

Interpretation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* from the Two Cultures Controversy

Liu Ya

School of Chinese language and literature Shandong Normal University, Shandong, Jinan, 250014, China

ABSTRACT. *The fiction Never Let Me Go, written by the Nobel literature laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, carries forward the English literature's tradition of explicating the conflict between science-technology and humanity. It features the theme of clone, reflects the complexity of the identity of "human beings" in "post-human times" and criticizes the technological rationality.*

KEYWORDS: *Kazuo ishiguro, Never let me go, Two cultures controversy*

1. Introduction

In March 2005, the 59th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) approved the United Nations Declaration on Human Cloning, banning the research on human cloning. On its heels, this year's Nobel literature laureate, Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese-British novelist, published the fiction *Never Let Me Go*, with a flat and cold tone to depict the life experiences and emotional landscapes of a group of "clones". The academia and readers have interpreted the novel from various perspectives, such as dystopia, scientific and technological ethic, initiation novel, power relationship, etc. It is recognized that one of its success factors lies in its keen response to the hot topic of "human cloning" in modern times. Actually, *Brave New World* by British writer Aldous Huxley and *Human Cloning* by American author D. Lovick have already mentioned this topic. Rolling further back in time, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the pioneer in criticizing the "abuse of science". Hence, if the novel *Never Let Me Go* is put in a broader historical background and social context, it is easy to find the hidden debate between "the two cultures"--science-technology and humanity--in British (actually also in the world).

2. Smoking Cessation and Painting: Utilitarian Demands and Poetic Life

The story centers around the protagonist Cathy's recollection of her childhood at the boarding school Hailsham, as her seemingly simple memories are mixed with

some narrations that may trigger off readers' peculiar feelings. The students in school would take a physical examination almost every week, and smoking was categorically forbidden. Their guardians warn them of "keep yourself very healthy inside"(Kazuo Ishiguro,68). These concerns, whereas, are of ulterior motives. They are "special clones" indeed, donating their organs to so-called "ordinary human beings". The novel begins with describing a clone who "had lie there, all hooked up" (Kazuo Ishiguro, 5) after a donor operation. Afterwards, the narrator recounts the horror of her friend Ruth's impending death due to the organ donation: she "was twisting herself in a way that seemed scarily unnatural" (Kazuo Ishiguro, 232) out of every burst of pain, approaching her death in a "horrible struggle". Facing the protagonist's scolding of treating students like this, Hailsham's guardian Emily says significantly: "When the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly, there wasn't time to take stock, to ask the sensible questions...However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer. So for a long time, you were kept in the shadows and people did their best not to think about you." (Kazuo Ishiguro, 257) These words could elicit a question, and that's exactly the purpose of developing science and technology. Is it right to breach or even ignore the moral bottom line for some kind of utilitarian demands? Such thinking and dispute have always existed in the British traditional debate between "the two cultures": science-technology and humanity.

Since the industrial revolution, Britain has always boasted a cultural tradition of prudently criticizing scientific and technological progress and industrial civilization, to resist the erosion of the integrity of human nature by instrumental rationality and utilitarianism value. Frankenstein focuses for the first time on the theme of conflict between scientific and technological development and social morality. Matthew Arnold once stressed that "Faith in machinery is our besetting danger." In 1920s, the biogeneticist Haldane painted an alluring picture of science promoting the future human well-being; the sophisticated philosopher Bertrand Russell highlighted that "science should never replace morality". Until 1950s, the physicist and litterateur C. P. Snow delivered a speech on "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution" in Cambridge, holding that there is a moral component right in the grain of science itself, and denounced the humanistic intellectuals, which caused wide controversy. Later, the "Sokal's trick" triggered a new round of conflicts between science-technology and humanity in the post-modern context.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel just echoes to this controversy. The age, claimed by Emily, of science and technology rapidly boosting is exactly the "1950s postwar era" in Snow's speech. However, all we achieved is the progress of medical technology without the "moral component" of science mentioned by Snow. The "ordinary human beings" are saved at the sacrifice of "clones", but what accompanies the healing of the body is the taint of the soul. For the sake of addressing this moral and legal dilemma, the "ordinary human beings" in the fiction usually resort to two measures: firstly, the "clones" have been degraded to "non-humans", as they are "shadowy objects in test tubes" (Kazuo Ishiguro, 256); secondly, they deny the existence of "human cloning" -- "people preferred to believe these organs appeared

