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The Missing Child: Viewing Kathy’s Reproductivity and Sexuality through the Judy Bridgewater Tape

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to decode the ‘biocapitalist’ regime that Kazuo Ishiguro showcases in his book, Never Let Me Go. By exploring the motif of the Judy Bridgewater tape, I will attempt to portray Kathy’s sex drive as a conditioned response of the biopolitical system. I will first showcase the Judy Bridgewater tape as reproductive tokenism. Subsequently, I will explore Kathy’s attachment to it in tandem with her sexuality. Moreover, I will extrapolate the clones’ sex drive as a humanizing tendency that is also a conditioned and desired response generated by the system that incorporates them. Using critical theory, I will analyse heteronormative narrative and Kathy’s urge to reproduce. Specifically, through Engel’s work and contemporary Marxist theory ranging from feminine reproductive labour to social reproduction, I will enumerate the relationships in the cottages and at Hailsham as a heteronormative force. My main aim is to weed out how Ishiguro has embedded a clever narrative on the significance of reproductive force in a system that gives birth to clones only for harvesting organs.

Keywords: Biopolitics; Reproductive labour; heteronormativity.
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Introduction

The picture above is the cover of the fictive album Songs After Dark by the elusive singer Judy Bridgewater. It first made its appearance in chapter six of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go and was later composed as the soundtrack for the movie. The cover, as Kathy describes it represents a woman smoking with a flirty gaze directed at the beholder. It is due to the smoking that Kathy kept it hidden and was fiercely possessive of the tape. As it became a symbol of endearment to Kathy, it’s interesting to deconstruct its significance within the narrative of Ishiguro’s biopolitical state that clearly runs on the principle of ‘make live’ and ‘let die’ (Foucault 241). This will be the focus of my essay. I am going to trace the significance of reproductive labour and futurism in Never Let Me Go using the tape as a lens. In order to establish these themes, I will first deconstruct the symbolization of the tape and then explore how this symbolic acquires different meanings through its interactions with sexuality of the clones and their search for models. To truly understand its importance as the symbolic currency driving reproductive force within the text, it’s important to first establish the tape as a token of reproduction.

The Tape as a symbol of Reproduction

Never Let Me Go experiences its titular moment in a melancholic scene depicting young Kathy’s desire to reproduce. Kathy narrates that it was just ‘this one song’ which made
the tape so special to her (Ishiguro 69). The song was so important that she always kept the tape ‘wound to just that spot’ so she could hear it whenever she played the tape (Ishiguro 69). As the lyrics ‘Baby, baby, never let me go’ played on a loop, Kathy would imagine a woman who ‘couldn’t have babies, who’d really, really wanted them all her life’ (Ishiguro 70). Since clones didn’t have the capability to reproduce, this fictive woman is a clear representation of Kathy’s failed expectations from her own body. These expectations inform her subsequent actions as Kathy continues her imaginary narrative by noting the occurrence of a miracle due to which the woman becomes successful in giving birth. ‘She holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: “Baby, never let me go” partly because she’s so happy’ but mostly because of her fear of the baby being taken away from her due to death (Ishiguro 70). This scene remains the most standout representation of Kathy’s internalised desire to procreate. Its significant to note that in the fictive lyrics, she is addressing the baby to never let her go, thereby, putting this imaginary baby in the position of power and highlighting her lack of it thereof. Further, as she held ‘an imaginary baby to her chest’, she invokes the fear of not just losing her baby but of the baby leaving her behind. Taking this further, it can be interpreted that her fear of loss interacts with her fear of losing her baby to invoke her fear of her death and in these fears is founded her will to survive. The tape, then, becomes a symbol of survival and the song, she always kept the tape wound to, becomes a way for her to hold onto that bleak hope of life.

