



CORPOREALITY AND FRAGMENTATION IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* narrates a dystopic world that draws attention to the construction of identity, existence as human beings and non-humans, and alienation. The "clones" in the novel portray the problematic relationship between identity and body. Significantly, the fragmentation of the bodies of the "clones" results in the disruption of their identities. This article explores corporeality and fragmentation in *Never Let Me Go* by considering the literally and metaphorically fragmented bodies of the characters. The "clones" in the novel experience alienation from their own bodies and from the outer world. The fragmentation or the fear of fragmentation of the bodies of the "clones" exposes the idea that their identities are formed by their descriptions as "freaks," as incomplete identities and suffering bodies. This study analyzes the fragmentation of the body in *Never Let Me Go* in accordance with the idea that the subject is alienated from his/her "self" which crystalizes the lack in identity.

Keywords: Corporeality, Body, Fragmentation, Alienation, Identity.

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* represents a dystopic world in which the main characters are suffering from their existences as "donors" physically and emotionally. Ishiguro's work narrates the story of "clones," also referred to as "students" or "donors," who grow up in certain institutions to supply their organs for ordinary citizens, who are referred to as "normals." This organ donation is the mission of these "clones" and when the "clones" have donated three or four organs their task is described as "completing." That is, when the clones are almost totally dead their tasks are "completed." The "clones" have also the possibility to become "carers" before their death. Being a "carer" means that they have to "care" for other "clones" who are unable to care for themselves after certain organ donations. Kathy who is a "clone" narrates the story of her own experiences and the experiences of her friends Tommy and Ruth. Her story begins at their boarding school when they are "students" and ends with the death of Tommy and Ruth. Although the novel is discussed within the framework of an alternate society, Ishiguro's "own concern in writing the novel was to provide a reflection of how humans actually live and love now, in the ordinary present" (Query, 2015: 155). *Never Let Me Go* includes the idea of a fragmented world in which the characters -the "clones"- are alienated from the outside world. Their alienation is the result of the fragmentation of their bodies since the "clones" are only considered as "organs" that are the supplies for the needs of ordinary citizens. In this sense, the loss of a complete body or complete "self," as a result of fragmentation, isolates them from the outer world. These "clones" are also isolated and alienated from their own bodies because they cannot perceive their bodies as their own. Analyzing Ishiguro's work by discussing corporeality and fragmentation exposes the sense of isolation and alienation from their own bodies and from the outer world. This paper explores the fragmentation of the body in *Never Let Me Go* in accordance with the idea that the subject is alienated from his/her "self" which crystalizes the lack in identity.

2. The "Skin-Ego" Relationship, "Freaks" and Identity

To begin with, the completeness of the body is closely connected to the construction of identity. Without a spiritual and physical complete "self," it is impossible to construct identity. In this regard, the idea of the "completeness" of the body regarding Pierre Ancet's ideas should be discussed. Pierre Ancet points out the "skin-Ego" relationship to explain the sense of completeness of the "self." Ancet claims that "the -

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skin- refers to the containing principle of the body and -Ego- refers to the containing principle of spirituality"¹ (2010: 126). He expresses that to feel physically and spiritually complete, the "skin-Ego" should be taken into consideration since "Like the skin holds the skeleton and the muscles together, skin-Ego holds the psychology of the subject together" (2010: 133). Therefore, when the "skin-Ego" relationship is destroyed one cannot reach a sense of wholeness. The "students" or "clones" in *Never Let Me Go* clearly lose the unity of their "skin-Ego" relationship for their corporeality is fragmented. To clarify, the "clones" or the "students" in the novel are regarded as body parts. In other words, they are not seen as whole human beings or as whole bodies, but as organs that are created for medical science and organ donation. As their former teacher Miss Emily explains, "all clones - or students, as we preferred to call you- existed only to supply medical science. In the early days, after the war, that's largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in tubes" (Ishiguro: 2005, 261). As it is understood, the "students" are perceived as objects that are just the "supplies" of other human beings which explains the idea that they are not considered as donors in the real sense but as constructed beings that include organs. In this regard, disrupting their bodies and separating their bodies into small parts -organs- results in the loss of their "skin-Ego." Ancet also adds that "Losing the skin means to lose organic unity" (2010:133), which results in losing the sense of a complete "self." Within this context, rather than existing as human beings the "donors" become "parts" of the body, so their only aim for their existence is to be a "donor." From the point of view of the "normals" or ordinary citizens, the actions of the "clones" do not represent their humanity but their "function" as donors for the ordinary citizens.

