

Traumatic Memories in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

GONG Yan-ling

Wuhan University of Technology, Hubei Wuhan, China, 430070

Kazuo Ishiguro, a renowned Japanese-British writer, is the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The novel *Never Let Me Go* is a science fiction about human cloning and tells the tragic experience of cloning groups. Kathy, a narrator and protagonist in the story, wrote memories of individual clones and collective clones trauma. She not only witnessed various individual traumas of herself and her friends, but also expressed the cultural trauma of the clones through writing. From the perspective of trauma theory, it can be found that traumatic memories can vent and relieve personal pain, construct collective cultural trauma, and then convey individual's responsibility for the collective disaster.

Keywords: *Never Let Me Go*, cloning groups, individual trauma, collective cultural trauma

Introduction

The novel *Never Let Me Go* is a science fiction by Kazuo Ishiguro published in 2005. It is written in the first-person narration, with Kathy as the narrator. It is a story about clones, guardians and sponsors. There are mainly 3 protagonists, including Kathy, Ruth and Tommy, who all grow up in Hailsham, a fictional boarding school in England. It's a strange and isolated school whose "students" with no parents, no relatives and even no surnames. The truth is that those "students" are all clones and they are raised to donate their organs for curing the normal people in their future. After two or three organ donations, they will end their lives.

This essay will discuss the trauma narrative in the novel, analyze the traumatic experience and memories of the protagonist Kathy on the individual and the clones in the anti-utopia society, and explore the meaning of recording trauma.

Individual Trauma in Kathy's Memories

The word "trauma" derives from the Greek words for "wound", which means "a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope" (Garland, 1998, p. 9). In the beginning, it means the physical injury, later extends to psychological treatment. Freud's research on trauma lay a solid foundation for the later studies about trauma. He describes trauma as a response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, imagination, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2010), people often unconsciously repress their painful experiences or deep memories. Repression becomes an important factor in the operation of the unconscious. Through observation of repression among different patients, he finds out that people are actually

unaware of their burying memories or traumatic experiences (Freud, 1989, p. 58). The origin of the contemporary trauma studies can be tracked back to 1980. American Psychological Association first added the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into the book *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Disorder III*. Later, the book gave an interpretation of trauma as “the traumatic event has to be of considerable severity presenting the treat to one’s life or that of others, involve actual death or serious injury or threaten to one’s physical integrity. It can either be experienced or witnessed by the individual” (*Diagnostic*, 1994, p. 424).

It can be seen that there is more than one form of having trauma. It can be a direct victim of a traumatic experience or an indirect victim of witnessing others being traumatized. As a narrator, Kathy has been a “carer” for 12 years, traveling between various medical institutions every day, witnessing the process of countless cloned people’s organs being cut by scalpels and tragically dying on the operating table. This is where she became an indirect victim. She said, “I get to see a lot as a carer. An awful lot” (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 226). In fact, being a witness of the violence and death is the root of her trauma. Kathy even witnessed the painful struggle of her friend Ruth before her death:

It was like she was willing her eyes to see right inside herself, so she could patrol and marshal all the better the separate areas of pain in her body—the way, maybe, an anxious carer might rush between three or four ailing donors in different parts of the country.....But just once, as she was twisting herself in a way that seemed scarily unnatural, and I was on the verge of calling the nurses for more painkillers.....It was one of those little islands of lucidity donors sometimes get to in the midst of their ghastly battles (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 210)

This is the only place in the novel that directly involves the tragic death of a cloned. A few simple descriptions hint to us the violent characteristics of organ donation and the immense suffering of the dead. For Kathy, this means serious psychological trauma.

Another major trauma that Kathy suffered came from the death of Tommy, the beloved of her life. They are like-minded, attracted to each other, and helped and supported each other when they were children. What the two have in common is that they are both curious to find out the truth about what happened in Hailsham. They are like detectives, paying attention to the words and deeds of their guardians, hoping to find out the truth about their destiny from the “clues” left by them. Later, with the joint efforts, they figured out the facts related to organ donation. It can be said that they are not only friends, lovers, but also comrades-in-arms. But they couldn’t get together. Before he died, Tommy used the turbulent river as a metaphor for the tragic love between them. After Ruth and Tommy’s death, Kathy only said, “I lost Ruth, and then I lost Tommy, but I will not lose my memory of them” (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 286). Behind the objective and brief words is the pain that is beyond words in any language. It can be said that in front of the huge trauma, Kathy showed a state of dissociation—emotional insensitivity and linguistic weakness—thus separating the self from the terrifying and painful reality.

