



TO BE OR NOT TO BE: DEMYSTIFYING POSTCOLONIAL ALTERITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

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Abstract:

The idea of the “Other” or the process of “Othering,” in the field of postcolonial studies, has been one of the hot-topics of critical engagements in the literary circle. There have been numerous discussions concerning the relegated state of either a particular individual or a particular community in the broader discourse of postcolonial studies. However, this general “othering” seems to be as problematic as the term ‘postcolonial’ in present-day world. Postcolonial alterity, or plainly, “different” or “the state of being other” has, at least in the case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, opened up a wide array of negotiations which render its meaning to be manifold in nature. The novel is primarily about clones but it perfectly deviates away from the traits of being labelled as a science fiction novel. It showcases the caught between state of the thirty-one-year-old narrator, Kathy, who glaringly suffers from a concrete independent space of her own. It is never an exaggeration to state that Kathy becomes the prototype entity of theoretical postcolonial studies which echoes the lack of a specific identity. This paper attempts at comprehending the fluctuating position of Kathy throughout the narrative using the concept of alterity. It also tries to depict that postcolonial alterity becomes the representation of the amalgamation of the native body of Kathy with the constructed one by the dictates of her guardians.

Keywords: *alterity, discourse, identity, post-colonial, space*

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3.1: INTRODUCTION:

...writing is all about enchantment. It is a form of magic, of something from beyond the ordinary mind of the writer. Beyond the singular human form.

.....Linda Hogan

To say that the theoretical domain of the broader realm of postcolonial studies has gained tremendous traction in the modern world is simply stating the obvious. It can easily be said that the word has almost come out of the domain of a ‘buzz word,’ something exotic in nature. In the present day literary circuit, the theory of postcolonialism has become something fundamental to the concerns of the both humanity and academia at large. Erroneously understood though, postcolonialism, in one way or the other, represents the inherent angst and agony of the suppressed group of people. Although this sort of comprehension of the theory cannot be rejected in an outright manner, it is definitely a reduction in its general entirety. There are much more to the theory in all its forms and branches which, with every passing day, find new meaning and understanding. Be it Said’s *Orientalism* in the very beginning or Ashcroft’s *The Empire Writes Back* of the 1990s, every masterpiece of the theory reiterates the nuances of the same in a methodological manner.

3.2: THE DISCUSSION:

Binary projections and positions appear to be of paramount importance in the field of postcolonial studies. The concept of postcolonial alterity, which this paper is concerned about, was baptised as the “Other” for the first time by Frantz Fanon. He understood the concept to be as ‘other’ is “not me.” Thus, from the very beginning, the ‘other’ became an idea which was always secondary to the ‘self.’ It epitomised a negligent position which was devoid of a concrete and specific presence and was seen to be becoming the victim of the authoritative position of the ‘self.’

In the opinion of Homi Bhabha (1994),

“Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven



development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, race, communities, peoples.” (Bhabha, 1994:171).

The “Minorities” which Bhabha talks about in the above lines can be equated to the position of the central character, Cathy in *Never Let Me Go* by the Japanese born Nobel-Prize winner, Kazuo Ishiguro. At one go, the novel appears to be the tale of clones who are seen to be getting used as replacements for human organs. However, clones and their associated position in the novel is a topic of serious deliberation which demands both observation and critical explication. Kathy H., along with her other friends in the novel, never really enjoy the concrete space related to one’s identity which postcolonial criticism so vehemently proposes. The very idea that the clones in the novel are different gets highlighted by the mind set of Kathy who considers themselves to be different in the following dichotomy- “other people” and “us.” Shameem Black opines that “representing alterity is frequently understood as an act of discursive domination that replicates, in literary form, the violent operations of political, economic, and social inequality” (Black, 2010: 33).

The development of the novel in terms of narration and depiction not aligning together on the same plane is one of the integral pathways which aids the fluctuating position of identity of the clones in the novel. Ishiguro adheres to a narrative style which denotes the tale to be in same line with the fictions which echo technophilic pleasures, but the presentation of the clones in an alternative England creates all the instances of othering in the novel. The fictional England which the clones live in is seen to be very much different from the England in reality. This marks the difference between the world of the clones and the world of the humans. Moreover, history also plays a vital role when it comes to understanding the differences between the two as biotechnological advancements reigned supreme among the clones. On the other side, it was nuclear developments which were actually prized in the actual England of the late 1990s. Clones like Tommy, Ruth, Cathy and many others, in the novel, seemed to reify the process of harvesting extra organ parts which were used for the cure of the fatal cancer. This also, at the same time, showcased the success in the field of scientific developments.