from nowhere” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 257). As a result, some reckons that clones are just like “lambs to the slaughter”. This simile reminds people of the ancient Chinese saying: “a gentleman should keep away from slaughter-house and cook-room,” and as long as “he hasn’t heard animals’ dying cries”, he could feel at ease to “eat their flesh”. What is noteworthy is that the word “donation” appears repeatedly in the novel, as if the clones are voluntary; At the same time, however, the term “notice” is also recurrent, illustrating the mandatory nature of such “donation”. This contrast satirizes the hypocrisy of “ordinary human beings”. In the story, there exists other ways to unmask this sort of moral self-deception.

Hailsham’s guardians would educate the pupils from childhood, especially in painting and poetry. As “Madam” says, paintings and poems display “your heart and your soul”. This corresponds to Arnold’s standpoint: poetry could “evoke the power of emotion”, and literature could construct “the integrated human nature” by cultivating an awareness of pursuing beauty and morality. Therefore, the school collects the students’ paintings to demonstrate that if clones are fostered in a humane and cultured environment, they would be as “sensitive, smart and souled” as normal people. The mutual assistance and concern of clones is in sharp contrast to the indifference and selfishness of “ordinary human beings”. The question of who is more like a “human” interrogates the readers’ conscience, reflecting the moral crisis in the scientism context.

3. The Cottage and Windows: Traditional Values and Modern Civilization

In line with the growth process of the characters, the novel is divided into three parts: juvenile, youth and adulthood. Their corresponding stories take place in Hailsham, the Cottage and Kingsfield Rehabilitation Centre respectively. It’s a remarkable fact that these scenes are all situated in the English countryside. Some Critics deem that Kazuo Ishiguro has inherited the English country writing tradition of Jane Austen and E.M. Foster. However, if the novel is placed in the context of “The Two Cultures Controversy”, the setting of the rural scene will mean more. The modern English literature witnesses how the image of “country” has gradually become the opposite of that of city and factory. It’s the “country” image that entrusts the “nostalgic complex” of literati and artist, praises traditional life values and becomes an essential literary image against the disadvantages of industrial cities.

And that has been reflected in the protagonist, Cathy’s experiences. She regards her early life in Hailsham as a “golden time”, and there are always “sunny days” in her memories: Children in Hailsham participated in humanity and art courses by making handicrafts for exchange, collecting their own valuable items and buying the transported goods regularly. And they could observe the countryside of England through maps and photos in Miss Emily’s geography class: Villages, streams, ancient churches and fields. This special experience benefited Cathy so much that she would drive to find such countryside even after many years. In fact, behind this picture of countryside that children have seen lies a different side of England: England written by K and the city of England.

Some piece of detail in the novel requires our attention: Young Ruth saw an advertisement of “beautiful modern open-plan office” on a magazine and she enviously considered that as “a proper place to work” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 142). When looking for the “model” who could copy herself, she also admires the writing room with “a big glass front” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 156) and believed that living there should be decent. Since the “the Crystal Palace” was completed at the first World Expo in 1851, buildings with large glass windows have developed into an indispensable feature of modern life. However, the glass window standing in front of Ruth is not only a window allowing those clones to see the modern civilized life, but a boundary wall preventing them from enjoying the achievements of civilization in the process of modernization. The clone’s life is similar to that of the wild people living in the “isolated area” in “Brave New World”, clones are also confined to a defined living space, as the guardian, Lucy said: “None of you can go to the United States, become a movie star or work in the supermarket ... And your whole life has been planned.” This implies a message: Don’t cross the border. All kinds of boundaries do exist in the novel in an ambiguous way.