Thus, the tape becomes a symbol of her desire to reproduce but also represents the close relationship between giving birth and her desire to survive. The missing child then becomes ‘the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value’ (Edelman 4). It shows ‘that figural child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitles to claim full rights to its full share in the nation’s good’ (Edelman 11). As Edelman points out, the child in a biopower state governed economy, represents a stake in the future and the regenerative currency required of labour power. Expanding this onto the figure of Kathy, her invoking the lyrics ‘never let me go’ is a clear chant to the future to not let her die; it is an anguished cry for survival as she realises that her life ‘relies directly on reproductivity as its primary motor’ (Vora 7). Reproduction, then, gains a strong narrative hold over the text in terms of two important implications. First, it is a magnified response for survival. By lending herself a temporality and an extended future that she will never have, she is associating futurity with fertility, thereby adding to the importance that making life regulates within Ishiguro’s bioeconomic world of letting die. Second, in locating this futurity, she highlights a resistance generated from within the system.
This is particularly noticeable when Madame points out ‘I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain’ (Ishiguro 267). Madame brings to equivalence the figure of the child with the old world that was the kind Hailsham and it was the emergence of a state that governed ‘problems of reproduction, the birth rate’ that took away this kindness (Foucault 244).

By connecting Kathy’s maternal body with the ‘old world’, Ishiguro has managed to hit two birds with one stone. On the one hand, he has managed to represent that even when Kathy was trying to resist the system, she was enwrapped within another older system, that encapsulated within Hailsham’s walls. Therefore, her body was never really her own. On the other hand, by associating her maternal body with the closed down Hailsham, he is taking away the hope to escape from death and driving home the rude awakening that Kathy despite her ardent desires can never reproduce. Further, through the figure of Madame as the helpless onlooker, he has also managed to highlight the disillusioned and naïve thinking of the sheltered Kathy who wants to escape the system but can never do so as she is unaware of her own infertility. Therefore, Ishiguro in his projection of Hailsham’s world system onto Kathy’s maternal body has managed to locate not only Kathy’s pressure on her own body but also how this pressure is a desired, conditioned response from the subject under the biopolitical, capitalist state. This is something that theorist Alan Sears has brought to attention. According to him, capitalism is dependent on the regenerative capacity of human labour to ‘replace workers who have died or withdrawn from the active workforce’ (Sears 180). Reproduction ‘had to be internalized, brought within the officially managed domain of the capitalist order’ (Fraser 301). This internalization led to the association of the body of the subject with the expectation of reproductive futurity. This developed as a condition and ‘the name political “capital” that those children will thus become’ (Edelman 112). Since Kathy internalised this conditioned expectation, her yearning for prolonged longevity asserted itself onto her body and it became wrapped within labour dependent system, thereby showing that the world still asserted control onto her body. However, Ishiguro takes this bleak hope away from her in her body being equivocated to a system that no longer exists. This loss becomes more pronounced when the tape is stolen away from Kathy.

Sexuality and Ishiguro’s ‘biocapitalist’ system

While her attainment of the tape expressed her resistance from submitting to the system, its loss became a symbol of Kathy’s right to her own life being snatched away from
her. Further to this, she and Tommy attempted to look for that same album during their trip to Norfolk. While, they do manage to find a tape by Judy Bridgewater it was not the same album and the song *Never Let Me Go* is lost to her forever just like her missing desired child has let her go. Moreover, Norfolk being labelled their ‘lost corner of the world’ magnifies this loss. (Ishiguro 66) Therefore, the tape became a symbolic register of reproduction and survival for Kathy. Its loss, then, took away the tokenism of hope and further imposed a constriction onto the body of the clone. ‘If there is a baby, there is a future, a redemption’ (Edelman 13). However, Kathy’s failure to reproduce is recounted as the failure to regenerate the labour capacity of the system, rendering her prolonged survival useless to it. Since ‘there is no baby and, in consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning’ (Edelman 13).

