

Fragmented Self and Postmodern Anxiety: A Lacanian Reading of Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro

Zahra Saeed

zssheikh11@gmail.com

Lecturer English, Government Associate College for Women Manga Mandi, Lahore, Pakistan

Fiza Saeed

fssheikh11@gmail.com

M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, University of Management and Technology Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

Kiran Shahzadi

kirranshahzadii@gmail.com

M.Phil Scholar, Department of English, Institute of Southern Punjab Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Zahra Saeed zssheikh11@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the fractured nature of subjectivity and the pervasive atmosphere of postmodern anxiety in Never Let Me Go by Kazuo Ishiguro through a psychoanalytic framework grounded in the theories of Jacques Lacan. Reading the novel within a postmodern paradigm, the study argues that Ishiguro's cloned characters exemplify a divided self-shaped by linguistic structures, institutional control, and the perpetual experience of lack. Employing Lacanian concepts such as the Mirror Stage, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the analysis demonstrates how Kathy H.'s reflective narration exposes a subject split between memory and repression, desire and resignation. The clones' formation of identity within the rigid framework of Hailsham illustrates the workings of the Symbolic Order, where language and social law regulate existence and normalize subjugation. Their longing for "deferrals" and meaningful recognition signifies the pursuit of the unattainable objet petit a; the elusive object that sustains desire yet remains forever out of reach. The paper further contends that the novel articulates postmodern anxiety through ontological uncertainty, emotional detachment, and the instability of fixed identity. The clones' quiet compliance with their predetermined destinies reveals an unsettling confrontation with the Real, underscoring the limitations of autonomy within a technologically mediated and biopolitical society. Ultimately, this Lacanian reading positions Never Let Me Go as a profound exploration of the fragmented self, exposing the fragile boundaries between humanity, memory, and existential anxiety in a posthuman condition.

Keywords: Fragmented Subjectivity, Postmodern anxiety, Lacanian psychoanalysis, symbolic order and desire and lack.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Postmodern literature emerges from a historical and cultural moment marked by profound skepticism toward grand narratives, stable meanings, and unified subjectivity. Shaped by the aftermath of world wars, rapid technological advancement, late capitalism, and the erosion of traditional social structures, postmodern fiction repeatedly foregrounds fragmentation, dislocation, and ontological uncertainty. Unlike modernist texts, which often grapple with alienation while still seeking coherence or transcendence, postmodern narratives frequently abandon the possibility of a unified self altogether. Characters are depicted as fractured, unstable, and psychologically disoriented, mirroring a world in which identity is

fluid, meanings are deferred, and reality itself appears contingent and mediated (Kirmani, 2023; khattak et al, 2025).

Within this literary landscape, the notion of the fragmented self becomes a central thematic and structural concern. Postmodern protagonists often experience a persistent sense of anxiety, lack, and incompleteness, manifesting through narrative discontinuities, unreliable narration, temporal disruptions, and metafictional techniques. These stylistic features are not merely aesthetic choices; rather, they reflect deeper psychological and philosophical crises associated with subjectivity in postmodern culture (Turyalay, 2023 and Muttair, 2024). The breakdown of coherent identity in such texts invites critical engagement with psychoanalytic theory, particularly approaches that challenge the idea of a stable, autonomous subject.

Jacques Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis provides a particularly productive theoretical framework for examining postmodern representations of the self. Lacan reconceptualizes subjectivity as inherently split, arguing that the human subject is constituted through language and marked by an enduring sense of lack. His concepts of the mirror stage, the Symbolic order, and desire elucidate how identity is formed through misrecognition and remains perpetually unstable. According to Lacan, the self is not a unified essence but a fragmented construct shaped by linguistic structures and unconscious processes (Solangi et al. (2023). This understanding closely resonates with postmodern literature's portrayal of characters who struggle to reconcile internal desires with external social and symbolic demands (Koolwal and Pandey, 2023).

