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The Significance of Fiction in the Debate on Dehumanizing Media Portrayals of Refugees

Shameen Black writes, “As with all of [Kazuo] Ishiguro’s novels, what does not appear—what lurks on the fringes of the narrative—is often the most important specter in the story” (803). In this quote, Black emphasizes the recurrent element of Ishiguro’s stories: symbolism. Ishiguro’s fictional texts always contain symbolic references to the world we live in and, as such, should be read as allegories. *Never Let Me Go* is a perfect example of this. The reader’s sympathies lie with the protagonist and her classmates: characters that are all clones. As Black explains, “When the novel invites us to extend sympathies beyond the category of human, it recognizes this category as exclusionary and troubling in itself” (803). This argument has led many scholars to examine the implications of the novel’s sympathetic stance toward a dehumanized group of people. Most scholars use *Never Let Me Go* as an allegory for racism, class discrimination, or even slavery. However, not many scholars have compared the clones to refugees, yet this comparison would give the text a significant role in the critique of contemporary European media portrayals of refugees. *Never Let Me Go* performs a humanizing act by making the reader sympathize and identify with a dehumanized party. In contemporary times, the media has often failed in succeeding in this humanizing task. Many refugees get dehumanized by the media, and although there are attempts at portraying refugees in humanizing ways, the media often seems to struggle with finding an appropriate way of presenting refugees. This essay aims to reveal Ishiguro’s strategy in humanizing a dehumanized group and to extend this to the issue of dehumanizing media portrayals of refugees coming into Europe.

When arguing that the clones in *Never Let Me Go* can be compared to refugees, it is crucial to examine the similarities between the two groups. The way the clones are dehumanized gets revealed in how they are treated as objects for organ harvesting, only existing for the health of “normal” people. In this way, clones are dehumanized and objectified and can therefore be compared to other dehumanized peoples. To compare them specifically to refugees, Ivan Krastev’s definition of a refugee is helpful:

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (26)

One key element in this definition is that refugees leave their country of origin behind.

Although the clones in Ishiguro’s novel do not leave an actual country, the school they grew up in, Hailsham, can be read as a bordered-off country. Hailsham has its own culture with its own population of clones, it is bordered by a fence, and this border cannot be crossed. When a boy tries to escape the premises of Hailsham, it is revealed that ‘[h]is body had been found two days later, up in those woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off’ (Ishiguro 50). The students of Hailsham have no freedom within the confines of the school, and only after they graduate are they allowed to cross the school’s border. These aspects of the story show that Hailsham can be read as a country that the clones cannot escape from. Moreover, this reveals the oppressive, panoptic powers that rule on the school grounds of Hailsham. Once the students leave Hailsham, they are left in a country where there is no protection for them; there is only their inevitable fate of being organ donors. Furthermore, when Hailsham closes down when Kathy, the protagonist, is an adult, she voices an anxiety about Hailsham

closing, worrying about “all the students who’d grown up with me and were now spread across the country, carers and donors, all separated now but still somehow linked by the place we’d come from” (212). The clones of Hailsham are unable to return to their country of origin, as it is closed. Thus, using Krastev’s definition of refugees, it becomes clear that clones are comparable to refugees in their leaving a country (Hailsham) and ending up in a country in which they are out of place and unable to return to their country of origin.

