



## Decoding Moral Ambiguity: A Critical Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's Dystopian Novel "Never Let Me Go"

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### ABSTRACT

Morality is one of the complicated notions that humans, since the beginning of creation, have been attempting to fit into a box. The dilemma of pigeonholing the essence of morality and considering it a matter of black and white has recently begun to loosen in fiction, especially dystopian fiction. Contemporary dystopian fiction deals extensively with the grey area that bears no absolutes. It is this grey area that constitutes the concept of moral ambiguity which is a recurrent trait of characters in dystopian fiction.

Through the lens of moral ambiguity, the world is a chaotic place where morality is relative and characters are difficult to label as good or bad, as they act on personal preferences and have no clear conception of right and wrong. This study aims to critically discuss morality and decode moral ambiguity through analyzing it as a theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel "Never Let Me Go".

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## تفكيك الغموض الاخلاقي: دراسة نقدية في رواية الديستوبيا "لاتدعني ارحل ابدأ" لكازو ايشيغورو

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### المستخلص

الاخلاق هي احدى المفاهيم المعقدة التي حاول البشر منذ بداية الخلق تفسيرها ضمن اطار محدد. ان معضلة تقييد جوهر الاخلاق وحصرها بين اللون الابيض والاسود بدأت بالتلاشي مؤخرًا في الادب ولاسيما الادب الديستوبي. يتناول الادب الروائي الديستوبي المعاصر بشكل واسع المنطقة الرمادية التي لا تعرف المطلقات. المنطقة الرمادية هي ما يجسد مفهوم "الغموض الاخلاقي" والذي يعتبر سمة متكررة في شخصيات هذا النوع الادبي. من خلال منظور الغموض الاخلاقي، يصور العالم على انه فضاء فوضوي تتسم فيه الاخلاق بالنسبية ويصعب تصنيف الشخصيات على انها خيرة او شريرة، لانها تتصرف وفقا لتفضيلاتها الشخصية دون امتلاك تصور واضح لما هو صواب او خطأ. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف مفهوم الاخلاق وتحليل ابعاد الغموض الاخلاقي من خلال دراسة رواية كازو ايشيغورو "لا تدعني اذهب ابدأ" والتحليل النقدي لتمثلات هذا المفهوم ضمن سياقها السردي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التحيز الجنسي، الترجمة الآلية، الترجمة الأدبية؛ فينابي وداربلنت، التقنيات المباشرة والتكيفية

### Introduction

Dystopian Fiction is a sub-genre of science fiction that simply describes an inflicted imaginary place "in which everything is as bad as possible" (Nakamura, 2017, p. 3). It is, as the philosopher John Stuart Mill states in 1868, an antonym of the word that entails an ideally perfect society; "utopia" (Beringer, 2018, p. 6). A dystopia is an exaggerated worst-case scenario set in a futuristic world, where the illusion of a perfect society is upheld through strict and oppressive control by corporations, government systems, technology, or authoritarian regimes (Demerjian, 2020).

By portraying non-existent societies that are worse than the author's, dystopian fiction serves its purpose in cautioning against the dangers of tolerating the corrupt politics and culture of the present-day societies which will ultimately lead to a nightmarish future (Finnsson, 2016). Dystopian fiction bears a striking degree of realism; "In a universe subjected to increasing entropy, one finds that there are many more ways for planning to go wrong than to go right, more ways to generate dystopia..." (Gordin, Tilley, Prakash, 2010, p. 2). It is a type of fiction in which characters require emotional resilience as well as physical skills to survive their bleak and oppressive environments (Almusawi, 2025).

It explores themes of false utopia, loss of individualism, survival, oppressive government control, technological control, environmental degradation, propaganda, technology, and conformity.

Although the bleak cautionary tales of dystopian fiction serve as a rhetorical 'reductio ad absurdum' of the utopian philosophy, they paradoxically cultivate the possibility of bringing in utopian hope and change even in the darkest of circumstances (Finnsson, 2016). The fact that dystopian fiction often strives to warn against the horrors of overlooking the ills of today's society and frequently features moments of awakening highlights its deeper engagement with morality. It

treats morality as a central theme, because it is moral dilemmas that characters try to navigate throughout dystopian narratives.