Postmodern anxiety, as depicted in contemporary fiction, can thus be read as a psychological consequence of this Lacanian fragmentation. The loss of stable meaning, the collapse of authoritative structures, and the dominance of mediated realities intensify the subject's confrontation with lack and alienation. Characters frequently oscillate between multiple identities, experience detachment from their own bodies or emotions, and exhibit compulsive behaviors that signal unresolved unconscious conflicts (Khokkar et al, 2024; Kemertelidze et al. (2024)). Through Lacan's lens, such anxieties are not merely personal or pathological but are symptomatic of the subject's entrapment within the Symbolic order and its inability to attain wholeness.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on postmodernism and psychoanalysis, there remains a need for focused studies that explicitly connect Lacanian theory with the thematic and narrative representation of anxiety and fragmented subjectivity in postmodern fiction. Much existing research either applies psychoanalysis in a generalized Freudian sense or discusses postmodern fragmentation without sustained theoretical grounding in Lacan's model of the split subject. This gap underscores the importance of a study that systematically examines how Lacanian concepts illuminate the psychological depth of postmodern characters and the structural logic of postmodern narratives.

Therefore, this study seeks to situate postmodern fiction within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework to explore how fragmented selves and pervasive anxiety are constructed, represented, and sustained within postmodern texts. By analyzing selected work of postmodern fiction entitled as *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, the study aims to demonstrate that fragmentation is not merely a thematic concern but a fundamental condition of postmodern subjectivity. In doing so, the research contributes to ongoing critical debates in literary studies, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory, offering a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects and interrogates the psychological realities of the postmodern condition. Hence, the main objectives of this particular study are;

1. To examine the construction of the fragmented self in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, with particular emphasis on concepts such as the mirror stage, lack, and the Symbolic order.

2. To analyze the representation of postmodern anxiety in the novel as a manifestation of unconscious desire, repression, and subjectivity under institutional control, highlighting how Lacanian notions of desire and misrecognition shape the psychological experiences of the characters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kirman (2023) conducted a study examining *Never Let Me Go* through a posthumanist lens, focusing on how the clones' emotional and relational experiences challenge conventional categories of personhood and autonomy. The study highlighted that despite their biologically engineered existence, the clones' capacity for care, attachment, and reflection destabilizes rigid human/non-human boundaries, demonstrating the ethical and existential complexities embedded in their lives. Khattak, Adelina, and Idrees (2025) examined the novel using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis within a Marxist framework to explore how language and institutional discourse shape the clones' acceptance of their predetermined fate. They found that ideological mechanisms embedded in everyday communication and social practices foster compliance, revealing how power and discourse govern identity and constrain agency within the dystopian world Ishiguro constructs.

Neog and Kashyap (2024) conducted a spatial analysis of *Never Let Me Go*, focusing on how different settings such as Hailsham, the Cottages, and recovery centers influence the clones' psychological and existential development. Their findings indicated that these spaces act as more than mere backdrops, actively mediating memory, belonging, and relational dynamics, and reinforcing the characters' sense of limitation and alienation. Similarly, Turyalay, Mahmood, and Ali (2024) examined the novel through a subaltern theoretical framework inspired by Spivak, exploring how the clones' voices and experiences are systematically marginalized by hegemonic social and linguistic structures. They found that indoctrination, spatial segregation, and objectifying language erase clone agency, portraying them as subaltern subjects whose emotional and psychological realities are obscured by dominant power relations.

Muttair (2024) conducted a narrative-focused study on *Never Let Me Go*, analyzing how first-person retrospection, non-linear chronology, and emotional restraint contribute to thematic explorations of memory, identity, and ethical responsibility. The study revealed that narrative form itself intensifies the reader's engagement with the clones' constrained subjectivities, showing that structure and content work together to produce profound philosophical and ethical reflections. Peng (2023) examined identity formation in the novel using Erikson's psychological framework, focusing on how the roles of "carer" and "donor" shape the clones' self-conception. The study highlighted that integrating these socially imposed roles into personal narratives provides the clones with a sense of relational meaning and self-certainty, illustrating how identity negotiation occurs even under systemic limitations.