By writing from the perspective of a dehumanized person, Ishiguro lets the reader sympathise with the dehumanized group that the protagonist belongs to. He does this by using the technique of identification. Specifically, because *Never Let Me Go* is a literary text, Ishiguro applies the technique of alignment that Rita Felski explains as “the formal means by which texts shape a reader’s or viewer’s access to character,” adding that “[i]t points to the directive force of narrative, description, and point of view: whose decisions or desires drive a plot; which figures are depicted in scrupulous detail; whose perspective we are invited to adopt” (93, 94). In *Never Let Me Go* the reader is invited to identify almost exclusively with the characters that are clones. Throughout the novel, these are the only characters the reader meets apart from the occasional caretaker. Moreover, it is not until the beginning of book 2, almost halfway through the novel, that the reader gets an affirmation that the students are in fact clones. The reader does not encounter the point of view of the “normal” humans that put in place the dehumanizing power structures that control the clones. Because of this, it is not only alignment that Ishiguro uses but also recognition and empathy. According to Felski, “recognition names an experience of *coming to know*: of being struck by some kind of insight or realization” (100-01). As the reader is led to identify with the clones due to the formal aspects of the text, they learn to recognise themselves in these dehumanized characters. There is a sense of self-recognition in reading about the unfairly treated clones while sympathizing with them due to the alignment process. This self-recognition can lead to empathy, which “is

tied to acknowledgment of suffering: feeling and responding to the pain of others” (106).

Thus, because of the identifying process in Ishiguro’s text, the reader is led to empathize with the clones, leading to a sense of self-recognition and a realization of the troubling nature of the dehumanization the clones face.

Whereas Ishiguro’s fictional text succeeds in empowering a dehumanized party, contemporary media often fail to do this for the refugees coming to Europe. It is important to consider that not all media feature dehumanizing portrayals of refugees. However, media have a certain responsibility to depict refugees in positive and humanizing ways, as they are a strong influence on the general image of refugees. Research by Chrysalis Wright, Rebecca Brinklow-Vaughn, Kelsea Johannes, and Fiordaliz Rodriguez proves this influence. In their study, they interviewed 196 college students and showed them either negative or positive media portrayals of refugees to examine their reactions. The results of the study were as follows:

[P]articipants who were exposed to negative (i.e., stereotypical or conflictual) portrayals of immigrants and refugees reported more negative attitudes, specifically regarding viewing immigration as an economic threat and cognitive Islamophobia. Additionally, those who were exposed to positive (i.e., human interest or social benefit) portrayals of immigrants and refugees reported more positive attitudes. They were more likely to view immigration as an economic, cultural diversity, and humanitarian benefit as well as view immigration as defending the rights of asylum seekers. (345)

As this study shows, media have a responsibility to portray refugees positively to avoid issues such as discrimination and Islamophobia. These two negative opinions on refugees have been circulated mostly by populist speakers. According to Chiara De Cesari, Ivo Bosilkov, and Arianna Piacentini, “Populist discourse fundamentally relies on a sharp us/them divide and on

a distinctive understanding of ‘the people’ as non-immigrant, white, and disenfranchised,” to which they add that populists “scapegoat migrants and minorities for rising inequalities and poverty” (27), thus echoing the negative ideas of refugees that Wright and colleagues worked with. When looking specifically at Europe, Rogers Brubaker argues that populism takes on a distinct form. He argues that European forms of populism, in particular northern and western European populism, take on a more civilizational form instead of a nationalist form due to the perceived threat from Islam. This fear of Islam, as Brubaker explains, seems to stem from the 2015 refugee “crisis” which “catapulted Muslims to the forefront of national-populist rhetoric” (1208-09). Thus, in Europe, populism plays a big part in the circulation of negative portrayals of refugees. People pick up this rhetoric and use it on social media, which Jill Rettberg and Radhika Gajjala show with the example of the hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome. In their article, they show how male Muslim refugees are often regarded as either terrorists, a perspective that shows the influence of Islamophobic, populist rhetoric, or as cowards that have left their country instead of fighting. Rettberg and Gajjala show that “[d]iscourse about the Middle-Eastern male as non-masculine is not new, and is based on a history of colonial framing of Middle-Eastern men as simultaneously effeminate . . . and threatening to women” (180). This shows what Chouliaraki and Stolic argue, namely that “media visualities are informed by a deep-seated orientalism that continues to reproduce historical tropes of colonial imagery in contemporary portrayals of mobile populations” (1164). Moreover, Rettberg and Gajjala reveal that people regard the “real refugee” as being “a naked, starving African child [standing] in the red dust of a refugee camp,” and, as they elaborate, “[t]he photograph of the African child is familiar to Western eyes from charity campaigns and calls for compassion” (179). This infantilization of refugees is also highly problematic as it does not convey a realistic image of them. Although these “charity campaigns and calls for compassion” that infantilize refugees bring to attention the struggles that refugees have to go through and call

