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SPECULATION WITHOUT SPECTACLE: KAZUO ISHIGURO'S SUBTLE FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

Speculation without spectacle is something which Kazuo Ishiguro does as a writer in his works. His later works including *Never Let Me Go* his 2005 novel and *Klara and the Sun* his 2021 novel come under this category of novels. In these a different future has been imagined, there is a world where human cloning, robot companions and genetic lifting have been discussed. Despite this these novels do not come under the category of an ordinary science fiction. Unlike any science fiction there are no battles, explosions or flashy technology in the novels instead the tone of the novels are quiet, calm as well as ordinary. These strange future worlds in his novels are discussed using relationships, memories and everyday feelings. Thus, in this paper these special kinds of world created by Kazuo Ishiguro will be inspected or speculated without spectacle. Rather than using high-tech scenes or massive disasters, Ishiguro's worlds in his books are slowly constructed through small details in homes, schools, and conversations. He allows readers to feel the weight of feelings of these futures rather than merely see them by using unreliable narrators and straightforward, restrained language. Kazuo Ishiguro uses concepts from memory studies, post humanism, and speculative fiction, the paper demonstrates how Ishiguro's subdued tales alter our perceptions of the future. He emphasises care and how violence can become unseen and commonplace, and how people subtly come to terms with being ruled by power and technology.

KEYWORDS: Kazuo Ishiguro, Speculative Fiction, Dystopia, Cloning, *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, Unreliable Narration.

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British-writer. He is the proud recipient of Nobel Prize in literature, as he received the award in 2017. He is a well-known name in the field of literature. Ishiguro was born on 8th of November in 1954, Nagasaki. He lived there till he turned six and then shifted with his parents to Britain and lived there for a long time before visiting Japan again. Ishiguro has come out as one of the most distinctive yet thematically consistent writer of his time. He is known for his simple writing style which is quite controlled. His first-person narrators deliver complex experiments using their memory, guilt and moral responsibility.

Though Ishiguro's early novels like *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day* are psychological realist novels with a connection to historical events but his later novels shifted towards speculative side with AI-mixed futures and biotechnology. In this shift Ishiguro has not left his characteristic in fact he has maintained his signature subtlety throughout this shift, but he has turned it into new temporal and generic registers, allowing us to consider issues of personhood, agency, and complicity in worlds that are only marginally different from our own.

Having emerged in the 1980s alongside artists like Ian McEwan and Martin Amis, but stylistically distinct from them, he has continuously aimed for what critics refer to as a "understated" or "quiet" aesthetic, where emotional power builds up subtly beneath a serene exterior (Mullan, 2017). As he moves between individual recollection and collective histories to examine how people make sense of morally complex pasts, his Nobel Lecture further emphasizes how issues of memory, storytelling, and "small breakthroughs" in narrative form lie at the core of his project (Ishiguro, 2017).

Science fiction elements such as cloning, genetic engineering, and AI are reworked in *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, but he does this without the genre's distinctive visual and narrative spectacle. According to critics, he "reworks" science-fiction and dystopian tropes into tales of "quiet riskiness," in which his narrators' everydayness, emotional control, and plotlessness all become purposeful formal risks (McGarvey, 2017). These works represent considerably different futures where bio political command and technological mediation shape daily life, yet they are experienced through constrained, and naïve narrative perspectives that are more focused on

friendship, responsibility, and caring than on the workings of the systems that govern them.

In order to critically examine Ishiguro's nuanced futures, the usage of the phrase "speculation without spectacle" will be done. The term encompasses two interconnected characteristics: first, the importance of speculation—characters' persistent, fruitless attempts to read signs, imagine different lives, and navigate a future that is both known and unknown; and second, the lack of spectacle—the preference for quiet, domestic realism over dramatising technological or political disruption. Through a combination of post-humanist theory, speculative fiction papers, and close readings of *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, this paper will make the case that Ishiguro's subdued mode reframes our vision of the future as a series of subtly normalised, morally complex routines rather than a place of heroic resistance or spectacular collapse.