Together, these studies demonstrate that *Never Let Me Go* has been extensively explored in terms of emotional development, power, space, narrative form, marginalization, and identity construction. They collectively indicate that while significant research exists on social, psychological, and posthuman aspects of the clones' lives, there remains room for further exploration of the fragmented self, unconscious desire, and postmodern anxiety using a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. This gap highlights the potential for examining how structural, symbolic, and psychic dimensions intersect to shape the clones' experiences in Ishiguro's narrative.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive textual analysis approach grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to examine the representation of fragmented subjectivity and postmodern anxiety in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). The novel serves as the primary data source, selected for its postmodern narrative structure, dystopian setting, and profound engagement with issues of identity, lack,

and psychological dislocation. Data for analysis consist of purposively selected narrative segments, including key dialogues, interior monologues, memory sequences, silences, and narrative gaps that reveal the characters' psychological states and unconscious tensions. These textual units are analyzed using central Lacanian concepts such as the mirror stage, the Symbolic order, the Real, lack, and desire, enabling a systematic interpretation of how subjectivity is constructed through language, misrecognition, and institutional discourse. The analysis proceeds through close reading, coding recurring motifs related to fragmentation, anxiety, repression, and identity instability, followed by thematic interpretation within the Lacanian framework. Rather than treating characters as clinical subjects, the study interprets them as discursive constructions shaped by ideological and symbolic forces, ensuring methodological rigor and theoretical consistency. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how postmodern anxiety in the novel emerges not as an individual pathology but as a structural condition of subjectivity within a controlled and symbolic social order.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section falls under the following themes;

Fragmented Subjectivity and the Lacanian Split Self

Fragmentation of the self in *Never Let Me Go* is most powerfully articulated through Kathy H.'s narrative voice, which unfolds as a series of discontinuous memories rather than a linear life story. Kathy frequently interrupts herself, revises earlier statements, and admits uncertainty about her recollections, indicating an unstable and divided subjectivity. Early in the novel, she remarks, "I'm not sure how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to be careful about what we said" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 4). This hesitation reflects Lacan's notion of the split subject, where the speaking "I" is never fully aligned with the self being described. Kathy's identity exists only through narration within language, situating her firmly within the Symbolic order and preventing access to any coherent or unified sense of self.

Moreover, Kathy's repeated return to Hailsham functions as an unconscious attempt to repair this fragmentation. She confesses, "The memories I value most, I don't ever see myself letting go of" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 60), yet the act of remembering paradoxically intensifies her anxiety rather than resolving it. From a Lacanian perspective, this compulsive remembrance reflects desire structured by lack, as Kathy seeks wholeness in a past that never truly offered it. The fragmented narrative structure thus mirrors the psychic fragmentation of the postmodern subject.

The Mirror Stage and Institutional Misrecognition

Lacan's mirror stage, in which the subject forms an illusory sense of coherence through identification with an external image, is crucial to understanding the clones' early identity formation at Hailsham. The students are encouraged to believe that their artwork expresses an authentic inner self, fostering a false sense of individuality. Kathy recalls, "We all knew it was important to produce good art, because that was how you proved you had a soul" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 16). This belief exemplifies Lacanian misrecognition, as the clones identify with an image of wholeness that is externally constructed and ideologically motivated.

This illusion collapses later when Miss Emily reveals the true purpose behind the art program: "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 255). The revelation exposes the violence inherent in the mirror stage: what appeared as recognition was, in fact, surveillance. The resulting anxiety stems from the realization that the self was never autonomous but always already shaped by institutional desire. This moment underscores postmodern anxiety as epistemological and ontological, rooted in the collapse of trusted narratives of selfhood.

The Symbolic Order, Language, and Psychic Regulation

The Symbolic order in *Never Let Me Go* operates most visibly through euphemistic language that normalizes death and suppresses resistance. Terms such as “donation,” “carer,” and “completion” function to erase the brutality of organ harvesting. Kathy observes with unsettling calm, “It’s not like they come at you and force you on the table” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 198), demonstrating how deeply she has internalized the Symbolic codes governing her existence. Language here does not merely describe reality; it produces compliant subjects.