for action to help these refugees in need, “they nonetheless ultimately fail to humanise migrants and refugees” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 1162). As revealed by Wright and colleagues’ study on responses to representations of refugees, media play a significant role in how viewers receive information about refugees, which ultimately paints the image they have of refugees. As shown in the example of charity campaigns, however, even when the portrayal is positive, it can still be damaging to the image of refugees by creating a stereotype. Given the issue of populist discourse on refugees and this being picked up on social media and problematized even further, it is the responsibility of the media, be it mainstream media or social media, to counter this rhetoric and create a positive, realistic image of refugees that will work to both avoid stereotyping and call for action in the help and acceptance of refugees.

Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* can be used as an example of how to succeed in this task to represent refugees in a humanizing manner. Esther Peeren argues that the literary tool of focalization can critique parts of how migrants and refugees are received.

Bringing in the narratological concept of focalization—asking who sees and what becomes visible (or invisible) through their eyes—I contend that in contemporary visual culture, attempts are made to refocalize irregular migration by showing the particularity and partiality of the perspective taken by the global mobility regime and by invoking other perspectives, including those of irregular migrants, as counterpoints. (175)

Peeren indicates one way in which this literary tool can be used to argue against negative portrayals of refugees, namely by including refugee perspectives in conversations about refugees. Peeren points out the option of visualizing refugee experiences, which is similar to what Ishiguro does in *Never Let Me Go*. As shown above with the use of Felski’s theory of identification, a work of fiction can be used to humanize a dehumanized figure. However, how would that be done outside of fiction, in our reality? To quote Felski, “Feeling a sense of

empathy with fictional persons, according to Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum, can expand the limits of experience, engender a sense of solidarity with distant others, and do valuable civic and political work” (106). Hereby, Felski shows the significance of literature with its quality to evoke empathy. Moreover, Georg Bertram shows that “[o]ne of the ways that humans give form to what they are is through art. Through their way of dealing with artworks, they develop their understanding of themselves and hence determine what kind of human they are” (10). Art is a reflective exercise because it lets people see how they respond to particular ideas or values; art shapes us. Felski and Bertram show that literature can change how we respond to reality and can thus be used as a political tool. Therefore, *Never Let Me Go*’s humanizing practice can be used as an example of how European media could successfully humanize refugees in their portrayal of refugees.

Europe faces a problem not with the refugees coming in but with how these refugees are presented. One way of reversing this negative portrayal of refugees is for contemporary media to adopt literary techniques such as identification and focalization to successfully humanize a dehumanized group of people, as Ishiguro does in his novel *Never Let Me Go*. Although the novel is fiction, the way it succeeds in humanizing clones can be used in the portrayal of refugees. This essay does not mean to argue that all media dehumanize refugees. It simply aims to reveal how populist discourse and anti-refugee rhetoric in mainstream media and on social media influence the way refugees are viewed and how even positive representations in mainstream media might be problematic. Nor does this essay aim to reveal one ultimate way of portraying refugees. *Never Let Me Go* serves as an example of what a successful humanizing portrayal of a dehumanized group of persons looks like. Ultimately, the general public will receive an image of refugees through media, and this is where the responsibility lies to counter negative rhetoric about refugees and create a humanizing, positive portrayal instead. This can be done directly by fiction with its reflective powers that

can lead to self-recognition and even empathy toward refugees, but these literary elements could also be adopted in a new form of media representation where refugees get to tell the story. In the debate on dehumanizing media portrayals of the so-called refugee crisis of Europe, Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* could lead to new insights and inspiration for positive, humanizing refugee representations.

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