Besides the "skin-Ego" relationship, also an analysis of the characters in terms of the concept of the "freak" portrays the fragmentation of the bodies of the "clones" in *Never Let Me Go*. Within the context of the "freak," Pierre Ancet explains that "freaks" are perceived as objects that are only images of their disabilities:

The freak is nothing more than an image for the observer. This contradiction is represented in language. A person is not "suffering a certain disability," but he/she is "disabled." As if the foregrounding of appearance annihilates everything and as if that appearance constructs his /her identity, the person reflects his disability and the impossibility to go beyond the idea of disability. That person is considered no longer as a human being. His/her only aim in his existence becomes to represent disability. (2010: 71)

The fact that the "students" are not considered as human beings exposes the notion that they represent only the "image" of an "organ" or "donor" for "normals." Within this regard, the "students" are seen as "freaks" whose existences represent their disability which is their lack of a complete corporeality. In other words, the disability of the "students" is their "function" as organ donors. For instance, Kathy expresses that "Madame was afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders" (Ishiguro, 2005: 35). Kathy adds that Madame "shudders at the very thought of you [the clones]- of how you [the clones] were brought into this world and why" (2005: 36). So, the concept of the "freak," manifests that the appearance of the students which is their existence as "donors" or "clones," constructs their identity as partly human or non-human. In the novel, when Miss Emily explains the views of the outer world about the "donors" she expresses that according to the outer world, "you [the donors] weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" (2005: 263). The students are just organ-containing-objects for the outer world. The idea that they are less human results from the belief that while they are perceived as partly organ they are seen partly machines. Evidently, clones in the novel are "ambiguous inhuman - part animal and part machine. Clones are machinic animals, created as a technological means for maintaining human lives" (Snaza, 2015: 220). The "normals" regard the students as partly-technological and organ-containing freaks. Considering them as organs or as body parts exposes a sense of discomfort because the idea of the "freak" isolates the students from their selves. The students' emotions, feelings and their creations of artworks are all destroyed and concealed by the aim of their birth. In other words, their appearance as "clones" veil their humanity which makes them "freaks" in the eyes of the "normals."

In relation to the fragmentation of the "skin-Ego" relationship, the fear of emptying one's own body regarding the "clones" is another concept that represents their alienation from their own identity. Ancet argues that the fear of the "freak" to lose the wholeness of the body is not a fear of disruption but the fear of the body being emptied (2010: 134). That is, the "freaks" are not afraid that their body will be destroyed but that their body will be opened up and their inside will be flowed out. Ancet illustrates this "flowing out" by

¹ The quotations used in this article from Pierre Ancet's work *Ucube Bedenlerin Fenomenolojisi* has been translated from Turkish into English by me.



explaining that this fear “is metaphorised efficiently by some patients who liken themselves to egg white or even to egg yolk” (2010: 134). So, while their bodies are compared to the egg shell, the content of their bodies are compared to fluid just like egg yolk. Within this regard, the fear of the body being emptied can be explored in especially Tommy’s fear of the fragmentation of his body. There is a sense of discomfort when Tommy’s friends play a joke on him and tell him that his wounded elbow can unzip like a bag. Tommy’s friend Christopher tells that “Don’t you know? If it’s right on the elbow like that, it can *unzip*. All you have to do is bend your arm quickly. Not just that actual bit, the whole elbow, it can unzip like a bag opening up. Thought you’d know that” (Ishiguro, 2005: 85). Tommy takes this joke literally and becomes afraid that his elbow will open like a bag. This fear is actually related to his and the “students’” fear of “donations” of their organs since “The idea was that when the time came, you’d be able to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you’d hand it over. ...You unzipped your liver, say, and dumped it on someone’s plate” (2005: 88). In relation to Ancet’s ideas of the fear of the body being emptied, Tommy as a “freak” or “clone” is afraid of the fact that his inside will flow out just as an egg yolk flows out of the egg shell, because the “freak” has the sense of feeling that “the inside is contained by a solid cover but the inside is fragile and fluid” (Ancet, 2010: 134). In this fashion, a sense of discomfort arouses since the students’ bodies are seen as fragmented for they are only perceived as organs and are literally fragmented since they are physically opened up. The loss of a complete body reveals the sense of discomfort in terms of the fragmented body of the “freak.” This discomfort is strongly the result of their fragmented “skin-Ego” relationship. Their “lack” completes the bodies of the “normals.” Ironically, the last stage which is called “completing” –being nearly dead- refers to completing other bodies. That is, the students give parts of their bodies away to “complete” the bodies of others. So, while the “clones” die after “completing” their mission and loose parts of their bodies and identities, they complete others’ bodies and identities. In brief, the fragmentation of their bodies leads to the idea that they are “freaks” who are considered not as subjects but as objects. So, “clones” cannot construct an identity since their “skin-Ego” relationship is disrupted.