As Edelman points out, there is a translation of blame that is shifted onto sexuality which has no meaning without reproductivity. This link between sex and birth has imposed itself onto the lives of the clones. A clear representation of this is Kathy being labelled the ‘natural successor’ to Tommy’s affections (Ishiguro 99). Considering that this was at the time of their lives when they were first becoming acquainted with their newly developed desires, this clever linguistic expression naturalizes the connection between reproduction and sex. Thus, sex was tied with procreation within Kathy’s life since she first started learning about her sexual desires. Sex, then, becomes the life force regulating the narrative of reproduction enwombed within the text. The association of ‘sexuality to the reproduction of labour power has meant that heterosexuality has been imposed’ onto the clones ‘as the only acceptable sexual behaviour’ (Federici 24).

Heteronormativity imposes and wraps itself onto the lives of the clones and controls their sexualities. This can be seen when Miss Laura talks to them about what sex means to humans. ‘And the reason it meant so much was because the people out there were different’ from clones because ‘they could have babies from sex. That was why it was so important to them’ (Ishiguro 82). As sex becomes more precious to the humans in relation to its reproductive functionality, the sex drive of the clone increases as ‘sex is work’ and ‘a duty’ (Federici 24). It is a heteronormative duty for them to unconsciously resist systemic death and imposes itself onto their lives to the extent that Kathy labels sex at the cottages as ‘functional’ (Ishiguro 125). It becomes more material and procedural than just pleasurable and is shown as a way to tame their intense sex drive. This becomes clearer when Kathy narrates ‘that half the time you weren’t sure if you were doing it with a boy or all that stuff’
The Missing Child: viewing Kathy’s reproductivity and sexuality through the Judy Bridgewater Tape

(Ishiguro 125). The addition of ‘all that stuff’ at the end of the sentence further pushes it toward the conceptual notion of a necessity that needed to be taken care of, devoid of emotional attachment.

At the same time, it is important to note that on the one hand, while the guardians promoted sex as healthy, they also monitored and tried to stop it. This close guarding of students’ sexual activities is questioned by Kathy and it is Tommy’s response that further establishes sex between clones as ‘fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments’ (Edelman 13). Tommy explains that the guardians ‘still felt uneasy’ about their sex drive ‘because deep down they couldn’t quite believe we couldn’t end up with babies’ (Ishiguro 82). As the guardians are unable to separate sex from birth, the clones’ sexual activities, by extension become an aberration, a means with no end because the end goal is prescribed in making life to not ‘let die’.

Despite this label of anomaly, heteronormativity retains itself as the only recognised system of sexuality within the domain. It is particularly interesting to read this through the rumour that couples who could prove that they were really in love were given deferrals. However, to ‘qualify’, the clones had to be ‘a boy and a girl’ who ‘were in love with each other, really’ (Ishiguro 226,151). If birth was not possible, then why was this push for heteronormativity regulated by the students themselves? One of the explanations for this is that guardians viewed their sexual drive as an aberration already, then to fall under the label of ‘umbrella sex’ would mean to fall further under this anomalous category, which they tried to resist.¹ Therefore, it also held a deeper implication within systemic control. ‘Heteronormativity naturalizes and eternalizes culturally and historically specific forms of sexuality’ framing it as ‘human nature’ (Sears 172). As heterosexuality becomes intertwined with ‘human nature’, Kathy’s uncontrollable sexual desire becomes a force that humanizes her and it is a way for her to naturalize her own body so someday the society could see her as human. However, it also exists as a constant reminder of her dehumanization. This becomes clear when Miss Emily points out that despite retaining so many similarities with humans ‘there would always be a barrier against seeing’ the clones ‘as properly human’ (Ishiguro 258). This barrier would always exist in the form of abnormal and meaningless sex.

¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, Never Let Me Go, p.94.

[Ishiguro doesn’t give a lot of instances regarding homophobia, however on this page he does acknowledge that gay sex was something that the students at Hailsham were confused about. This homophobic tendency further lends to the no child, no future condition for meaningless sexuality.]
Therefore, her sex drive is closely tied in with her want to be human so she could be allowed to live.