To examine the concept of moral ambiguity, it is essential to first define what morality is. Bernard Gert, an American moral philosopher, defines morality as “an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, having the lessening of evil or harm as its goal, and including what are commonly known as the moral rules, moral ideals, and moral virtues” (Gert, 1998, p. 19). In other words, it is a legally non-binding system that holds the ultimate purpose of preventing harmful behaviors by holding everyone accountable to its moral rules. However, this definition of morality is inherently flawed, as it overlooks the fact that there is not a universally unified set of moral principles. The impossibility of establishing a unified valid system of moral principles stems from the idea that moral values differ from one society to another based on religion, culture, social conditions and others.

Morality plays a multifaceted role in dystopian societies; on the one hand, it is a tool of control and manipulation wielded by governments and ruling entities. On the other hand, it emerges as a catalyst of hope and resistance, prompting individuals and marginalized groups to engage in acts of rebellion in the hope of alleviating the world of its ills and creating a better future (Atasoy, 2021).

Since dystopian narratives are often characterized by morally complicated situations where the line between good and evil is nearly indistinguishable, authors of such narratives craft morally ambiguous characters and leave it to readers to decide whether these characters are good or evil (Wildes, 2007). To understand moral ambiguity, often referred to as moral greyness, it is necessary to identify the components that make up this mixture: the “white” or morally good actions and the “black” or morally evil ones. Although the matter of distinguishing between the concepts of goodness and evil is heavily shaped by cultural diversity, several cultures share common ground in what they consider good or evil. According to Robert Hinde in *Why good is good: the sources of morality*:

The mechanism by which people come to hold moral values (in the sense of values seen as good) and behave in moral ways is similar in many respects to that by which immoral (in the sense of bad) values and behavior are acquired. (Hinde, 2005, p. 3)

Despite Hinde’s view that good and evil are two sides of the same coin, there are significant differences between these two notions. Most commonly, the concept of goodness means doing what is right, and what it takes for oneself and one’s environment to survive and thrive. In “*The Language of Morals*”, the British moral philosopher, R.M. Hare, underlines a significant issue that he states:

We get stirred up about the goodness of men because we are men. This means that the acceptance of a judgment, that such and such a man’s act is good in circumstances of a certain sort, involves the acceptance of the judgement that it would be good, were we ourselves placed in similar circumstances, to do likewise. (Hare, 1963, p. 141)

Hare’s notion of goodness suggests that moral judgment is not merely abstract evaluations of others, but is closely tied to how a person perceives themselves and their potential actions. In other words, the goodness of a behavior is determined by whether or not the evaluators of that behavior would do the same if they were in a similar situation.

Another approach to demonstrating what makes an action good is Immanuel Kant’s view of

morality. Kant's ethics propose that there is an absolute, universal moral law, depending on which the moral judgment of an action is to be conducted. "The categorical imperative", as Kant calls this universal moral code, is the cornerstone of Kant's deontological moral philosophy (Johnson & Cureton, 2024). In Robert Johnson's view of Kant's moral philosophy, the criterion on which Kant's moral judgment lies is underlined: "Immanuel Kant ... argued that moral requirements are based on a standard of rationality he dubbed the "Categorical Imperative" (CI). Immorality thus involves a violation of the CI and is thereby irrational." (Johnson & Cureton, 2024)

In other words, Kant's moral goodness proposes that what makes a good action is the intention behind it, rather than its outcome. It emphasizes that morally good actions are guided by rationality and respect for the universal moral law, as well as a commitment to treat all individuals as ends in themselves.

Like goodness, the matter of pinpointing what dooms an action evil is multifaceted and arguable. David Hicks, a doctor of philosophy, defines what an evil person is in his article, "Moral Evil as Apparent Disvalue", as "... one with evil or vicious motives, attitudes, dispositions and/or will" (Vránová, 2016, p. 31). This definition of evil cannot be generalized, for what characterizes a bad attitude or motive varies depending on many factors one of which is the circumstances under which an action is performed. What complicates the matter of fitting evil into a box is the paradox that, in most cases, people who perform violent actions do not consider themselves evil.

