

Disciplining Biopolitical Subjectivity through Prosthetic Affective Memory in *Never Let Me Go*

Mengying Wei

School of Foreign Languages (SFL), Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

DOI: 10.65285/HSS.V2I4.009

Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* depicts the tragic fate of clones in a dystopian society and can be read as a political novel exploring power and oppression through Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics. Drawing on Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective politics, this study examines how memory and emotion function as tools of control and discipline that manage clone lives and deprive them of autonomy. Pain and love, instead of helping them understand or challenge their fate, are manufactured emotional bonds among clones; implanted memories thus become tools that soften the reality of their exploitation. This mechanism not only legitimizes oppression but also masks its inhumanity through sentiment and aesthetics, allowing biopolitical violence to operate covertly and deepening the clones' self-alienation under bare life.

Key words: *Never Let Me Go*; Prosthetic Memory; Affective Politics; Biopolitics, Alienation

Introduction

As the sixth novel by Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005) tells the story of clones through a dystopian lens. The novel has been discussed as science fiction (Griffin 647), a "mild and melancholy dystopia" (Toker and Chertoff 163), and a critique of the social consequences of genetic engineering. It also raises questions about identity, humanity, and the operation of power in modern society.

The novel can further be read through Giorgio Agamben's concept of homo sacer. Although Kathy and her friends grow up in the seemingly normal environment of Hailsham, they are gradually confronted with their predetermined purpose: to donate their organs until death. Their attempts to understand their identities and gain autonomy are repeatedly constrained by a system that defines their lives in advance. Despite their experiences of friendship, love, and care, they remain trapped in roles determined by others. Their loss of agency and subjectivity therefore reflects Agamben's concept of bare life, in which life is included within the political order while deprived of full protection and autonomy.

Previous studies have examined *Never Let Me Go* mainly through dystopia, human rights, and biopolitics. Levy reads the novel as a coming-of-age narrative reflecting contemporary human rights concerns (1), while Toker and Chertoff emphasize its quiet and oppressive dystopian structure (163). Robbins further examines the unequal relationship between clones and humans and the novel's political implications (301). These studies establish the novel as a critique of institutional oppression and the unequal value assigned to different lives.

However, less attention has been paid to how memory and emotion work together as mechanisms of control. The clones' experiences of love, care, pain, creativity, and belonging are not simply private feelings but, shaped by Hailsham's educational practices, become prosthetic affective memories that influence how they understand themselves and their predetermined lives. This essay therefore examines how emotions function as prosthetic memories and contribute

to biopolitical control. It first establishes the relationship between prosthetic memory, affect, and biopolitics; it then examines pain and love as central affective experiences through which clone subjectivities are shaped; finally, it considers how these affective memories conceal structural violence and contribute to the clones' self-alienation and loss of autonomy.

1. Prosthetic Memory and Affective Politics

Prosthetic memory, defined by Alison Landsberg, refers to memories that "provide people with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they did not experience" (33). These memories are neither "natural" nor "organic" but are produced through cultural technologies such as film, museums, and virtual simulations. They become "worn on the body" (20), leaving sensuous and affective imprints that shape how individuals understand history, identity, and their relationship to others (25–26).

Landsberg emphasizes the political potential of prosthetic memory. Through a "sensuous engagement with the past," such memories can generate empathy and social responsibility and even contribute to "counterhegemonic public spheres" (21). Because mediated experiences are felt as well as remembered, they can become integrated into the self and influence belonging and identity. Affect is therefore central to how prosthetic memory is experienced and internalized.

Ahmed's theory of emotion further explains this process. Emotions are not simply private feelings but shape collective identities and social relations. As Ahmed argues, "the 'you' implicitly evokes a 'we'" (2). Emotions can connect individuals to groups while also producing boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. They circulate between subjects and objects and become "sticky," attaching people to groups, ideas, and objects (11). As Ahmed explains, "emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside" (10). People consequently understand themselves partly through what they are taught to love, value, fear, or reject.

This understanding is important to prosthetic memory because emotional attachment can make mediated experiences feel personal and natural. When externally produced memories are connected with strong feelings, they become part of how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. This connection is particularly important in *Never Let Me Go*, where the clones are taught to associate love, care, creativity, and humanity with everyday life. These feelings shape not only their sense of belonging but also their understanding of themselves within the system that controls them.