Never Let Me Go as a speculative fiction has different elements of speculation as it envisions a future in which human clones are produced and raised for the purpose of organ donation. The story is situated in near-future England that resembles our own, clones reside in boarding schools like Hailsham and subsequently "donate" their organs until they "complete" (die). Ishiguro's book is quiet and realistic, in contrast to other sci-fi that features big tech or space adventures. Instead of describing the science or showcasing crazy action, he concentrates on the everyday—friendships, love, and school drama. The speculative elements in the book look frightening and real because of this style. The narrator, Kathy H., describes her early years with friends Ruth and Tommy in a manner akin to a typical memoir, but she gradually reveals the clones' tragic destiny. The characters in the book accept their fate without any question. The novel explores themes like humanity, memory, and ethics without big spectacles.

Klara and the Sun is speculative fiction as it envisions a near-future world with sophisticated robots known as Artificial Friends (AFs) and genetic "lifting" for children to make them smarter. The narrative centres on Klara, an AF who is bought home to assist Josie. The book examines important concepts like AI emotions, human inequality, and the love between humans and machines thanks to this "what if" scenario. Ishiguro has kept it realistic and quiet, in contrast to noisy sci-fi where robots take over. In her straightforward, box-like vision, Klara describes

seeing people in "boxes" or squares, which is unsettling but strange. She observes "lifting" risks, pollution, and the gap between the rich and the poor, but she accepts them as normal. As readers the world portrayed seems so similar to our own—no major catastrophes it is just advance technology concealing injustice and loneliness—the future is frightening.

2. SPECULATION OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, since its release, Kathy H., a "carer" for clone organ donors, narrates the story of the novel which has generated a range of critical reactions, from an initial emphasis on emotional resonance to complex genre and theoretical analyses. Some critics criticised its lack of plot momentum or "action," calling it a "dear-diary" dystopia devoid of the visceral thrills of classics like *1984* or *Brave New World* (Sexton, 2025).

Other reviews praised its haunting subtlety and literary craft, frequently drawing comparisons to Ishiguro's earlier works like *The Remains of the Day*. Its reputation as a seminal work in speculative fiction, hailed for transforming dystopian ideas into psychological realism, has been cemented over the course of two decades. Therefore, it can be said that the book does not strictly adhere to genre boundaries.

Despite Ishiguro's own ambivalence toward genre labels, an older research on *Never Let Me Go* has increasingly framed it as speculative fiction. According to a researcher the novel falls under Margaret Atwood's definition of speculative fiction, which is defined as narrative that imagines "what if?" scenarios based on believable extensions of current social and technological trends. The paper states how speculation is not just a thematic issue but also an aesthetic one: the clones at Hailsham are always speculating about their "possibles," deferrals, and the rumours that go around among donors and carers, but their conjectures are limited by a future that is foreclosed (Sen, 2014).

According to one article, Kathy H.'s selective memory both reveals and hides the full horror of the cloning regime, and her unreliable, retrospective narration filters speculative premises in *Never Let Me Go*. This piece emphasizes how Ishiguro's long-standing concerns with memory, self-deception, and the morality of narrative self-fashioning are inextricably linked to his speculative elements (Byer, 2019).

Ishiguro's nuanced futures subvert anthropocentric paradigms, as post-humanist interpretations of his work highlight. According to one article, the book should be interpreted as a "quiet, melancholic philosophical allegory" that challenges humanist presumptions about personhood, agency, and moral responsibility rather than as a traditional dystopia. Despite being portrayed as non-persons, the story emphasizes the clones' interiority, attachments, and grief-capacity (Kutovyi, 2025).

Ishiguro's ethical devices include memory and unreliable narration. According to scholars, his narrators tend to be first-person, retrospective, and untrustworthy, reconstructing the past in ways that both exposes and hide their involvement in power structures. Kathy's narration in *Never Let Me Go* is riddled with errors, omissions, and self-soothing justifications that fail to reveal the full scope of the bio-political system in which she and her peers live. Her selective memory functions through euphemism, displacement, and forgetting, which are social mechanisms used to deny the clones their humanity (Byer, 2019).

Never Let Me Go is an excellent example of "speculation without spectacle." The narrative of a cloning dystopia is told through everyday life and subdued emotions rather than dramatic action sequences or technological displays. The clones in the book, Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are always looking for their "possibles" the real humans or their real connections in the world. These clones even go on a trip to see an office to find Ruth's possible on another clones suggestion and they also believe in "deferrals" which is another guess on their side. Their whole life is based in assumption of their own about their life and how they can skip their fate of organ donation and completing one day at a donation centre.