The sexuality of the clones then becomes a projective medium of ‘the rise of’ “bio-power” that imbibed “disciplines of the body” with “the regulation of populations” to form “the entire political technology of life” (Sears 173). Thus, in trying to humanize herself, Kathy’s acknowledgement of her unnaturally hyperactive sex drive sets a resistance against the constraining boundaries of the system. This humanizing force of resistance, however, further ties her into the system as what sets her apart is her shame in her intense sexual drive, something she asks Ruth about because it feels unnatural and shameful to her. This shame is a consequence of Kathy’s awareness of sex being abnormal and meaningless for the clones. As she attempts to break the system, it therefore further captures her not just through her response to her own sexuality but by what her response configures. These complex narrative signals can be traced through the Judy Bridgewater tape.

### Kathy’s sex drive and the Judy Bridgewater Tape

As has already been established, the tape operates as a reproductive token and represents her ardent wish to survive and procreate. However, it also remains hidden. Kathy keeps the tape a secret from everybody and as something that is so intensely valuable to her, she makes sure to just be by herself when she is playing the tape. While on the one hand this invokes her fear of the tape being taken away, its loss being kept a secret complicates meanings. The loss of the tape meant her loss of hope to escape from the system and as there was no standout token of her desire to reproduce, there was nothing that highlighted her resistance and set her apart from the other clones. Therefore, Kathy keeps the loss hidden to falsify another hope of it being found which also falls through. In a similar strand of thought, her sex drive highlighted her resistance but was also a conditioned response that was generated from within the system. To further understand this, it is important to establish the relationship between Kathy’s sex drive and the Judy Bridgewater tape.

Particularly visible in chapter sixteen, when Ruth and Kathy are talking about their intimate experiences, ‘Ruth was running a finger up and down the cassettes stacked in little piles’ ‘and then the Judy Bridgewater tape was in her hands’ (Ishiguro 188). Ishiguro cleverly places the narrative of the tape in midst of conversations about sex. Further, by writing about Ruth touching the tape, he has managed to sexualise the narrative of the tape. This sexualisation becomes more pronounced through various other instances in the text. The
trip to Norfolk is a major turning point within this narrative. Kathy and Tommy separate from the group to look for Kathy’s tape and find a substitute. Subsequently, Kathy hides the tape from Ruth and in this hiding, it becomes ‘a guilty secret’ (Ishiguro 182). This concealment further ties it in with the concealment and shame regarding her sex drive. Hence the two narratives become strongly linked together as mediums of resistance against the system that are kept hidden. Moreover, the fictive nature of the original Judy Bridgewater tape makes its cover an important point of analysis. Kathy’s reading that the woman on the cover ‘might be flirting’ perfectly fits its sexualised narrative. Therefore, its concealment equates this token to her sex drive. Since they both become associated in such a manner, sex and reproduction come to operate as instruments of humanization and the cassette by extension, becomes a symbol of Kathy’s humanity.

Further, the trip to Norfolk can also be read as an emblematic mode of interaction for this narrative as the talk of deferrals comes up as the veterans try to convince Ruth and Tommy to apply for them. It is during this trip to Norfolk, that this myth about deferrals is more openly discussed. In fact, it is during this trip that Ishiguro builds up the various forms of resistance on the part of the clones to submit to death. While, Ruth talks about the qualifying couple, Tommy talks to Kathy about his ‘imaginary animals’. The trip to Norfolk, then, becomes an emblem of resistance and hope for deferrals. This myth about the deferrals further pushes the direction of heteronormativity and ties in the three main themes being explored in this essay. As it was on this trip that Kathy’s last hope of finding the Judy Bridgewater tape failed, its loss finally hit home and witnessed through its nostalgic substitute, this loss aligned with her loss of child, her humanity and her future.

This formulation of building up hope and taking it away operates as a cleverly constructed technique within the text. It functions as the direct reflection of the inescapability from the tightly constrained biopolitical system. This is observable when the information behind the deferrals turns out to be a rumour and the expectation from Kathy and Tommy’s heterosexual love falls through. The developing circumlocution thus becomes more intertwined with the themes of reproductivity and heteronormativity. To escape the system, Kathy developed a strategy of resistance in her want for procreation. However, this strategy

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2 Kazuo Ishiguro, p.176.