Landsberg's account also stresses that prosthetic memories can become part of an individual's personal archive rather than remaining external cultural information. Their significance therefore lies in how mediated experiences are absorbed into personal experience. It also leaves memory vulnerable to institutional shaping. In the novel, Hailsham provides such a mediated environment, where education, artistic production, and emotional cultivation shape what the clones regard as valuable.

The connection between prosthetic memory and emotion becomes more significant through biopolitics. Foucault describes modern power as taking human life itself as an object of political management. Agamben develops this idea through bare life, a form of life included within political order while excluded from full political protection (140). His figure of homo sacer represents a life that "cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed" (140). This framework helps explain the clones, whose lives are maintained while their bodies are treated as resources for others.

Prosthetic memory can participate in such biopolitical control because it shapes not only what subjects remember but also how they understand themselves. Although Landsberg emphasizes the potential of prosthetic memories to produce empathy and new political connections (34, 48), the same process can become controlling when institutions provide particular memories, values, and emotional responses. Emotion strengthens this process by turning externally produced ideas into personal attachments. Memories associated with love, care, or belonging can become difficult to question because they are experienced as part of the self.

Affective prosthetic memory can therefore function as a form of biopolitical control. Rather than relying entirely

on direct force, it shapes how subjects feel about their own lives and the system governing them. By encouraging attachment, gratitude, and self-sacrifice, institutions can make restrictive conditions easier to accept. In *Never Let Me Go*, love, care, creativity, and humanity give the clones meaning and belonging while also making the donation system easier to internalize. Their memories and emotions thus become part of the operation of power.

Biopolitically, this process moves from external regulation to internalized feeling. When institutional values become personal attachments, subjects may participate in their own regulation without recognizing the role of power. The clones' emotions are therefore not fabricated or insincere; rather, genuine emotions are organized within a system that has already determined their lives. Affective prosthetic memory consequently connects the cultural production of memory with the political management of life, allowing institutional values to enter the subject through emotion and making control appear personal. Their affective memories thus sustain belonging while limiting their ability to question the structures governing them. The following analysis therefore examines pain and love as affective mechanisms through which the clones internalize the conditions of their bare life.

2. Affective Prosthetic Memories and Biopolitical Regulation

In *Never Let Me Go*, emotions such as pain, love, care, and creativity are not simply private feelings. Shaped through Hailsham's educational practices, they become "prosthetic affective memories": externally mediated experiences internalized as personal feelings and attachments. These experiences give the clones a sense of belonging and humanity, while making their predetermined lives easier to accept. Emotional attachment thus becomes part of their regulation.

Pain is central because it establishes a relationship between body and self. As Scarry argues, "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" (4), while Ahmed suggests that pain can become a "sign of attachment to something" (26). Freud similarly describes the ego as "first and foremost a bodily ego" (26), formed through sensations that distinguish inside from outside. Yet the clones experience bodily vulnerability without developing a clear understanding of themselves as violated subjects. When Miss Lucy reveals the truth about donations, the children remain silent because they "knew just enough to make us wary of that whole territory" (Ishiguro 56). Kathy later recalls that they knew there were "donations waiting for us" but did not "really know what that meant" (216). They sense the threat without possessing the language to understand it as injustice. Pain remains contained within institutional knowledge rather than becoming a basis for self-recognition or resistance.

Hailsham reinforces this containment by linking suffering with artistic and emotional sensitivity. The students are taught to value creativity and see themselves as "special" through artistic production (Ishiguro 71). Madame explains that their artwork was collected because it would "reveal your souls" and "prove you had souls at all" (201). Hailsham uses creativity to establish the clones' humanity, but this recognition remains separate from political autonomy. Their capacity to feel and create proves they possess "souls," yet does not alter their status as donors. Suffering is translated into the language of art and humanity rather than understood as structural injustice.

Pain is further absorbed into memory and relationships. Kathy's effort to "get straight" what happened between herself, Tommy, and Ruth shows how memory is bound to loss and attachment (Ishiguro 32). Their shared experiences create intimacy, but not collective resistance. Suffering becomes part of the emotional history through which they endure predetermined lives. Prosthetic affective memory thus transforms potentially disruptive pain into familiar narratives of friendship, loss, and care.

