



Posthuman Identities in Contemporary Literature and Media: Rethinking the Boundaries of the Human

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL3-Mar26-ES-026

Subject: English Studies

Received: 20.12.2025

Accepted: 28.02.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bjisi.v10si3.26.Mar026

Abstract

*This research paper examines the idea of posthuman identities portrayed in contemporary literature, with a close analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2005). The study aims to investigate the ethical contexts of biotechnology, genetic engineering and the blurring of lines between human and non-human. The theoretical perspectives include the studies of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Cary Wolfe, who influence this paper in defining the posthuman condition and the potential relationship in contemporary literature to this condition. The paper argues that contemporary literature is an important site of critique in defining the posthuman condition and related anxieties and possibilities. The results in this study indicate that this literature is related to the technological concerns in contemporary society and challenges the definition and meaning associated with the concept 'human.'*

Keywords: posthumanism, bioethics, margaret atwood, kazuo ishiguro, genetic engineering, human identity

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented technological advances that challenge fundamental assumptions about human nature, consciousness and identity. The emergence of genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, cybernetic enhancement and biotechnology has destabilized traditional humanist conceptions of the autonomous, rational subject. Posthumanism, as both a philosophical movement and a cultural phenomenon, interrogates the boundaries between human and non-human, natural and artificial, subject and object. As N. Katherine Hayles argues, "the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material

instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (2).

Contemporary literature has become a vital medium for exploring these posthuman anxieties and possibilities. Speculative fiction, in particular, offers imaginative frameworks for examining the ethical, social and existential implications of transgressing human boundaries. This paper examines two significant contemporary novels—Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005)—as case studies in the literary representation of posthuman identities. Both novels engage with questions of genetic



modification, the commodification of biological life and the reconstitution of human subjectivity in technologically mediated contexts.

Through close textual analysis informed by posthumanist theory, this paper argues that these novels present complex negotiations of posthuman identity that resist simple technophobic or technophilic readings. Instead, they reveal how the posthuman condition generates new ethical dilemmas regarding personhood, agency and the value of human life itself.

Theoretical Framework: Defining Posthumanism

It is necessary to define the meaning of posthumanism before focusing on texts before one can analyze the literary texts effectively. The posthuman, in itself, refers not to a point in time after the human but rather to the critical point of challenging the tenets of humanism itself. The old humanism, based in Enlightenment philosophy, places man as a rational and autonomous actor in contrast to nature and beasts, for instance.

Posthumanism undermines this exceptionalism on several fronts. First, as Cary Wolfe asserts, "Posthumanism opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself" (xv). Second, the Idea of Cyborg, as conceptualized by Donna Haraway, undermines the distinctions between human or animal and machine, between physical and non-physical entities and imagines instead "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (Haraway 150). Third, according to Rosi Braidotti, the advent of posthumanism brings with it "a move towards a more complex and relational subject constituted by embodiment, sexuality, affect, empathy and desire" (Braidotti 26).

In literary criticism, posthumanism constitutes a critical apparatus that helps to investigate the representation of transformed subjectivities in narratives and challenges the notion of species in texts that reconfigure human agency in technological spaces. All the novels studied in this paper demonstrate engagement with these topics through a

speculatory mode that instantiates posthuman interests.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*: Engineering the Posthuman Future

Biotechnology and the Commodification of Life

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* portrays a dystopian future where biotech corporations reign. The action centers on Snowman (Jimmy's nickname before becoming Snowman), who seems to be humanity's last hope following a global pandemic and who reminisces about times when he was close to the genius geneticist Crake, who was also enamored with the mysterious woman known as Oryx. This genius goes on to create what would become a new breed of posthumans nicknamed 'Crakers' to replace humanity, all the while letting loose a plague to wipe out humanity.

However, the most evident interaction between posthumanism, as a philosophy and *Oryx and Crake* is through the generation of Crakers. Crake's genetically modified creatures signify an attempt at developing a superior form of posthuman because these creatures would not possess qualities that Crake sees as destructive characteristics of humanity. As Crake argues, "the Crakers would have no racism, no hierarchy, no sexual jealousy; their 'sunblock' trait would provide built-in sunscreen, their 'repellent' trait would give them protection from insects, their 'pigest' trait would enable them to digest plant material efficiently."