According to "*The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*", the American historian and archaeologist Arthur G. Miller's most influential psychological and sociological work, the definition of evil is set forth as carrying out brutal, cruel, damaging, and repressive acts (Miller, 2004). Although Miller's definition of evil is clear, remains relative, as there have always been individuals who have committed acts of extreme violence and cruelty in the name of creating a better world, and their actions were often justified in the public eye. Those people, although they have committed brutal acts such as labeling some innocent people undesirable and waging unnecessary wars, are not regarded as evil, as they believe they have acted out of moral responsibility (Vránová, 2016, p. 31).

After considering the concepts of goodness and evil, it is significant to put the concept of moral ambiguity into perspective at this point. Moral ambiguity is generally defined as "a lack of certainty about whether something is right or wrong" (Merriam-Webster. n.d.). It refers to a situation in which a moral dilemma arises due to the absence of a clear moral response or action. It is the result of having moral principles that conflict with each other. Moral ambiguity adds a layer of intrigue to narratives as it defies the black-and-white moral absolutism and prompts characters to take provocative ethical stances. It also deepens the story and elevates it from a mere escapism to a probing exploration of human nature. In addition, the introduction of moral ambiguity into a story reflects the complexities of human nature. The nuanced portrayal of morality that dystopian fiction offers sparks ethical debates, which in return enrich its narrative texture and thematic depth (McKee, 2023).

Furthermore, moral ambiguity plays a significant role in terms of character development. It creates satisfyingly unpredictable character arcs. Characters may start off with a clear set of moral principles but ultimately abandon them, adapting a nuanced worldview. As morally complicated characters grapple with their conflicting ethical values, they are compelled to evolve, offering readers rich insight into their internal conflicts (McKee, 2023). The labyrinth of ethical gray areas that characters navigate makes it almost impossible for readers to predict the next moral decision of a character. It also encourages readers to reflect on how multifaceted human nature can be and question their understanding of moral certainties. In that sense, the internal moral journeys of characters are central

to the overall narrative of dystopian fiction. All in all, moral ambiguity provides fertile ground for ethical debate, narrative tension, and character development (McKee, 2023).

### Grey Morality: A Theoretical Background

*There are no blacks and whites, there are only greys*

\_Ayan Rand

Grey morality, which in this context refers to moral ambiguity, is not a new phenomenon as morally grey characters have appeared in literary works since time immemorial. However, the term ‘ambiguous characters’ has not been emphasized until recently. The concept of grey morality has long been a part of moral theories. Socrates’ theory of morality, for one, encourages the idea that improving the quality of one’s life is the purpose of morality. His view on this matter is best illustrated by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, who states: “The art of morality is not the art of living morally with a view to attain happiness; it is the art of being happy because one lives morally.” (Coman, 2007, p. 113) In other words, Socrates’ theory favors the individual’s well-being and happiness over the blind adherence to rigid moral rules. Therefore, it supports the idea of morality as a way of life, in which moral values that make an individual happy are the ones to be followed.

Grey morality has its roots in Aristotle’s theory of moral virtue, which is illustrated by Joe Sachs, a translator of Aristotle and Plato’s works, as; “the only practical road to effective action”. (Sachs, 2016) Aristotle believes that the actions and goals of virtuous people are guided by what they perceive as ‘beautiful’. It is noteworthy that beauty, in this sense, means moral goodness. According to Aristotle, a good character naturally desires morally good things, as they see the inherent beauty in them. Aristotle’s view of morality emphasizes the idea that morality is relative, as what seems beautiful or “moral” to one person may seem ugly or “immoral” to another (Sachs, 2016).

Another moral theory that goes hand in hand with the concept of moral ambiguity is John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian theory. To Mill, it is the result of an action that determines whether the action is good or not. According to his theory, an action is good as long as it promotes happiness. Notably, it is not only the happiness of the doer that labels an action good, but the pleasure and well-being of the majority of the people affected by it. Mill’s utilitarian theory feeds into moral ambiguity, as it favors the overall happiness of the group over that of individuals (Mill, 2012).