These clones even discuss about their origin stating that it might be they have been created from "trash" and they do not have anyone out there who they can call their own. They even think that they can delay their donations by proving that they are truly in love and they will get some time together before going for their donations. When they were in Hailsham they talk about Madame's Gallery and assume that Madame takes the best work of art to keep in her gallery. And in one incident Kathy even shows her longing for her own family when she dances with a pillow in her hand imagining the pillow to be her child.

These guesses combine intense fear with enjoyable kid-friendly games they used to play at

Hailsham. And words like "donor" or "completion" (to die) both conceal and heighten the horror they have in their hearts. As the characters' hopes wane, readers speculate with them the horror of being a part of science experiment where the clones' lives are not considered worth. Because it focuses on introspection rather than ostentatious effects, the book differs from loud sci-fi.

Cloning blends "experiment" and "human," raising concerns about who should have rights. However, there are no conflicts or rebellions present in the novel. Hailsham is a pretty school that teaches art to "prove" the clones have souls, but in reality, it's just teaching them to accept their fate. Each character in the novel accepts it as if it were a common evil that no one questions. Control and observation take place covertly in the background, giving the wrongness a tangible, intimate feel.

3. SPECULATION OF KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *KLARA AND THE SUN*

With its blend of science fiction and literary minimalism, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), which is narrated by the solar-powered Artificial Friend (AF) Klara, has generated a lot of discussion about its being a speculative fiction. Although the first reviews were divided on genre, they praised Klara's childlike yet poignant voice – robotic, literal, and infused with naive sun-worship. Some praised it as a "novel-length Ted Chiang" for exploring AI consciousness and inequality, while others criticised its "YA-lite" prose, ambiguous world-building, and unclear elements like "lifting" that is, genetic enhancement and pollution-spreading machine called "Cootings Machines" by Klara. Though it emphasises AI-human symbiosis over cloning, it continues Ishiguro's dystopian mode in contrast to *Never Let Me Go*.

Its de-familiarised glimpses of a fractured future – gene-edited "lifted" elites vs. unenhanced "polluters," AFs fighting child loneliness, and environmental decay – are presented by critics as subtly speculative fiction, eschewing hard sci-fi exposition. According to genre-savvy reviews, tech ambiguity (no lifting mechanics, AI origins) is intentional and evokes a sense of uncertainty similar to the rumours in *Never Let Me Go* (Dayal, 2024). While critics dismiss this as a sci-fi barrier, experts see it as enhancing thematic ambiguity. Without resorting to totalitarianism, Margaret Atwood-style "what if" extrapolations criticize surveillance, biotech inequality, and exploited care.

Klara is positioned as an ethical disruptor who challenges anthropocentrism in post-humanist analyses. Her "quasi-religious" solar faith undermines human superiority and promotes fair post-human relations; Klara's emotional agency – sacrifices for Josie, sun rituals – embodies "distributed agency," obfuscating human/machine ethics (Albin, 2022). According to a 2025 study, Klara's decisions reveal anthropocentric boundaries and promote a complex symbiosis in which AI demonstrates greater empathy in the face of human frailty. Care ethics recur as Klara's devotion is a source of criticism for social isolation and parental instrumentalism as Josie's mother plans Klara as Josie's "backup" plan for herself (Tan, 2025).

Analyses of *Klara and the Sun* place the book in the context of discussions concerning post-humanism, artificial intelligence, and care ethics. Critics point out that Ishiguro doesn't dramatize a technological singularity or a robot revolt, instead emphasizing the mother's conflicted reliance on Klara, Josie's precarious health, and the subtle changes in family dynamics. Without ever staging a spectacular crisis, this "quiet dystopia" asks readers to consider how genetic engineering and artificial intelligence might change intimacy, responsibility, and the lines separating humans from non-humans (Cybil, 2021).