3. The “Consumption” of the “Clones” as Objects

The “students” are alienated from their own bodies as they are forced to identify themselves not with human beings but with objects. For example, the use of trash for Exchanges (Ishiguro, 2005: 16) and buying used stuff in Sales (2005: 41) “foreshadows the future recycling of their own body parts” (Rizq, 2014: 520). For instance, the students are told horrible stories about the woods to prevent them to go there. The story of the boy “tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off” (Ishiguro, 2005: 50) frightens the students. As Ancet states, “Beauty cannot endure the examination of parts of the body. Human relations are not the result of the details of expression but they are the results of the wholeness of expression and the wholeness of the body. On the contrary, wrinkles, body hair or fissures emphasize discomfort” (2010: 69-70). For this reason, the sense of discomfort of the students is strengthened by the stories of the destruction of the body as a whole. Regarding the aforementioned example, the story of the boy reflects the fear of the loss of a complete body. Significantly, this story foregrounds the loss of the human relations of “students” since they will be never able to communicate with the “normals” because they will always lack the idea of a complete body. This loss of the possibility of communication with the outer world or with other human beings causes their alienation from the outer world and from themselves.

Furthermore, the consumption of the body of the “Other” reflects an incomplete self in relation to language in *Never Let Me Go*. Carol Adams asserts that language plays a major role in objectifying and fragmenting animal and female bodies. Adams states that “animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them” (1990: 66). The use of language changes while eating animals; for instance, she asserts that we do not say that we like to eat a certain kind of dead animal, but we say that we like a certain cuisine (1990: 66). In this context, the society in the novel changes the language which describes the process of “forced” organ donation through a scientific language. In other words, to use organs of the “students” a whole new vocabulary is invented. There are words such as “carers,” “donors” and “students” which change the image of the dying body. The students do not “die” or they are not “killed” but they “complete.” They are not forced to give their organs but they are “donors” or they are not forced to care for their dying friends but they are “carers.” Nathan Snaza argues that “As the novel is structured, ‘donation’ in fact says the opposite of what the word customarily means: these ‘donors’ have their organs taken from them. Calling such a taking a ‘donation’ is a cruel misnomer, a catachresis in the sense of ab-use” (2015: 224). The system in the fictional world of the novel plays with language to conceal exploitation and murder. The invented or reformulated language is closely connected to the scientific discourse which is constructed to justify the disruption of the bodies of the students. The “Truth” that



science represents is used in such a way that the students are perceived as products of science and not as human beings. For instance, Miss Emily explains that “for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum” (Ishiguro, 2005: 262). In this regard, the “clones,” who are actually human beings, are objectified and “consumed” for the sake of science and “normals.” Adams states that both animals and women are included in the “cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption” (1990: 73). Evidently, the “clones” as the “others” in society are included in the cycle of this consumption, just like women and animals. In this sense, the “clones” are included in this cycle since they are first objectified as products of science, then they are fragmented through “donation,” and lastly they are consumed physically by the “normals” when they “complete.” Interestingly, while eating animals and exploiting women, language is reformulated to conceal the fact that there is a soul behind the animal or woman. Similarly, in the novel, while murdering the students, the vocabulary is reformulated to hide the fact that they have a soul. Even though Madame tells the students, “your art will display your souls” (Ishiguro, 2005: 254), the vocabulary that describes them as less human, “donors,” and “clones” result in the belief that they cannot have souls. Carol Adams claims that “we make someone who is a unique being into something that is the appropriate referent of a mass term. Mass terms signal the thingification of beings” (2004: 22). In this sense, the students are not considered as unique. For instance, they have no surnames and they are even not known by their names but are only referred as “students.” Like animals and women are “thingified” for consumption, the students are also “thingified” for the consumption of their organs. Like after being butchered, fragmented body parts of animals are renamed to obscure the fact that these were once animals (Adams, 2004: 74). The “bodies” of the students are fragmented and renamed as “clones” or “donors” to conceal the fact that they are human beings.