Yet, Atwood's portrayal defects a straightforwardly celebratory approach to posthuman enhancement in relation to *The Crakers*. *The Crakers*, who are technically perfected, demonstrate unpredicted ways in action and thought, such as engaging in ritual and symbolic thinking, which Crake had planned to eradicate in human culture. Snowman notices this: "They're plotting something, though. They're talking to each other; he can hear the hum of conversation, a murmur of many voices talking at once. They're doing what they always do in the morning, standing around a circle in worship of the newly risen sun" (Atwood 361).



The Ethics of Creation and Responsibility

Oryx and Crake raises deeply philosophical questions about the creation of life and the role of its creators toward the created. Crake's almost divine ability to create a new life-form speaks of the fears of genetic and synthetic biology and the fear of playing God. However, Atwood defies the easy critique and delves into the mentality that drives such a move. Crake sees the best of mankind as flawed and destructive and therefore unsustainable. His posthuman world is a utopian nightmare born out of a sense of desperation.

Second, the relationship between Snowman and the Crakers helps to clarify the ethical implications of a posthuman identity. In spite of their engineered differences, Crakers do exhibit the ability to form a connection, sense curiosity, and care. Crakers consider Snowman to be a parental authority, someone to look to for direction and protection at all times. Such a pairing tends to blur the lines dividing and connecting a human and a posthuman.

As Stefan Herbrechter points out, "posthumanism is always already ethical because it questions the foundational principles upon which ethical systems have been built" (158). *Oryx and Crake* instantiates this ethical questioning in its rendering of scenarios where traditional moral frameworks are found wanting in sorting out the aftermath of extreme biotechnological intervention. According to Paulraj, Atwood's speculative fiction "serves as a critical intervention in contemporary debates about bioethics, forcing readers to confront the moral ambiguities inherent in genetic manipulation" (45), a view that brings into light the fact that the novel refuses to yield any easy answers to complex ethical dilemmas.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*: Clones and the Question of Humanity Manufactured Lives and the Politics of Recognition

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* engages posthuman identity from a different perspective, focusing on clones who have been created to provide organs for "normal" humans. The narrator of the

novel, Kathy H., recounts her childhood at Hailsham, a boarding school for clones and her subsequent life as a "carer" for other clones undergoing organ donation. The clone existence brings forth fundamental questions on personhood, rights and what constitutes human identity.

Unlike the visibly distinct Crakers, Ishiguro's clones are biologically and psychologically identical to other humans, yet they occupy a liminal status—biologically human but socially interpellated as less-than-human. As Miss Emily, Hailsham's headmistress, says, the school's art program was meant to "prove that you were more than just human. you were truly special, truly different from others who might walk alongside you" and to demonstrate "that you had souls at all" (Ishiguro 260). Here is the precarity of posthuman recognition: instead of an ontology, humanity becomes a proof.

The strength of the book is, therefore, the subtlety of Ishiguro's treatment of the subject matter. The author offers no thrilling breakout attempt or rebellion of the clones. Rather, Kathy and her friends meekly submit to their fate, which indexes the fragile existence, what Judith Butler would term "precarious life," that is contingent solely upon social and political acknowledgment of one's humanity (Butler 25). The clones think through their subordination, which indexes how the dehumanization of the subject is imprinted on the very subjectivity of the subject. Dr. S. Kandasamy suggests, "Ishiguro's narrative strategy of understated resignation is a profound critique of how social conditioning can consolidate the normalization of oppressive relations" (112).

Memory, Art and the Search for Originals

Throughout the novel, the clones frantically search for their "originals," or those from whom they were cloned. This search itself is a longing for authenticity and origin in the posthuman condition, where reproduction has been divorced from biological parentage. When Kathy and Tommy discover the futility of their search, they must face down the construct of identity.