Love operates through a similar mechanism. As Ahmed argues, love can intensify through non-reciprocity: "if you do not love me back, I may love you more" (136). In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones' desire for recognition and belonging develops within a social order that denies their full subjectivity. Their attachments are genuine, but formed within limits that make emotional belonging compatible with political exclusion.

Kathy's memory of the donors illustrates this continuity between affection and regulation. She observes them sitting in "a rough semi-circle," appearing "almost studiously relaxed" and "savouring the company" (Ishiguro 215). The scene recalls "the way our little gang used to sit around our pavilion" at Hailsham (215), connecting donor life with childhood community. Yet this continuity provides comfort rather than an alternative to donation. Hailsham's community thus

accompanies the clones into the system that exploits them.

The institutional production of such attachments is also evident in the Exchanges, where students' artworks are "bought" with tokens (Ishiguro 15), associating artistic production with value, recognition, and identity. Kathy later asks, "Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that?" (200). Her question exposes Hailsham's contradiction: the clones develop creativity and sensitivity although their futures are predetermined. Education gives them a language of human value without the autonomy to act upon that value. Their development therefore functions as both recognition and containment.

Hailsham intensifies this contradiction. Friendship, creativity, memory, and care create a shared emotional world that makes the institution appear humane rather than coercive. Madame's claim that the students' art could "prove they had souls at all" (201) captures the paradox: the clones are recognized as "as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (202), yet this recognition never extends to their right to determine their own lives. Their emotions affirm their humanity while their bodies remain available for donation.

Love and belonging consequently function as emotional self-regulation. Kathy's role as a carer gives her purpose through caring for others, but also keeps her within the institutional system. Her attachments are genuine, but inseparable from the structures that sustain them. This is where prosthetic affective memory becomes biopolitically significant. Hailsham does not suppress the clones' capacity for love, care, or pain. It organizes these capacities so that emotional attachment becomes compatible with obedience. They retain rich emotional lives while losing the ability to treat them as grounds for autonomy. Their feelings make existence meaningful, but also help them inhabit the conditions of bare life without confronting the system that imposes them.

3. Structural Violence and the Erosion of Subjectivity

Building on the preceding analysis, this section examines how prosthetic affective memories, particularly those shaped around pain and love, conceal the structural violence imposed on the clones. Drawing on Galtung and Agamben, it argues that violence in *Never Let Me Go* operates not primarily through physical coercion but through social structures and emotional regulation. Prosthetic affective memories therefore not only shape the clones' identities but also weaken their ability to recognize and resist the system that determines their lives.

As Johan Galtung argues, violence exists when social structures prevent individuals from realizing their potential through unequal access to power and opportunities (169–70). In *Never Let Me Go*, such violence is embedded in the clones' predetermined lives as organ donors and their exclusion from meaningful social and political recognition. Rather than appearing as direct physical force, however, it operates through institutions that shape what the clones remember, value, and feel, making their predetermined roles appear normal and acceptable.

Kathy's memories of Hailsham illustrate this contradiction. She recalls listening to Judy Bridgewater's song and imagining herself "as a mother holding a lost child" (Ishiguro 59). The memory is filled with warmth, care, and longing, yet exists alongside the knowledge that her future has already been determined. She later recognizes that "there was no way to reverse the process" and that "there was no going back" (203). The contrast between her affectionate memories and the irreversible reality of donation shows how affective memory softens the violence of exploitation. Kathy remembers Hailsham through relationships and emotional experiences that make her past meaningful rather than primarily as the institution that prepared her for death. Her attachment therefore makes the system psychologically bearable without challenging its structure.

This process helps explain why the clones rarely interpret their condition as structural violence. At Hailsham, friendship, creativity, care, and emotional sensitivity are encouraged, while the system determining their deaths remains largely unquestioned. Prosthetic affective memory thus transforms structural conditions into familiar emotional experiences, making violence less visible and encouraging the clones to endure rather than question the structures that confine them.

This dynamic also undermines their subjectivity. Landsberg argues that when identity can be shaped through memories that are not directly experienced, memory becomes open to external influence (45–46). In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones' memories are formed within an isolated institutional environment that restricts their knowledge of the outside world. At

Hailsham, the outside world is “like a dreamland,” leaving the students with only a vague understanding of life beyond the school (Ishiguro 66). Although they know that donations await them, they cannot fully grasp their political and bodily implications.