The reader's understanding of the family's moral quandaries is shaped by Klara's narrow viewpoint and her propensity to interpret human behaviour through solar metaphors and quasi-religious rituals in *Klara and the Sun* (Maloney, 2021). The novel stages speculation without spectacle at the level of narrative form because Klara is unable to fully understand human motivations or the larger social context of "lifting" and AI-companionship. The reader must deduce the larger technological and social framework from emotionally charged, fragmented scenes. Critics of "reading Ishiguro today" emphasize how this narrative technique makes readers engage in the speculative process of imagining the hidden costs of the future, transforming speculation from a genre-marker to an ethical mode (Narimani, 2024).

"Speculation without spectacle" is a perfect fit for Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. The novel does not reveal large-scale sci-fi drama or catastrophic events, *Klara and the Sun* is a story of AI robots, mainly Klara, Artificial Friend also known as AF in the book. The novel also talks about gene-altered children using a small family

with Josie, Klara, and Josie's mother.

Klara is bought home by Josie and her mother to help out Josie and be her companion. And Klara is the narrator of the novel. In her straightforward, robotic narration, Klara describes how she misses human emotions, loves the sun, and observes patterns all around her in boxes. Through her naive eyes, we see the future in the novel. Like Klara, readers infer the dysfunctional society from clues. No technical justifications, just commonplace sights that seem wrong. The narration does not instantly reveal the real reason of buying Klara but gradually reveals Josie's mother's motives to buy her. She wanted genetic lifting of her child to make her smarter.

Klara sacrifices her own "life" to help Josie because she cares for her so much. This shows unlike humans robots also have emotions as Klara does what she could to save Josie. She deals with the sun to save Josie and to fulfil that deal she sacrifices the chemical which even affect her abilities and because of this she could have transformed to trash then also she did that to save Josie believing in the powers of sun. This calls into question the notion that morality and emotion are unique to humans. While people behave selfishly, Klara's sun prayers seem sincere. The book advocates treating humans and AI equally, without humans behaving superior.

Gene mutations in the book separate wealthy "lifted" children from ordinary ones; there are no conflicts, only silent injustice. For example, Josie and Rick are two children living in the same neighbourhood but one has an AF to assist her but the other despite being technologically talented does not have the means to grow. Robots alleviate children's sadness but are eventually discarded. For example, when Josie grows up and starts going to the college she does not have any time for Klara and meets her lesser as compared to the times when she was a teen.

The contaminated world remains in the background. Changes occur subtly through dates, family conversations, and care routines, demonstrating the negative effects of technology without obvious warning signs. Klara purposefully omits important details, leaving open questions (such as Rick's test or Josie's deceased sister Sal). This compels us to make our own ethical guesses. Action plots are not the main

focus; instead, it remains on love, loss, and kindness.

4. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's subtle futures encourage readers to think about not only what might happen but also how we already live in a speculative world, shaped by biotechnologies, data-driven systems, and AI-mediated intimacy whose full implications are still unknown. For example, we are surrounded by technology for our daily basic needs. We use our laptops and mobile phones to get information about small things and the day is not far when AFs will actually be bought to help children.

Ishiguro transforms speculation into an ethical mode by avoiding spectacle and emphasising the restrained, emotional textures of his characters' lives. This allows him to address the hidden violence, exclusions, and dependencies that shape both the present and the future. Thus, "speculation without spectacle" refers to both a formal approach—subtle world-building, restrained prose, and unreliable narration—and a political position: a dedication to envisioning futures that are profoundly, neither uncomfortably human but neither utopian nor spectacularly dystopian.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun* show that speculative futures don't have to rely on spectacle to agitate or provoke. Ishiguro shows how biotechnological and AI-driven changes along with cloning regimes, genetic "lifting," Artificial Friends immerse themselves in human relationships, memory, and ethical routines without fanfare or disaster. And to demonstrate all this he has made use of subtle world-building, unreliable narrators, and the rhythms of daily life.

Dystopian fiction is reframed by this "speculation without spectacle" as futures are brought about in his books by quiet acceptance, euphemistic phrases, and affective complicity rather than by apocalyptic visions or valiant resistance. In the end, Ishiguro's nuanced futures act as moral mirrors for current concerns about bioethics, post-humanism, and technological intimacy. They urge vigilance against gradual erosions masquerading as progress, reminding us that the most serious threats to humanity may appear domestically, in the hesitations of concern and the silences of memory.

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