4. Physical Pain and the Use of Language

Physical pain and emotional pain are used in *Never Let Me Go* to reflect the alienation from one’s own body. The feeling of pain is difficult to represent in literary works since it is a subjective matter, yet Ishiguro’s novel includes many impressive descriptions of pain, which manifests the idea that the novel presents forms of pain with its poetic language. Zoë Norridge clarifies that “Literary texts are uniquely placed to represent pain because they excel in the creation of new systems of meaning –vocabularies, grammars and image libraries of emotion- which render intelligible multifaceted and deeply personal beliefs and sensations” (2011: 221). The donors do not perceive physical pain they have to endure as a major issue since they are raised to think that pain is a part of their existence and bodies. In this sense, the novel makes one question the feeling of pain which lurks behind the words. The scientific discourse is questioned in the novel because science is the cause for their pain. To clarify, “Our culture – the modern, Western, industrial, technocratic world- has succeeded in persuading us that pain is simply and entirely a medical problem” (Morris, quoted in Norridge, 2011: 214). In this fashion, Madame expresses that “I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sickness. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world” (Ishiguro, 2005: 272). Although Tommy and Ruth are in great physical pain through the end of the novel, they do not express their bodily sufferings. The reason for this is that physical pain reduces the sufferer to a pre-linguistic state in Elaine Scarry’s words. She points out that “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry, 1985: 4). For instance, Ruth suffers so much that she goes beyond the pre-linguistic state as she cannot even make sounds. Kathy states that “[Ruth] was twisting herself in a way that seemed scarily unnatural, and I was on the verge of calling the nurses for more painkillers” (Ishiguro, 2005: 236). There is no end to the fragmentation and destruction of the body and souls of the donors:

How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you’ve technically completed, you’re still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations ... until they switch you off. It’s horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don’t want to think about it. Not the whitecoats, not the carers- and usually not the donors. (2005: 279)

In relation to the interconnection of bodily pain and the pre-linguistic state, Tommy’s last moments are not narrated in the novel since his pain is indescribable. The absence of the description of his sufferings and the absence of language makes the situation even more painful for Kathy. Kathy becomes unable describe her friends’ physical and emotional pains. She knows that she only has her “memories of them” (2005: 286), but she cannot express the pain she feels. Thus, the physical pain as a result of the fragmentation of the bodies destroys language in such a way that their sufferings are not explained directly but through different images and the absence of language.



5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Never Let Me Go* reflects fragmented corporeality with the sense of isolation and alienation. The characters in the novel are alienated from their own selves as a result of objectification of their bodies. The destruction of the wholeness of the body, the representation of the characters as “freaks,” the connection between human and non-human bodies, and the representation of physical and emotional pain are the issues that deconstruct the idea of a complete body. Ishiguro reformulates the aspect of the body by defamiliarizing the reader. The reader is defamiliarized since he/she is forced to confront the fragmented body image. Although the novel is set in a dystopic world, it foregrounds the exploitation of the bodies of “others” or the “freaks” in the present world. Ishiguro includes the “clones” in the cycle of objectification, fragmentation and consumption that the “others” such as animals and women have to confront. As a result of the idea of the aforementioned cycle a sense of discomfort is aroused. The characters in the novel have a disturbing function because they are both similar to us and different than us. As Ancet states, “A freak does not only blur certain knowledge, but it arouses a kind of discomfort because it represents a concept which was once familiar yet which is now unfamiliar” (2010: 102). The distinct and “strange” appearance of “freaks” “reflects a rupture from nature” (2010: 102). In fact, the donors who are regarded as organs produce a sense of uncanniness since they are human but at the same time considered as body parts.

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