As a general picture, a postcolonial novel, more often than not, tells the tale from the standpoint of the oppressed group. In such a scenario, the presentation of otherness does not seem to be that problematic because the ‘other’ is always evident. However, in the context of



this particular research, the presentation of the ‘other’ appears to be problematic because of the foremost reason that the female narrator, Kathy abides by the system constantly throughout the novel. There is no such attempt being seen from the clones in order to change their position or their state of living which renders the issue of marginalisation a bit tedious to be delineated. The reason being that, postcolonial marginalisation always involves a powerful and a submissive force but in this novel, the clones ever really complain their secondary position. Although located between the artificial and the natural worlds at Hailsham, it is the language used by the Kathy which presents the fact that she is both within/outside the system. As “a choice of language is a choice of identity” (Durring, 1995: 125-129), the identity of the clones is very much a self-appreciated one. Kathy, sort of accept the differences between them and the actual people living in England as she remarks,

“I realized, of course, that other people used these roads; but that night, it seemed to me these dark byways of the country existed just for the likes of us, while the big glittering motorways with their huge signs and super cafés were for everyone else.” (Durring, 1995:267).

Boundary appears to be one significant aspect related to the process of alterity in the novel. The above lines by Kathy ably substantiate the same to a great extent. It was seen that the various clones who studied at Hailsham were prevented from crossing their demarcated border. Moreover, there were also restrictions being imposed on their ways of talking and codes of conduct and were strictly asked to refrain from any kind of inappropriate behaviour which their guardians could not grasp. In these ways, there was an unseen system and process of regulating the clones in a manner which the guardians preferred and wanted as opposed to the wishes of the clones. An identity or rather a constructed identity was what formulated which rendered the positions of the clones to be secondary in nature. It also has to be kept in mind that the so called degree of difference from the mainstream people is dependent on how far the clones deviate from them which again ramifies postcolonial othering from the self. The differences associated with the binary language of “the normal” and “the clones” also find their manifestation in the process of othering to a great extent.

The notable Freudian critic, Erik Erikson(1968) opines that the identity of an individual comes with a duality; it is the duality between the personal image of the individual alongside the societal image based on the public appearance. Defining identity, he states that,



“A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unselfconscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters.” (Erikson, 1968:22-23).

Erikson also talks about the idea of “identity crisis” which he inaugurated in the literary circle in 1940s. This very idea of the crisis of one’s identity was according to him the state when a particular individual was never really amidst the ramifications of a particular society and has also lost sense of his or her basic self. The clones in the novel drastically suffer from this crisis in their identity as the treatment meted out to them by the normal people of the society was one of frustration, retardation and negligence. The idea of difference also leads to the creation of a mental distance between the clones and the ‘normals’ in the novel as the clones are made to believe that they don’t belong to the mainstream society of the people. Even the educational setting of Hailsham propagated the structured layers of othering, albeit not directly. It was indoctrination which aided the glorification of differences because the clones were taught to abide by the rules and dictates of their teachers or guardians without retorting back. Regarding her childhood friend, Tommy, Kathy remarks,

“I think I was a pretty decent carer. But five years felt about enough for me. I was like you, Tommy. I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?” (Ishiguro, 2005:223).

The above lines are an ample testimony to the fact that Kathy and the other clones at Hailsham were taught to perform their duty of a donor without opposing the system which both made them the product and the by-product of the system they are a part of. K. Boréus opines that “Exclusion occurs when human beings are deliberately excluded from a group, locked out, being deprived of goods of various types, and tends to be generally seen as unfavourable treatment” (Boréus, 2001: 31). Postcolonial alterity hinges on the process of othering using



numerous ways and treating the individuals as mere objects is another significant way. It is never a derogatory remark to state that Kathy was a clone who was devoid of a basic ontological existence in the novel. Aged thirty-one, the primary role served by her in the novel was to adhere to the dictums of her guardians and preparing herself ready to act as a donor. Moreover, the process of objectifying an individual is also associated with the larger picture of ‘gazing.’ The act of gazing an individual in a manner not appropriate also downplays to a great extent the attributes of identity of the individual. There is an instance in the novel when the clones, Kathy and Tommy were ‘gazed’ in a relegated by the Madame which was stated in the followed manner,

“And as her gaze fell on us, a chill passed through me, (...) Her eyes were as cold, and her face maybe even more severe than I remembered. (...) you could see her stiffen - as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her” ((Ishiguro, 2005:243).

One of the significant aspects associated with the rearing up of the clones is the cultural environment at Hailsham which was never conducive to them. In the words of Phil Scratton, “Childhood is not a static, objective and universal fact of human nature, but a social construction which is both culturally and historically determined” (Scratton, 1997:2). This statement appears to be very true in the lives of the clones because right from their childhood, they have been sort of modified and taught to be the donors in order to support the human beings. What is significant is the location of various cottages, schools and other centres for harvesting the organs. The very act of harvesting the organs of the clones also seemed to have been accepted by the clones themselves as they are seen to be mere passive beings without having any kind of say of their own. On the flipside, it is again the poignant language which acts as the push to substantiate the scenario of othering of the clones. The clones, in the novel, have been described as “special” and “gifted” and in this regard, it can be said that this language is adorned with a touch of manipulation by the guardians. Once they are killed, the act is again said to be “completion” which reiterates the fact that the sole purpose of the clones in the society is to serve the humans which proves their state of being the ‘Other.’

Pierre Pascalion (1968) argued that culture is

“a comprehensive interpretation of nature, a whole system of understanding and changing the world. Culture comprises all the productive expressions of man,



technological, economic, artistic and domestic. It implies a systematic relationship between every aspect of life as it is lived.” (Pascalion, 1968:1).