Collective Trauma of the Clones

In the novel, Kathy, Ruth and Tommy are traumatic carriers. They are individuals who bear the collective trauma of clones directly. As Erikson said, collective trauma is a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing of community” (Erikson, 1995, p. 187). A collective trauma is a traumatic psychological effect shared by a group of people of any size, up to and

including an entire society. Traumatic events are witnessed by an entire society which can stir up collective sentiment, which often result in a changing of social culture and mass actions. The collective trauma is slowly embedded in the consciousness of those who suffer it. Therefore, it doesn't have the kind of suddenness that usually comes from personal trauma, but it's still a form of shock. Although the clones show different individual trauma symptoms, they bear the common collective trauma in bearing the responsibility of organ donation and suffering the fear of death.

In the novel, the collective trauma of Kathy and other clones come from their identity anxiety, which is their source of psychological trauma. The clones are always anxious about their uncertainly identity and status. Kathy recalled the process of her awareness of self-identification and the feeling about being transformed into "the other" brought about by an encounter with one of the normal members of human society, the Madame. In Hailsham, in order to verify Ruth's view that "she is scared of us", Kathy and her friends suddenly sauntered out to Madame and observed her reaction: she just froze and waited for us to pass by. She didn't shriek, or even let out a gasp. But we were all so keenly turned in to picking up her response..... And I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 33). Kathy realized that Madamewas indeed afraid of them, as if a person was afraid of spiders. Years later, Kathy still remembered this situation, calling it "the cold moment".

We can use Lacan's mirror image theory to interpret the process by which Kathy identified herself with "the other" under Madame's gaze and reaction. Lacan believes that the so-called mirror image is not limited to real mirrors, but also includes the eyes of others around them and their reactions to themselves. Individuals' sense of identity in the process of growing up has undergone different mirror reflections, including interaction with others around it. In the novel, Madame's gaze and reaction provide Kathy with a mirror image to determine her identity. From the mirror image of Madam's fear, rejected, and disgust, she saw a self-image that frightened members of mainstream society: the ugly, inferior, and terrifying other. Later, when meeting with Miss Emily, Kathy's status as an inferior other was strengthened. Miss Emily spoke frankly to Kathy and Tommy: "We are all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost everyday I was at Hailsham" (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 240).

In short, the discrimination from the eyes and words of normal people make clones know that they are "the other", are always under the gaze of others, and are treated abnormally. This is the collective trauma from the clones, but they have no reason or ability to resist.

Cultural Trauma: Declaration of the Clones' Painful Experience

After 1980, trauma theory is expanded to more fields. Cultural trauma is built on this atmosphere. American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander gives his definition of cultural trauma. He argues that traumas occur when individuals and groups feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever, and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). In his view, cultural trauma is a painful experience which have negative effect on the future of individual and collective. It is based on its group dimension, which is a kind of collective injury activity, involving the collective identity.

Obviously, the painful experience in the novel belongs not only to Kathy, but also to the entire cloned people—they are exploited and slaughtered as a whole. Clones are thirsty for life and hope to delay the time of organ donation; they have a longing for the future and hope to realize their professional ideals like normal people. However, given destiny, shortened life, rejected future and dreams, and slaughtered naked reality, all these make them both painful and powerless to resist, and they can only self-degrade and bear their fate in silence. The writing of the experience of the clones cultural trauma in the novel is obvious.

In Alexander's view, cultural trauma does not form spontaneously. Its uniqueness lies in the conscious cultural construction process, that is, it is a specific writing of specific experience, which is self-conscious and reflective. The pain of individuals and clones can only rise to cultural trauma through conscious reflection and the construction of cultural meaning. So, in the novel, does the clones consciously realize their pain, reflect on and reproduce it, and finally construct it as a collective cultural trauma? The answer is yes.

In the novel, as Kathy continues to narrate her own memories, the truth slowly emerges. The truth of the frightening event of organ donation and the power operation involved are gradually revealed: the clones were born under the emergence of science breakthroughs and new methods of curing diseases; they grew up on various organ farms monitored by the government until the body organs mature. In Kathy's memory, she not only showed the clones as the victims of selfish human beings, but also declared the organ donation as the fundamental damage to the clones, thus completing the initial construction and claim of cultural trauma. And when her memoirs were read by many readers, she also completed the dissemination of collective cultural trauma.

Conclusion

In summary, *Never Let Me Go* is Kathy's writing of individual and collective trauma stories. She not only wrote about the indirect and direct trauma suffered by individuals who were both eyewitness and experienter, but also constructed collective cultural trauma through writing. By interpreting the novel as a traumatic narrative, we will discover the significance of Kathy's writing. On the one hand, venting individual trauma through writing can alleviate individual pain and soothe the injured soul. On the other hand, the way of writing breaks the collective silence of the clones and declares the history of the exploitation and violence of marginalized groups, thus constructing the collective cultural trauma and taking the individual responsibility for the collective disaster.

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