[These imaginary animals and the way Tommy often thinks about them as small and need to be handled carefully could become an interesting point in likening works of art in this text to creations of non-value. They become like the children they will never have and like his love with Kathy couldn’t save him, they couldn’t either. There then exists a conflict between creations of value and non-value within the biocapitalist system.]
turns out to be a conditioned response from within the system and she becomes further entrapped within it when her hopes fail. Confined to this system of no escape, Kathy tries to push back as “life itself appears only as a means to life” (Sears 183). Viewed as a conditioned response, the system pushes back against her will to survive.

Ishiguro’s representation of the family as an economic unit

As Kathy’s mediums of resistance turn out to be the instruments of the state in itself, further value is added to heterosexuality within the confines of family as a microeconomic unit of production of labour power. Friedrich Engels points out that history has set marriages “between man and woman for the propagation of children” (Engels 36). Ishiguro represents the family as a function and a kin-based unit of the system when Kathy observes that ‘the veteran couples never did anything showy in public, going about in a sensible sort of way, like a mother and father might do in a normal family’ (Ishiguro 118). While this might reflect Kathy’s expectations from her relationship with the veterans, it becomes an interesting depiction of social reproduction within the confines of heteronormative domestic roles. Further, she closely ties in the relation between sex and family when she links them with the ability to control their sexual needs in front of the other clones like a mother and father would. Moreover, in her normalizing the traditional family layout she is recognising that ‘the most historically enduring site for the reproduction of labour power is of course the kin-based family unit’ (Bhattacharya 73). Further, by assigning them with reproductive roles that they cannot fulfil, Kathy is trying to envision an outside that doesn’t exist. The trifecta connection of sex, reproduction and family roles within the narrative drives Kathy to try and understand both her creation and her need for creation.

The epitome of this connection is her searching for her ‘possible’ within ‘Steve’s mags’ (Ishiguro 131, 178). This search for the creator collides with sex as her mechanism of resistance. To understand this further, it can be viewed in conjunction with the inverse relationship that the creators and the donors share. The models are the technical necessity that brought them into this world and got to survive as their production had value in birth. Their future was granted to them by the state because of the contribution of life force within the system. This life force, thereby ‘functions to siphon the value it produces into capital’ (Vora 31). A further assertion of this can be traced when Kathy talks about the possibility of seeing one’s future on encountering the model. This myth develops an interesting point of intersection. Drawing up a whole circle, Kathy’s search for her creator is to understand her
ardent need for creation in reproductive futurism. The models create their clones for organ donations. However, the clones wish to be creators, to reproduce which is not in their biological physiognomy. By extension then, Kathy wishes to prolong her survival by creating something that the system views as utility. However, as they ‘completed’ in death, the system attached utility in their being snatched away (Ishiguro 274). This inverse relationship between the creator and the creation then can be seen as defining the importance of birth in a system that inflicts death. Further, as the substitute Judy Bridgewater tape was found on the trip to search for Ruth’s model, it bears witness to this search and the inverse relationship between birth and death.

Conclusion

Viewing this in conjunction with the Judy Bridgewater tape, Never Let Me Go becomes an assertive cry to hold onto a reproductive legacy which will determine their futurity. These narratives become merged through the last scene in the text when Kathy visits the ‘lost corner of the world’ where everything she lost could be found. Post Tommy’s death, Norfolk transitions into the corner of the world where she lost her hope of finding ‘Never Let Me Go’ and through it, her hope of her maternal, humanized body and her hope of staying alive in the system of death. Kazuo Ishiguro cleverly uses the symbol of the cassette tape to construct various different meanings. Through this essay, I have explored how it can be viewed as a token of her hope to reproduce, her sex drive, her humanity and her want of a traditional family. Ultimately in its loss, it becomes a symbol of the missing child that could have saved her if only the tape had never let her go.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Peter Howell. ‘thestar.com’.

Works Cited:


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