Ishiguro said in an interview that parents should create a “happy soap bubble” around their children. And Hailsham in the book, which the guardian believed that is a “shelter”, is just like such a soap bubble. However, when you read the novel thoroughly, you will find that the place also carries other functions.

Hailsham owns a special location, “a valley between hills at even heights”, and standing at “almost any window of the main building” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 34) allows you to see what is happening all around. That associates with the “panopticon” expounded by Foucault. Every corner of the school is available for hiding some student to peep and eavesdrop. And such cases also occur in the “cottage” where young students live. What are more horrible are those eerie fences and woods around the school as well as the fearful fables about climbing over the fence. They made young students too afraid of the outside world to cross the border. The wire entanglement that appears in the novel for many times also warns those students of the boundaries from time to time.

As a result, the traditional rural boarding school in Hailsham has been endowed with dual attributes: On one hand, it has been utilized as a bubble to the fullest, which provides young clones with a joyful childhood where they grew up soundly; on the other hand, it performs a function as a modern prison which monitors their words and deeds and even constrains their thoughts. In this way, the school affects students in a subtle but continuous way in which students form a unique self-awareness.

4. “Who Am I” and “Who Are We”: the Anxiety over Individual Identity and the Exploration of Group Identity.

The questions of “who am I” and “who are we” are always hidden in the textual narration of the novel; the self-identity and group identity of clones are mainly controlled by the outside world.

In “Brave New World”, repeated propaganda and “sleep therapy” was used to instill the minds of infants with many specific ideas, which helps them form extensive fixed affirmations about the outside world and themselves. Similarly, the guardian of Hailsham deliberately chose the timing so that students could not properly understand the information being told, but accepted it unconsciously. So, they knew about “donation” when they were about six years old. And the guardian even instilled the idea of donation to them while teaching sex knowledge. As Lucy said: “You have been told and not told. You have been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way.” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 79)

Therefore, the clones knew that they were different from the “guardian” and “people outside” at an early age and verified that guess through action: “the Madam” was afraid of them, and “treated them as spider”. Such “the other” identity has been pretty traumatizing for the clones since their childhood. Hannah, the clone, almost cried when facing the lady shaking with fear; the “animal” that Tommy “created” by heart seemed to be his portrayal; and the plot of Cathy’s having pillow in her arms was particularly moving. The infertility of clones distinguishes them from “ordinary human beings”. That explains the two implied emotional appeals of Cathy when she assumed that the pillow in her arms was her child and danced slowly in her singing: She wants to be a mother with real children to prove that she is an ordinary human being; at the same time, she also dreams to be a child embraced by her own mother to feel the tenderness of mother love. This proves that the identity anxiety of cloned individuals and groups is not only a technical issue, but a bad result of their lack of human care from “ordinary human beings”. As Emily questioned: “How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 256) It is “ordinary human beings” who deliberately puts the “colons” in “the other” identity, just like the “they” and “you” she repeated in the foregoing. Therefore, the clones also accepted this special setting and wouldn’t wish to search for “their own future” and “inner part” through the “prototype”. The way they verify themselves is memory. With no history or future, they could only prove their identity and existence through memory which is the only thing they have access to. As the principal said: “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”. (Kazuo Ishiguro, 280)

The novel uses soothing narration to express the deep concern about the increasingly dominant technological discourse, and to cautiously criticize the rising instrumental reason and weakened moral standards under technological progress. Perhaps “Madam’s” explanation about her tears represented the author’s attitude towards the “The Two Cultures Controversy”: “I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sickness. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind word, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go.” (Kazuo Ishiguro, 266).

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- [4] (Author’s Affiliation: School of Chinese Language and Literature of Shandong Normal University)