This internalization aligns with Lacan’s assertion that the Symbolic order structures subjectivity itself. The clones’ inability to articulate anger or injustice reflects their psychic entrapment. As Ruth admits, “We’re all afraid of things we don’t talk about” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 73), silence becomes a mechanism of repression. Postmodern anxiety thus emerges not through overt panic but through emotional numbness and resignation, signaling the success of symbolic domination.

Desire, Lack, and the Fantasy of Deferral

The fantasy of “deferrals” represents the most explicit articulation of Lacanian desire in the novel. Kathy and Tommy’s hope that love might postpone their fate demonstrates desire’s orientation toward an impossible object. Tommy clings to this fantasy, insisting, “If we’re really in love, we might stand a chance” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 220). Lacan conceptualizes desire as endlessly deferred, and this narrative literalizes that principle by tying survival to emotional authenticity.

The shattering of this fantasy occurs during the meeting with Miss Emily and Madame, when the truth is revealed: “There are no deferrals. It was never possible” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 256). This moment marks the intrusion of the Real, where symbolic illusions collapse and the subject confronts the void at the center of existence. Tommy’s breakdown following this encounter exemplifies the traumatic force of the Real, as he screams in a field, unable to articulate his loss within language (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 274). Postmodern anxiety here is existential, emerging from the realization that desire can never be fulfilled.

Acceptance, Melancholia, and the Postmodern Condition

The novel concludes not with rebellion but with melancholic acceptance, reinforcing the Lacanian claim that subjects remain bound to the Symbolic order. Kathy’s final reflection “I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 288) encapsulates postmodern anxiety as quiet resignation. Her compliance does not indicate peace but rather the exhaustion of desire and the impossibility of escape.

This subdued ending challenges traditional dystopian expectations and instead presents fragmentation as a permanent condition. The self remains divided, desire remains unfulfilled, and anxiety persists as a structural feature of postmodern subjectivity. Through a Lacanian lens, *Never Let Me Go* reveals that the fragmented self is not an anomaly but the defining condition of life within late-modern symbolic systems.

Across these themes, Ishiguro’s novel constructs identity as fragmented, desire as endlessly deferred, and anxiety as an inescapable psychic reality. Lacanian psychoanalysis allows these elements to be understood not as individual failings but as consequences of subject formation within language, ideology, and institutional power. The novel thus offers a profound meditation on the postmodern condition, where the self exists.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* reveals that the novel constructs the postmodern subject as fundamentally fragmented, anxious, and constrained by symbolic structures. Through a

Lacanian lens, the findings demonstrate that fragmentation is not incidental but central to the narrative, with anxiety emerging as a psychological response to the impossibility of achieving wholeness or satisfying desire. The characters' experiences reflect the split subject (Lacan, 2006/1977), whose identity is perpetually mediated by language, social institutions, and unconscious processes. Kathy H.'s fragmented narration, punctuated by hesitant recollections and temporal disjunctions, embodies this instability. Her attempts to reconstruct the past highlight the tension between the conscious desire for coherence and the unconscious impossibility of attaining it. This finding aligns with Lacan's claim that subjectivity is formed through misrecognition, and that the "I" is always divided and incomplete.

The study further finds that the clones' identities are constructed through institutional misrecognition and symbolic control, which intensifies postmodern anxiety. Hailsham's art-based pedagogy encourages the students to believe that their artwork expresses an inner self, yet this belief is ultimately revealed as a manipulative device designed to justify institutional exploitation. This aligns with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, in which the subject misidentifies with an image of wholeness that is external and ideological (Lacan, 2006/1949). Miss Emily's revelation that art was monitored to assess "souls" exposes the clones' misrecognition and underscores the structural nature of their anxiety: it is generated not by individual pathology but by a symbolic system that enforces compliance while promising autonomy (Ishiguro, 2005, pp. 16, 255).

