Hidden Oppression and “Narrative” as Resistance: A Biopolitical Reading of Never Let Me Go

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go, which depicts the unfortunate prospect of a group of clones in a dystopian way, has a central theme of power and oppression. From a biopolitical perspective, it may be called “an Agambenian novel.” The clones who seem to live a “normal” life but eventually have to face their unusual destiny, resemble what Agamben has elaborated as “homo sacer”. This essay argues how the sovereign power turns the clones into “bare life” by means of spatial isolation, leaving them trapped in a state of exception—in which legality and legal needs are suspended, and finally deprives them of their lives in a “legal” way. With an analysis of the reminiscent narrator, the essay continues to argue that Ishiguro’s “narrative,” with its potential for resistance and protest, functions to uncover the hidden oppression in daily life and negate any political violence in a society.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go, biopower, biopolitics, life narrative

1. Introduction

Never Let Me Go is the sixth novel of the 2017 Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro, which has attracted widespread attention since its publication and was well received by critics. In fact, Never Let Me Go is also an Agambenian political novel that expresses the theme of power oppression. The clone in the novel lives under the “normal” but has to face the unusual, very similar to the “homo sacer” in Agamben’s biopolitics. Sovereign power in the novel makes the clones “naked” through spatial planning and at the same time suspending legal power in clones’ living places such as Hailsham, cottages and rehabilitation centers, etc., maintaining Agambenian “the state of exception”. And that state is finally normalized, passively accepted and even voluntarily obeyed by clones, thereby completing the “legal” manipulation and deprivation of clones’ life power. This article mainly uses Agamben’s concepts of biopolitics such as “Homo sacer”, “bare life” and “state of exception” to try to reveal Ishiguro’s disclosure and criticism of hidden political violence, human oppression, and loss of life power, and discuss the resistance of power oppression by its unique life “narrative”.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1 Spatial Seclusion and “Bare Life”

In Never Let Me Go, clones such as Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth grew up “normally” in boarding schools, but after three to four times donation after graduating, their life were ended in unusual “completeness”. Their right of life were ruthlessly deprived, but those hidden “deprivers” need not get any punishment. From the perspective of biopolitics, the clones described by Ishiguro Ishiguro is undoubtedly the Agambenian “homo sacer” since they were born “bare” and “could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime”(Agamben, Homo Sacer 103). They are controlled by sovereign power for organ transplantation, voluntarily give up their right of life and regard it as their due responsibilities and obligations. The reason why the sovereign can turn the cloned into usable human organs unquestionedly and self-protectedly is that it normalizes the clones’ “bare life” using spatial isolation to realize the abnormal disposal and “legal” use of cloned human body[1-3].
Etymologically, the word “sacer” originally contained the meaning of separation and isolation from the public society, and homo sacer literally refers to people who are separated or excluded (Lanjiang). From the perspective of space, the clones in Never Let Me Go belong to a group of people isolated from normal society. The novel is divided into three parts, corresponding to three very remote places in the short life of the clones: Hailsham, the cottage, and the Kingsfield Center. Hailsham is the main place where clones live and learn. This seemingly ordinary boarding school is located in a “smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides” (34), and the village, the temporary habitat of the clones after graduation, is “the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before” (116), and Kingsfield Center where the hero Tommy makes donations is “out of the way and awkward to get to, and yet when you’re there, there’s no real sense of peace and quiet. You can always hear traffic on the big roads beyond the fencing, and there’s a general feeling they never properly finished converting the place (218). These places are carefully set or selected by sovereign power to isolate the non-clone society to keep clones passively in a state where information is relatively blocked. For example, recalling the Hailsham, the heroine said: “at that stage in our lives, any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land; we had only the haziest notions of the world outside and about what was and wasn’t possible there” (66). Especially in Hailsham’s closed-school academic learning and discipline management, they are unable to obtain convenient communication with the outside world and obtain a clear self-cognition. Therefore, they consciously accepted their special identity different from “ordinary people”, and that kind of speciality and difference was unconsciously strengthened by their limited connection with outside people, for example, delivery people.

In addition, the isolation status also has another special purpose. Human society has made great breakthroughs in biotechnology, and can cure many diseases such as cancer, motor neuron disease and heart disease through cloning experiments. However, this practice initially generated a lot of social controversy, so the sovereigns purposely “hid” the clones (263). And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum (262). The isolation measures adopted by the sovereigns ensure cloning experiments and organ transplantation can be carried out smoothly without external intervention, which has cleverly avoided the public’s attention or opposition and greatly reduced the public’s ethical concerns and moral panic. Therefore, through space isolation, the community outside composed of natural persons is able to extend their lifespan through cloning and other medical technologies so as to obtain their own benefits, and at the same time, it is impossible for them to regard clones as real human-being but an alternative organ cultivation and donation. As Emily said, “here was the world, requiring students to donate. While that remained the case, there would always be a barrier against seeing you as properly human” (240).

The protagonists Kathy, Tommy and Ruth grew up “healthy” in boarding schools designated by the overpower power, lived “freely” in the temporary habitat cottages, and were finally “escorted” to rehabilitation centers around the country to “voluntarily” donate. Clones are completely institutionalized and systematized as a donor group for mass production of human organs. Like “homo sacer”, they are excluded from normal legal power, which is like Agambenian “ban” too. That is “the sovereign discarded the bare life into violence through withdrawing its protection of life” and the “‘bared life’ exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Agamben, Homo Sacer 183). Namely, once the cloned lose the legal protection, they are completely live in the state of Agambenian “bare life”. The concept of “bare life” includes the difference between “zoe” and “bios” and the former refers to lives in natural state which is similar to animal lives, while the latter constructed by and living in politics (Lan 2).