James Rachels, an American moral philosopher, has also developed a theory on morality. His theory denotes that one’s morality is closely related to the cultural conditions under which he\ she lives, as he explains; in his book “*The Elements of Moral Philosophy*”, that cultural influences shape our basic assumptions about the mind, the body, and the universe. They also guide the questions we ask, the facts we seek, how we interpret those facts, and respond to the interpretations of them (Rachels, 2012). His perception of the impact of culture on an individual’s moral decisions suggests that moral values are changeable. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize moral ambiguity as a fundamental aspect of morality.

Moral Ambiguity in Kazuo Ishiguro’s “Never Let Me Go” “Never Let Me Go” is the most popular novel by the Japanese-born British author Kazuo Ishiguro. It is a dystopian tale that portrays the loss of humanity and the harshness of the English system during the 1990s in which “colonies of children are being cloned” (Eickenberg, 2016, p. 3) to harvest their organs. Since the novel portrays clones as beings remarkably similar to humans in terms of appearance and mentality, critics and

readers find the narrative to be marred by ethically questionable actions. With that being stated, Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go" offers a profound exploration of the concept of moral ambiguity or moral greyness. The ethical dilemmas presented in this novel are not black and white, but rather filled with shades of grey morality. The clones' acceptance of their fate as donors, with no say in their own lives, is perhaps one of the most significant and clear examples of moral ambiguity. The idea that the main characters Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth, are all aware of their tragic end from a young age yet never seem to question it underscores moral ambiguity as one of the novel's primary themes. The clones' submission to their predetermined life path and the apparent lack of interest in challenging it suggest deep moral ambiguity. Living in peace with being raised merely for organ harvesting, the clones avoid questioning the righteousness of the life-altering choices that have already been made for them. The system that exploits them exposes the emotional and intellectual complexities that the clones face, blurring the lines between resignation and agency.

This, in turn, raises ethical questions about whether the clones truly comprehend the value of their lives. The clones' final acceptance of their roles as donors is vividly captured in this line: "It felt right. After all, it's what we're supposed to be doing, isn't it?" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 174) Ruth's words reflect the existential weight of the clones' morbid realization. The moral ambiguity of their situation lies in the idea that, even though they understand their fate, they still feel as if they are left waiting for a never-coming moment of clarity and freedom. Their reaction to discovering the real purpose behind their existence embodies moral ambiguity in the sense that the clones never explicitly revolted against the system that oppresses them. In addition, Kathy's proud description of her work as a carer in the first chapter; "Okay, maybe I am boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying calm" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 5) reflects her resigned acceptance of the repressive system. The clones' crushing acceptance of what is to be bestowed upon them ethically complicates their situation.

It is noteworthy that Ishiguro avoids using medical terms such as "organ harvesting," "heart removal", or "bodily failure" throughout the novel, instead relying on euphemisms for these terms. The use of euphemism, such as "completion" for death, gives readers the impression that nothing in this novel is what it seems and that every bit of the truth is masked (Koehler, 2023). Employing euphemistic language is closely tied to the theme of moral ambiguity in this novel because this linguistic subtlety is the tool that society uses to shy away from confronting the moral consequences of its actions. By using neutral terms like "donations" and "completions", the guardians at Hailsham create an illusion of normalcy and suppress moral indignation. In the essay "Cloning words: Euphemism, Neologism, and Dysphemism as Literary Devices in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go", the author suggests that Ishiguro's linguistic choices illustrate society's tendency to sanitize and soften uncomfortable truths, thereby facilitating ethical complacency (Pandey, 2011).

Another example of how moral ambiguity lurks in every aspect of Kazuo's novel is Ruth's manipulative character. What makes Ruth a morally ambiguous character is her manipulation of Kathy and Tommy. Ruth's deliberate fabrication of a false romantic relationship with Tommy, solely to prevent him from being Kathy's romantic partner, emphasizes her moral ambiguity. On the surface, Ruth's actions seem harsh and selfish. However, those actions stem from a deep-rooted insecurity and a desperate need to maintain a sense of control in a deterministic life. Her behaviors, although morally questionable, reveal the complexities of human relationships and what it feels like to never be in the driver's seat in your life.