The wider society reinforces this limitation by separating the clones’ bodies from the process of donation. Kathy recalls that people outside the system imagined the organs as if they “came from nothing” or were grown “in some kind of vacuum” (Ishiguro 262). This language erases the bodies from which the organs are taken and makes exploitation appear natural. The clones are therefore denied not only political recognition but also the language through which their exploitation could be understood as violence.

This condition closely resembles Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, a form of life exposed to sovereign power while excluded from meaningful political protection (103). The clones are carefully raised, kept healthy, and taught to care for one another, yet this apparent protection primarily serves to preserve their bodies for future donation. Their lives are maintained because they are useful to others. Institutional care therefore becomes inseparable from bodily control: the same system that protects their lives determines how and when their bodies will be used.

The emotional education at Hailsham further strengthens this process. Madame recalls watching Kathy dance and seeing “a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world” and “pleading, never to let her go” (Ishiguro 202). The image captures Kathy’s genuine longing for love, safety, and a meaningful world. Yet this emotional attachment remains disconnected from effective resistance. Kathy can feel deeply, remember intensely, and care for others, but these capacities do not give her control over her own life. Her emotional world affirms her humanity while leaving the structures governing her body untouched.

Through isolation, mediated memory, and emotional education, the clones therefore internalize the limits imposed upon them. Prosthetic affective memories do not simply shape who they are; they also teach them how to live within conditions they cannot change. Because institutional control is experienced through familiar forms of care, belonging, and memory rather than visible coercion, it becomes psychologically acceptable. The loss of subjectivity thus occurs not through the elimination of feeling but through its regulation. The clones retain rich emotional lives, yet these emotions increasingly serve the system that denies their autonomy. In this sense, prosthetic affective memory becomes a mechanism through which structural violence is concealed and bare life is quietly internalized.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* presents biopolitical power operating not only through institutional control but also through emotion and memory. This essay has argued that the clones’ experiences of pain, love, care, and belonging function as prosthetic affective memories that shape their subjectivity while encouraging emotional compliance. Rather than fostering autonomy, these emotions obscure the structural violence that reduces the clones to Agamben’s bare life.

Hailsham is central to this process. Through art, emotional education, and shared memories, the clones learn to associate humanity with creativity, sensitivity, love, and care. Yet these prosthetic memories reverse their potential for empowerment: pain becomes evidence of their “souls” rather than a sign of injustice, while love and belonging make their predetermined fate easier to accept. Their emotional attachments therefore conceal rather than challenge the conditions of exploitation.

This affective control also contributes to their self-alienation. As Galtung’s concept of structural violence suggests, their predetermined roles as organ donors and society’s denial of their personhood constrain their lives without requiring constant physical coercion. Kathy’s warm memories of Hailsham coexist with her acceptance of donation as unavoidable, showing how emotion can normalize rather than resist oppression. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that biopolitical power can operate through apparently humane practices: by cultivating emotional sensitivity, Hailsham affirms the clones’ humanity while leaving their bodies available for exploitation. Their “completion” thus marks not only physical death but the culmination of a process in which subjectivity has been gradually subordinated to institutional power.

References:

- [1] Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, USA, 1998.
- [2] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Routledge, London, UK, 2014.
- [3] Freud, Sigmund. *The Ego and the Id*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York, USA, 1960.
- [4] Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1969, pp. 167–191. Sage Publications, London, UK.
- [5] Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Vintage International, New York, USA, 2006.
- [6] Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. Columbia University Press, New York, USA, 2004.
- [7] Levy, Titus. "Human Rights Storytelling and Trauma Narrative in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–16. Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, UK.
- [8] Robbins, Bruce. "Cruelty Is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2007. Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, USA.
- [9] Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, New York, USA, 1985.
- [10] Toker, Leona, and Daniel Chertoff. "Reader Response and the Recycling of Topoi in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2008, pp. 163–180. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

Author Biography:

Mengying Wei (born June 2001) is a female Master's student in English Language and Literature at Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China (Postal Code: 310000). Her research interests focus on British and American literature, with particular attention to feminist literary criticism and related literary studies.