domination.

Flowing from institutional control is psychological conditioning, which functions as the primary mediating mechanism between power and compliance. Through emotional nurturing, artistic encouragement, and carefully framed narratives about donation, the clones internalize their assigned roles. They learn to associate care with authority and sacrifice with meaning. This conditioning transforms external control into internal acceptance, producing subjects who regulate themselves. Simultaneously, the process generates dehumanisation, wherein the clones are recognized as emotionally sensitive beings yet denied full moral status. They are valued only for their biological utility, reduced to resources rather than acknowledged as autonomous persons. Dehumanisation here is bureaucratic and affective rather than violent, allowing society to maintain a humanitarian appearance while engaging in systemic exploitation. These two processes psychological conditioning and dehumanisation converge to produce quiet compliance, a defining feature of Ishiguro's dystopia. The clones do not rebel because resistance has been psychologically neutralized. Their obedience is not imposed but cultivated, shaped through memory, attachment, and normalized limitation. Quiet compliance represents the internalization of structural injustice, where individuals accept predetermined destinies as inevitable aspects of life. This compliance ultimately leads to ethical collapse, the final stage in the framework, in which society collectively disengages from moral responsibility. Scientific progress and medical benefit are prioritized over human dignity, and exploitation becomes normalized through routine institutional practice.

Together, these components form a cyclical model of power: institutional control produces psychological conditioning and dehumanisation; these generate quiet compliance; and compliance enables ethical collapse, which in turn sustains the institution. The framework demonstrates that Ishiguro's dystopia operates not through terror or repression but through emotional governance and moral disengagement. It reveals how modern systems can perpetuate profound injustice while appearing compassionate, thereby illustrating the novel's central warning that the most dangerous forms of dehumanisation emerge not from cruelty, but from ordinary, well-organized care.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis to examine the interrelated themes of ethics, control, and dehumanisation in *Never Let Me Go*. The methodology is primarily literary and conceptual, drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives from dystopian studies, biopolitics, posthuman ethics, and moral philosophy. The research is based on systematic reading of the primary text, focusing on narrative structure, characterization, institutional settings, and recurring motifs such as memory, care, and bodily sacrifice. Key passages relating to Hailsham, organ donation, artistic expression, and interpersonal relationships were purposively selected and analysed to identify patterns of psychological conditioning and normalized compliance. Rather than employing quantitative measures, the study emphasizes thematic interpretation, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how power operates through emotional regulation and social routine. Secondary sources published including peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and ethical commentaries were reviewed to contextualize contemporary scholarly debates on cloning, bioethics, and posthuman identity. These sources were synthesized thematically to support analytical claims and to situate the novel within broader discussions of technological rationality and human instrumentalisation. The analytical process involved coding textual evidence under conceptual categories such as institutional control, psychological conditioning, dehumanisation, quiet compliance, and ethical collapse, which together form the study's theoretical framework. This approach facilitates theoretical generalization rather than empirical measurement, enabling the paper to illuminate how dystopian power in the novel is internalized rather than imposed. By integrating close reading with conceptual synthesis, the methodology foregrounds interpretive depth and ethical inquiry, offering a coherent framework for understanding how Ishiguro constructs a dystopia sustained not by violence, but by emotional governance and moral disengagement.

#### 5. DISCUSSION: ETHICS, CONTROL, AND QUIET COMPLIANCE

The dystopian world portrayed in *Never Let Me Go* reveals a deeply unsettling ethical landscape in which exploitation is normalized through institutional routine and emotional management rather than overt coercion. At the core of this system lies a profound moral contradiction: cloned individuals are acknowledged as emotionally sensitive beings yet denied full ethical recognition. Society benefits from their biological sacrifice while simultaneously distancing itself from responsibility for their suffering. This ethical disjunction allows the wider social order to function without visible guilt. Unlike traditional dystopian regimes that rely on violence or surveillance, Ishiguro presents a system sustained by politeness, gradual disclosure, and administrative care. Ethical collapse occurs not through cruelty but through collective moral disengagement, where technological advancement and medical necessity are used to justify the instrumentalization of human life.

Institutional control operates primarily through education and managed awareness, particularly within the setting of Hailsham. The clones are not entirely deceived about their future; instead, knowledge is carefully fragmented and introduced incrementally. This partial transparency prevents shock while discouraging resistance, producing subjects who grow into their predetermined roles. The educational environment cultivates emotional dependence and restricts imaginative horizons, ensuring that students cannot conceive of alternative futures. Authority figures present themselves as guardians rather than enforcers, thereby transforming control into a form of protection. This structure exemplifies how power can function most effectively when it appears benevolent, embedding domination within everyday practices such as schooling, caregiving, and artistic encouragement.