It is noteworthy that love and relationships, in this novel, are central to the theme of moral ambiguity. Indeed, the very notion of love is morally ambiguous in Ishiguro's narrative because the genuine feelings of love that Kathy and Tommy have for each other are tainted by the fact that their

relationship exists within a framework of exploitation. In a system that denies individuals full autonomy and the right to control their own lives, it is unclear whether or not love and emotional connections retain their ethical value and purity. The idea that the clones know their tragic end in advance complicates the determination of whether these emotions of love and friendship are authentic or merely products of their desperation and awareness of the inevitability of their circumstances (Muttair, 2024). The moral ambiguity of the relationships between Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth intensifies towards the end of the novel when Kathy confronts the complicated emotions tied to love, betrayal, and forgiveness acknowledging the deep bonds they have shared and how those bonds are shaped by manipulation, jealousy, and the harsh realities of their predetermined fate.

The teachers at Hailsham, Miss Emily, Madame, and Miss Lucy, also play a part in making Kazuo's "Never Let Me Go" a profound exploration of moral grey areas. Throughout the novel, Miss Emily and Madame withhold vital information from the students concerning their fate. They keep the students preoccupied with doing educational tasks and encourage them to learn about art and literature even though they are fully aware of the clones' unfortunate eventual life purpose. The moral ambiguity of Miss Emily and Madame is best shown in their commitment to perpetuate the very system that exploits the clones. On the one hand, they appear to care and try to create a nurturing environment for the students. On the other hand, they hide the full truth from the students and avoid encouraging them to rebel against the morbid system that robs them of the freedom to decide for themselves.

The teachers' actions prompt the reader to consider whether it is more ethical to protect the clones from the full truth or to reveal the truth about their fate and let them decide what to do with it, even if that leads to emotional turmoil and resistance. The position of these teachers reflects the ethical complexity of those in power and how, for them, it is vital to balance personal integrity with the demands of an oppressive, inhuman system. Although Miss Emily admits that hiding the truth from the students was intended to protect them, she remains complicit. By supporting a system built on deception, she has committed a moral failing (Xiao, 2021). While Miss Emily and Madame seem to navigate the grey area regarding the students' predetermined future, the new teacher Miss Lucy decides to bluntly tell the students the whole truth about their lives that she says: "Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs." (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 65) Her rebellion against the system is regarded as morally ambiguous because, although it gives students a chance to understand where their lives are heading, it also puts their emotional well-being at risk, as they are too young to comprehend their bleak future fully.

## Conclusion

The quest to limit morality to a set of absolutes is as old as time immemorial. Contemporary fiction, especially dystopian fiction, tends to go against the ancient human need to pinpoint what exactly rewards an action as good or moral and condemns another as evil or immoral by acknowledging the grey area between what is right and wrong, which several ancient moral philosophers have refused to reflect on, and gave it priority in their works. Moral ambiguity is the heart of the grey area in ethics and is what the paper in hand aims to examine by analyzing its concept in Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go".

Moral ambiguity is a central theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go" as the novel presents a world where moral actions are never simply black and white, but exist in a murky grey area. In the dystopian world of the novel, injustice, exploitation, hypocrisy, manipulation and commodification

of human life all occur quietly, without rebellion, and are rationalized. Ishiguro's characters, conditioned by society, appear to be stuck in a state of being between unawareness of their right to question their fate and indifference towards discovering the true purpose of their existence. The multiple ethical questions about what makes society human, whether the absence of resistance means acceptance, and whether the clones are victims of an oppressive society or merely beings whose reality, in its own way, is fair, remain unanswered in Ishiguro's narrative. The absence of definitive answers in this novel demonstrates that the majority of human behaviors falls into the category of moral ambiguity and challenges the readers to dwell on the ethical implications of societal norms and scientific advancement.

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