A significant finding of the study is the pervasive role of desire and lack in shaping the clones' psychological reality. The fantasy of deferrals, centered on the hope that romantic love might postpone organ donations, illustrates Lacan's notion of desire as inherently unattainable. Tommy's emotional outbursts and subsequent despair following the denial of deferrals exemplify the traumatic encounter with the Real, where symbolic illusions collapse and the subject confronts the void of unfulfilled desire (Ishiguro, 2005, pp. 220, 256, 274). This highlights how postmodern anxiety in the novel is existential rather than circumstantial: it emerges from structural impossibilities of self-realization within both institutional and symbolic constraints.

The findings also indicate that Ishiguro's narrative style; subdued, melancholic, and reflective mirrors the psychological condition of the clones and reinforces postmodern themes of resignation. Kathy's final acceptance of her fate, expressed in her quiet observation and compliance (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 288), demonstrates that postmodern anxiety is not manifested through dramatic revolt but through internalized limitation. Lacanian theory explains this as the subject's inescapable positioning within the Symbolic order, where agency is constrained and desire perpetually deferred (Lacan, 2006/1977). The novel thus presents fragmentation and anxiety not as anomalies but as inherent characteristics of postmodern subjectivity.

The analysis further reveals an intricate interplay between memory, identity, and temporality, reinforcing the fragmented nature of the self. Kathy's persistent recollection of Hailsham, punctuated by uncertainties and selective omissions, demonstrates how memory functions as both a source of selfhood and an instrument of psychic instability (Ishiguro, 2005, pp. 4, 60). This finding corroborates Lacanian assertions that the subject is constituted through language and memory but can never achieve complete self-coherence due to the structural lack at its core. The clones' reliance on memory as a stabilizing mechanism thus ironically underscores their fragmented existence and sustained postmodern anxiety.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that *Never Let Me Go* exemplifies the postmodern condition of the fragmented self: identity is shaped by institutional and symbolic forces, desire remains structurally unattainable, and anxiety is a constant psychological feature. By employing Lacanian psychoanalysis, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how Ishiguro's narrative constructs subjectivity, illustrating that fragmentation and anxiety are not merely personal or moral dilemmas but reflections of systemic and structural determinants of selfhood. Moreover, the analysis contributes to contemporary literary

scholarship by linking postmodern narrative techniques—such as non-linear chronology, unreliable narration, and thematic repetition—to underlying psychoanalytic mechanisms of fragmentation, misrecognition, and desire.

In short, the findings indicate that postmodern anxiety and the fragmented self are inextricably linked in Ishiguro's novel. Lacanian psychoanalysis allows for an interpretation that moves beyond surface-level character study, revealing how language, memory, and institutional discourse produce a persistent psychic tension. The novel's thematic and narrative strategies thus serve as literary articulations of Lacan's theoretical propositions, offering a profound exploration of how postmodernity shapes human subjectivity and internal experience.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, it can be said that *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro offers a profound meditation on the fractured constitution of the self within a postmodern and biopolitical framework. Through a Lacanian lens grounded in the theories of Jacques Lacan, the novel reveals subjectivity as inherently divided, shaped by language, institutional authority, and the perpetual condition of lack. Kathy H.'s retrospective narration exposes a consciousness structured by repression, deferred desire, and the impossibility of attaining wholeness, thereby exemplifying Lacan's notion of the split subject.

The clones' socialization within Hailsham demonstrates the powerful operation of the Symbolic Order, which naturalizes hierarchy and conditions individuals to internalize their own marginalization. Their persistent longing for "deferrals" and recognition reflects the pursuit of the unattainable *objet petit a*, reinforcing the idea that desire is sustained precisely through its deferral. Moreover, the clones' quiet acceptance of their predetermined fate signals a confrontation with the Real—an encounter that destabilizes illusions of autonomy and exposes the limits of human agency.

Ultimately, this study underscores how Ishiguro interrogates modern assumptions of identity, freedom, and authenticity. By portraying characters who exist in a liminal space between humanity and commodification, the novel articulates a distinct form of postmodern anxiety rooted in ontological uncertainty and existential precarity. A Lacanian reading thus illuminates the novel's deeper critique of fragmented subjectivity in a posthuman world, where the self remains perpetually incomplete and haunted by absence.

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