Psychological conditioning emerges as a central mechanism linking institutional authority to individual compliance. From childhood, the clones are socialized to view donation as inevitable and meaningful. Artistic expression is encouraged, ostensibly to nurture creativity, but ultimately serves as a means of assessing interiority and reinforcing the idea that their value lies in what they can offer others. Emotional

bonds among students further stabilize the system, as friendships and romantic attachments provide comfort while simultaneously anchoring individuals within the institutional framework. Through these processes, external control is gradually internalized, transforming imposed destiny into self-regulated acceptance. The clones come to interpret sacrifice not as injustice but as purpose, demonstrating how ideology operates through affect rather than force.

Dehumanisation in the novel is subtle and bureaucratic rather than violent. The clones are treated with kindness on an interpersonal level, yet structurally reduced to biological resources. This paradox enables society to maintain a humanitarian self-image while participating in systematic exploitation. The absence of explicit cruelty makes dehumanisation more insidious, as it is woven into administrative procedures and normalized language. The clones' bodies are valued primarily for their utility, while their emotional lives are acknowledged only insofar as they do not interfere with their predetermined function. Such selective recognition reflects a modern form of objectification in which individuals are granted limited dignity while being denied fundamental autonomy.

These dynamics culminate in what may be termed “quiet compliance,” a defining feature of Ishiguro’s dystopia. Resistance is notably absent not because the clones lack awareness, but because their consciousness has been shaped to accommodate constraint. Memory and nostalgia serve as emotional coping mechanisms, allowing characters to find meaning within severely restricted lives. Kathy’s reflective narration exemplifies this process: rather than questioning the system directly, she organizes experience through recollection, preserving personal relationships while accepting institutional inevitability. Quiet compliance thus represents the internalization of injustice, where individuals adapt psychologically to structural violence. It illustrates how domination becomes most effective when subjects participate in their own containment.

Taken together, ethics, control, and quiet compliance form a self-reinforcing cycle. Institutional structures generate psychological conditioning and dehumanisation; these processes produce compliant subjects; and compliance enables continued ethical collapse. The novel thereby exposes a model of power characteristic of contemporary technocratic societies, in which efficiency and utility override moral responsibility. Ishiguro’s narrative suggests that the greatest danger lies not in tyrannical authority but in systems that operate smoothly, compassionately, and invisibly. By presenting exploitation as routine and sacrifice as duty, *Never Let Me Go* compels readers to confront the unsettling possibility that profound injustice can coexist with civility, care, and social order.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study has examined how *Never Let Me Go* constructs a distinctive form of dystopia grounded not in overt authoritarianism but in emotional governance, institutional conditioning, and normalized ethical disengagement. Through a close qualitative analysis of narrative structure, character development, and institutional settings, the paper demonstrates that Ishiguro portrays exploitation as an ordinary social process sustained by care, education, and gradual disclosure rather than violence or coercion. The clones’ acceptance of their predetermined fate emerges as the outcome of systematic psychological conditioning, where sacrifice is framed as duty and compliance is internalized as inevitability. Dehumanisation operates quietly, granting the clones limited emotional recognition while denying them full moral status, thereby allowing society to benefit from their biological utility without confronting its ethical responsibility. The novel ultimately reveals how modern systems can instrumentalize human life while preserving a façade of civility and compassion. By foregrounding themes of ethics, control, and quiet compliance, this paper argues that Ishiguro offers a powerful critique of technological rationality divorced from moral accountability, warning that the most dangerous forms of injustice are those embedded within routine institutional practices. The narrative compels readers to reconsider contemporary assumptions about

progress, care, and human dignity, illustrating that ethical collapse does not always arise from cruelty but can emerge through politeness, administrative efficiency, and emotional normalization. In doing so, the novel exposes a deeply unsettling truth: that societies may participate in profound dehumanisation while believing themselves to be humane.

## 7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research may extend this analysis by situating *Never Let Me Go* within broader comparative studies of dystopian and posthuman literature, examining how quiet forms of domination operate across different cultural and narrative contexts. Empirical reader-response studies could explore how audiences emotionally engage with the clones' compliance and whether such narratives influence ethical perceptions of biotechnology and organ commodification. Further interdisciplinary work combining literary criticism with bioethics, sociology, and science and technology studies would deepen understanding of how fictional representations shape public discourse on cloning, bodily autonomy, and medical utilitarianism. Scholars might also investigate the role of memory and nostalgia as psychological coping mechanisms in dystopian narratives, tracing how affective storytelling contributes to the normalization of injustice. Additionally, future studies could focus on marginalized subjectivities within the novel such as gendered vulnerability and relational dependency to illuminate how structural power intersects with emotional life. Longitudinal critical approaches may examine how interpretations of the text evolve alongside real-world advances in genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. Ultimately, further research should continue to explore how literary dystopias like Ishiguro's function as ethical laboratories, offering critical insight into contemporary systems that risk reducing human beings to instruments of efficiency while concealing exploitation beneath the language of care.

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