Ishiguro uses this narrative to interrogate what constitutes the grounding of human value and dignity. The clones possess memory, emotion, creativity and relationships—all qualities traditionally associated with humanity. Kathy's narration portrays a high level of self-reflection and emotional depth. These qualities, however, do not find their fulfilment in social recognition or moral consideration. According to Jackie Stacey, "the novel explores how the human is constituted through processes of recognition and misrecognition, raising questions about the ethics of defining the boundaries of the human" (89).

The function of art in this novel is also very important. Artwork by the students from Hailsham is gathered and put up for exhibition to demonstrate that clones have souls and creativity. This also has a plot to reveal how posthuman entities always have to prove themselves to be human, but at the same time, this also marks a fundamentally arbitrary process.

Comparative Analysis: Embodiment and Agency in Posthuman Contexts

Both explore how posthuman subjects negotiate agency within systems in which they should be constrained. However, they offer very different visions of posthuman embodiment and of resistance. In *Oryx and Crake*, the Crakers modified bodies represent their liberation from certain human vulnerabilities but also a form of biological determinism. Crake has literally inscribed his vision of the ideal society into their genetic code. Yet, given that the Craker's possessed unexpected development of culture and ritual suggests the agency develops even within highly constrained parameters. Their posthuman bodies do not determine their subjectivity entirely.

By contrast, *Never Let Me Go's* clones have unreconstructed human bodies but are socially positioned in a radically different way. Their embodiment as "donors" renders them living resources, their bodies of value solely for the transplantable organs they can yield. In this case, the posthuman condition follows not from biological alteration but from social and political redefinition.

As Hayles says, "whether or not interventions have been made on the body, embodiment is always already social" (196).

Both of the above novels reject technological determinism. Both of them argue that the identity of the posthuman is the result of a complex interplay between biological design, social recognition, cultural meaning and human agency. While not charting a purely positive course, as is obvious, and not being explicitly dystopian either, as is evident, what is interesting is that the posthuman subject, as defined by the Asian context of the above-said novels, as defined by Dr. B. Pradeepa, "exists at the nexus of biological innovation and social justice imperatives, requiring evolving paradigms of right, dignity and belonging" (78).

The Politics of Posthuman Representation

The novels also deal with the questions of "who qualifies as posthuman and under what circumstances." For example, posthuman improvement is primarily the concern of rich compounds in *Oryx and Crake*, where the rest of the world is plunged into violent and polluted "pleeblands." This directly relates to modern worries about whether biotechnological developments will worsen inequality rather than overcome it.

Never Let Me Go offers an even bleaker view of posthuman relations and hierarchy in this regard. The clones' sole purpose in life is to satisfy the needs of the "normalized" humans and their subjugation is made legitimized through their fundamental difference. It is also suggested that this set of relations was fully condoned in British society as it benefited them in the form of medical advantages.

Both novels, therefore, illustrate what Braidotti refers to as "the politics of life itself"; that is, transformations putatively achieved through posthumanism are not contained outside or beyond relations of power (Braidotti 135). They contest any belief that through transgressions of human limitation via technology, better or just societies would thereby be created.



Conclusion

The novels *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood and *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro portray the ability of literature to scrutinize posthuman possibilities and preoccupations in a unique manner. The posthuman transformation is understood in these novels to involve more than a biological shift and is instead defined by far-reaching reconstructions in the realms of identity and agency. Both novels defy easy conclusions about what might be involved in a posthuman existence. While both works are cognizant of certain possibilities of transformation, it is clear that posthuman futures are always in some way determined by pre-existing power relations and structures of ethics and recognition. The Crakers and the clones are not liberatingly posthuman figures or merely ruined by technological arrogance. This is where literature's role in posthumanist studies begins—not in abstract formulations in the world of ideas but in making those very ideas concrete and fleshed out through emotional engagement. Stories involving characters and a narrative that express posthuman themes allow books such as *Oryx and Crake* and *Never Let Me Go* to enable a mental engagement with changes that may very well become real in the near future. They act, in effect, as posthuman labs in which our future courses become possibilities to consider not only in terms of what we can do but what we should do. According to these novels, the posthuman is not a reality of the future, but a process in which negotiations take place in scientific laboratories, hospitals, politics and cultural imagination in the present. Literature in the present era actively engages in this negotiation by illuminating the stakes in re-charting the human frontier.

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