In Never Let Me Go, clones exist in the structure of political power, but are not protected by its power, and therefore have largely reduced to animals like “zoe”. Finally, clones are completely subjugated or serve the interests of sovereigns under the control of the invisible power mechanism, and are reduced to only human organ parts with medical value or practicability[4-5].

2.2 “State of Exception” and “Legal” Suspension of Life Power

Agamben believes that the reason why the “homo sacer” can not escape the tragic fate is that in addition to the normal political order, there exists a more fundamental order, namely the “state of exception”, which is a paradoxical situation, a state where law or law needs being suspended or a “no-man’s-land” between law and life (Agamben, State of Exception 1). In Never Let Me Go, the living environment of the cloned described by Ishiguro Ishiguro is very similar to the Agambenian “state of exception” or a kind of “topological structure”, which means secluded clones lives both out of and in laws.
or in a suspended or obscure state not in and out of laws.

In this novel, clones are actually given the legal rights of education, property, freedom, etc. just like non-clones before performing the “donation” obligation, indicating that the external law works to a great extent. In boarding schools, they study various courses such as geography, sports, music, art, literature, and culture; They can carry out literary and artistic creation activities such as painting, drawing, ceramic art, poetry, prose, etc; They can participate in auctions and trade fairs organized by the school; They can freely fall in love with each other, and they can travel freely when they grow up. In the cottage, they can even have a larger space for free movement, travel, visit or choose their own actions according to their own will, just like normal people. Moreover, they are endowed with education, property, and personal freedom rights, indicating that the external laws still maintain great effectiveness in them. However, the limited personal freedom comes at the cost of deprivation of autonomy of life for further control and deprivation of clones’ bodies and lives. That is what Agamben called “inclusive exclusion” (Agamben, Homo Sacer 20). Namely, the exclusion is not a kind of simple one, but an inclusive exclusion, which is characterized by being excluded and discarded out of the edge of law but at the same time being connected with law in a way of suspension.

However, the state of exception in Hailsham is quite similar but not the same as the Nazi concentration camps that Agamben has shown. The latter’s internal power mechanism is only indirectly implemented in the living body, which is a roundabout power. Instead of directly exposing clones to violence, it establishes a flexible and gentle exceptional state to command the right of life. Whether the education received by the students, the training received before becoming a caretaker, or even the rumors of deferring “donation”, etc., are not mandatory disciplinary methods, but they unconsciously produces a kind of obedience needing not to be forced(Foucault, Discipline 36).

2.3 “Narrative” Resistance

After Never Let Me Go came out, one of the more critical issues is that why Cathy, Tommy, and others did not choose to fight back when facing planned life and depriving fate. And even after knowing the truth, why didn’t they express opposition or think of protesting and escaping (Toker 166; Levy 3). First, the sovereigns made the clones a “bare life” through spatial isolation, and “tamed body” or voluntary “donors” through various implicit disciplines. They are disciplined within the normalized educational mechanism, treating donation as a task that should be completed and a duty to be performed, just as Ruth said when expressing her feelings as a donor: “It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?”(227). Second, sovereigns make full use of the “exceptional state” to “normalize” the abnormal needs through institutional disciplining, blinding clones to accurately recognize the implicit political violence and oppression. That abnormal normalization symbolizes the hidden violence behind “the normal” order created by political power, and that passive obedience of clones symbolizes the broader marginalized group in history and reality.

The clones in the novel seem to have accepted the fate of the ultimate “completeness”, and Ishiguro rarely describes clones’ open resistant actions. But as Michel Foucault said, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, History 95). Ishiguro’s novel is not about abstract political philosophy or the simple deduction of Agambian or Foucaultian biopolitics, but a dystopian depiction and reproduction of human existence, an artistic reflection and criticism of the dilemma of biopolitics. He described the “bare life” in the state of exception, which does not mean that he agrees with the deprivation of the political power of life. On the one hand, Never Let Me Go describes the growth process of clones and the inescapable “completeness” with a touch of sadness. On the other hand, it also reproduces clones’ pursuit of life meaning with personalized and humanized first-person narrative techniques, which is also a kind of life narrative resisting the potentiality.

In Never Let Me Go, the reminiscent narrative is a dominant, structural resistant force. Because reminiscence is the experience of individual life’s existence, the inherent power of clones’ lives and deep expression of lives. When the heroine recalls the story of the clone’s short life, “memory” becomes the subject of the heroine thinking and comment throughout. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells us that she tried to forget the past, but it is difficult to do. She said: “There have been times over the years when I’ve tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I’ve told myself I shouldn’t look back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting” (4). And at the end of the novel, she 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 (286). It is not difficult to see that in Ishiguro’s narrative text, “memory” or “recall” is a manifestation of strong inner vitality, an instinctive impulse that contains an unconscious resistance to
resist forgetting [6].

3. Conclusion

The narrator regains her memory or actually “reconstructs her identity” through fragmented memory (Bizzini 65). She puts together the fragmented past and constantly constructs the collective identity of cloned people. Moreover, she refuses to forget the past and history and strive to establish the connection between the past and the present and re-definite of current reality and self-life. Such a narrative of memory is a confirmation of the meaning of life and the value of existence, as well as a curved protest against the deprivation of survival power. For Ishiguro, everyone has the life power to tell and listen, recall and testify, as well as the innate feelings of life. Ishiguro’s life narrative has revealed and criticized the hidden political violence and power oppression. Therefore, Never Let Me Go presents a life dystopia with warning and enlightenment significance.

References