The above definition of culture implicitly leads to the fact that there is always a kind of relationship between individuals which exist within the broader domain of cultural atmosphere. The question which pervades the entire engulfing atmosphere of ‘Other’ in the novel is why does Kathy and her friends stay in a relegated position? Moreover, this question also highlights the basic idea of the trajectory of the novel to be bifurcating from the general postcolonial ‘coloniser-colonised’ binary because they are almost muted entities. The basic aspect of othering becomes vividly evident in the fact that although the clones live in the same world as other humans, their world is pretty much different as technology reigns supreme there. However, in spite of the differences, the fictionality remains quite intact because the clones are different in the form of them being genetic copies, not something to be discarded. The position of inferiority and relegation which sort of envelop the entire social existence of the clones gets summed up in the following introspection which Kathy had in the novel, “we were different from our guardians, and also from the normal people outside” (p. 66).

More importantly, it was also seen that passivity of the clones rose to such an extent that they were almost not aware of the processes involved in the act of being a donor. The ignorance of the clones gets heightened in the following lines by Kathy who regarded the act to be a simple one,

“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. It wasn’t something we found so funny in itself; it was more a way of putting each other off our food. You unzipped your liver, say, and dumped it on someone’s plate, that sort of thing” ((Ishiguro, 2005: 86).

Needless to say, words like “unzip” in the above lines are more than enough to indicate the state of ‘othering’ which the clones suffer from in the various cottages at Hailsham. It also, on the flipside, indicates the aspect of the clones being thought of as mere objects more than human beings who needs to be given importance and valued. In this way, it becomes vividly evident that there was both existential and ontological crisis suffered by the clone at the hands of their guardians. Staggeringly enough, postcolonial alterity also appears to the



forefront in the so called ‘life after donation’ of vital organs by the clones as well. Once the clones donate their organs, although they are kept under observation, the state of their being becomes drastically ‘Other’ with them devoid of their organs and turning into the oxymoron, living-dead bodies.

The selves of the clones at Hailsham or other cottages no longer remains authentic selves as they are always structured in a manner which would help the ‘normal’ human beings. There is a process of transformation of the authentic selves of the clones to infrastructural selves associated with utility at large. A caught between state permeates the entire process of existence of the clones who get sandwiched between their state of individuality and the state of them being using as mere infrastructures for the benefit of the people. The initial lines of the novel which Ishiguro states, are more than enough in order to drive home the point that there are complexities involved in the schema of cloning. As Kathy describes herself initially,

“My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That’ll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn’t necessarily because they think I’m fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who’ve been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I’m not trying to boast.” ((Ishiguro, 2005:3).

The significance of the lines lies in the differences between the two worlds- the clones and the humans. Moreover, the lines are also a clear indication of the secondary position which the clones have to sustain in the novel without having to deal with any kind of highly productive enterprise. The build up to the very situation of being ripe enough to be able to donate a healthy organ to the humans by the is one of the integral processes which is associated with the creation of their identity. It can safely be said that the clones, at the hands of guardians like Mrs. Lucy ingrain their fate of acting as a donor without having their own subjective existence. The heart-wrenching remarks by another clone, Ruth in front of some other clones clearly vindicate the fact that at some point, there is the realisation in the minds of the clones that they are mere objects having ‘othered’ identity,



“We all know it. We’re modelled from trash. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren’t psychos. That’s what we come from. (...) If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that’s where you’ll find where we all came from” ((Ishiguro, 2005:164).

Postcolonial alterity finds its manifestation and expression in the novel in utter perfection. If on one side, it is the fluctuating and ‘othered’ position of Kathy and other clones who seem to be structured to be donors right from their childhood, there is also their own submissive nature on the other hand which greatly aids their relegated identity. Thus, it is crystal clear that the concept of alterity itself is a fluctuating one in the novel with no static depiction of one particular concern related to the clones. It is simply the artistic genius of Ishiguro who, through this sheer brilliance, problematizes the process of postcolonialism itself in the novel. As was well remarked by Salman Rushdie (1991),

“Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist. [...] Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world.” (Rushdie, 1991:427).

3.3: CONCLUSION:

There are primarily issues and concerns related to the existence of the clones in the novel but, at the same time, considering the larger picture, Ishiguro also paints two spatial locations thereby bringing in spatial politics to some extent. The world of the clones was seen to be confined within the four walls of the cottages and the boarding school of Hailsham whereas, the society outside the world of the clones in England was altogether different which comprises of ‘normal’ human beings carrying out mundane daily activities. Ishiguro, although quite subtly, creates a kind of cultural depiction of the local scenes coupled with the larger global perspective because “cultural construction is a process that is simultaneously global and local” (Griswold, 2000). All told, “to be or not to be” a clone seemed to remain unanswered in the novel as Kathy and other clones rightfully adhered to the norms of their guardians. There was no defiance from them, what was seen was acceptance of the passive kind, to be precise.



Having said that, the life which she led was nothing short of a traumatised one in terms of not having proper acceptance, recognition and embracement.

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