

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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### **Posthuman Vulnerability**

Hello everybody, this is our module on post human vulnerability. As we all recognize we live in a time of rapid, unprecedented in fact, technological changes. These changes have impacted the human form, it has impacted other life forms, it has called into question the boundaries of the human body, the boundaries of the species body, it has called into question ontological and all other forms of identities through, for example, the organ transplantation scenario and technology, through cloning, the making of artificial beings such as robots and other “creatures” within quotes. With genetic engineering and genetic manipulation, with cloning technologies, our notion of what is the human and, therefore, our notion of what is the person has been considerably altered. And we will begin here our discussion of post human vulnerability by which we mean not just the vulnerability of post human beings but also the troubling of borders, the blurring of borders between human and non-human which is also a condition of posthumanism and posthuman technologies today.

Then we will begin with our older definition of eco-precarity with a particular slant. Eco-precarity is now also the blurring of species boundaries. New technologies make it possible to alter the nature of species itself. To reiterate, organ transplantation, cloning, hybridized creatures, genetic manipulation, artificial beings and robots are technologies and processes that call into question what it means to be human and what it means to be human as distinct from other life forms.

So what we are looking at here is a very complicated picture, where whatever we have assumed we understand as the human is no longer quite so. We cannot really draw clear cut boundaries between humans and other life forms and as a result the technology is not a question of just engineering it has deeply philosophical implications as to how we see the human and much contemporary literature does address this particular question. What does it mean to be human in the era of rapid technological change? What does it mean to be human when our borders, our bodies, indeed our very identities and our minds overlap with technological processes, other creatures, even alien life forms. So, it is a question of speculation, it is a question of sometimes a fable, it is sometimes a question of a very dystopian world view where who we are, what we are and what the others are. By others

we mean anybody, any life form, which is not quite human and this set of questions is part of our considerations, our debates on post-human vulnerability which contemporary literature such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* but also earlier authors such as Octavia Butler and the now current sensation of course Margaret Atwood's work have pointed to.

So let us explore this a little bit. Post-human vulnerability is, for our purposes today, the vulnerability of clones and artificial beings to exploitation and by exploitation, we mean, exploitation by humans. So, our interest in post-human vulnerability has to do with the conditions, the social context, the politics through which artificial beings and clones are exposed to exploitative processes by humans. The position in the social order which renders them open to exploitation and oppression. So posthuman vulnerability is also the state of being that calls for, that advocates new ethical principles and these ethical principles have to do with slave robots, robot identities and human robot interactions.

So its interest lies not in robots as just technological devices but the position these robots come to occupy or have already come to occupy in, say, the family which would be the subject of Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, in society which would be the subject of something like Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* or, again, to return to the question of the family, his follow up novel, so to speak, *Klara and the Sun*. So, we are not just talking about the vulnerability of the creature, the being but the dynamics of, say, the family or the society where the clones and their interactions with the artificial beings and their interactions with humans produce a certain ethical question. So, to reiterate post-human vulnerability calls for new ethical principles on slave robots, their identities and robot human relations. The clones in *Never Let Me Go* are subject to exploitation because their primary purpose as you know, if you have read the novel is that they will grow up to donate their organs to keep humans alive. They will serve as within quotes “donors”.

That means they were created with the explicit purpose, with the explicit intent that they would serve humans and humanity. That their entire life is devoted to caring for them because they have a particular role and function to fulfill at some point in the future, that they will one day start donating their vital organs and eventually of course die. So, the clones are put into segregated schools as you know, they are trained and in fact, the training is so effective, the acculturation is so effective that they become willing to donate their organs. They recognize that that is their purpose in life. They acknowledge that they are here on Earth created so that one day they can fulfill their destiny.

Remember it's a destiny not chosen by them. It's a destiny that has been assigned to them, that has been accorded to them by the human race. That's why they were created in the first instance. So, the clones understand this. Now some of you might recognize the

parallels between these clones and the slave bodies, entire populations of slave bodies from the earlier eras of plantations in the New World.

That they are meant to serve, their bodies are meant to serve, that their entire training is geared towards preparing them for serving humanity. The clones are integrated into the human social order, whether it is in the family or into the larger society because they are there to serve. They become donors, they become workers, they are there as carers. All of it has to do with their particular function in life. They will serve, they've been trained to serve, they understand that they will serve.

The clones in Ishiguro's novel constitute the genomic aids equivalent of the cultural other that mankind has always exploited. I mentioned slavery before. The purpose of the slave was that the slave would serve the white man, would serve the white family, would serve the white social order. So, in many ways, what we are doing here is we are reinventing slavery, we are reconstructing slavery, except that, instead of humans we now have clones. That instead of African people taken, kidnapped, sold from Africa into slavery in the New World, New World, the Americas, you now have clones who are not perhaps from Africa.

They are produced in factories, they are taken care of in schools. If you recall the Ishiguro novel, there are specific schools in which the clones are nurtured and trained and taken care of. And just like the Africans who become slaves in the New World, the clones become slaves in the future world, in the post-apocalyptic world and their job, their service is dedicated to humans entirely. Now, if you look at this excerpt from Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, you have a small passage here: "we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones – or *students*, as we preferred to call you – existed only to supply medical science".

This is a passage where the teacher is, the clones' teacher is telling them, we try to prove that if you are given careful attention, if you're nurtured properly like in families, you would be sensitive, caring as other humans. The point being made here is we have treated in this particular school that is Hailsham, we have treated the clones differently in order to demonstrate that clones can be as good as humans, that clones can be as sensitive, as caring, as intelligent, as compassionate as humans. What is being done here? What is being done is an attempt to establish that the clones are as human as humanity, that although they are created in a lab, they are clones. They are not just students whose job is to provide bodies to medical science.

No, they exist as living cadavers, as critics have pointed to supply organs. Yes, but when

you have nurtured them properly, they will be as good as humans. In other words, the question Ishiguro asks implicitly is what is the humanity of the clones? What is the humaneness of the clone? Do we construct them as clones and treat them as humans? Or do we construct them as our mirror images, but treat them as clones? So, do you create them as humans and treat them as clones or do you create them explicitly as clones, but treat them as humans? That's the question that's implicit through the narrative of *Never Let Me Go*. Ishiguro doesn't of course have clear answers, but it's important to think about the kinds of questions he's asking. At some point in the novel, the clones are wondering about their origins, where they come from, and they are looking for what they call their so-called "possibles".

As in the original human from whose DNA they have been made and it's rather scathing, but also saddening passage, Ishiguro writes, and this is the clone speaking. "We're modelled from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from. We all know it, so why don't we say it? A woman like that? Come on. Yeah, right, Tommy. A bit of fun. Let's have a bit of fun pretending ... If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from."

It's interesting to think of what Ishiguro is doing here. If you recall, criminal bodies after their execution were donated to hospitals for dissection. And in the 19th century and quite a bit into the 20th century, these dissections of the criminal body were public spectacles, as in you would have the dissection anatomy lesson in full public view and anybody could come to watch. And Ishiguro is pointing to the deployment, the use, the instrumental use of bodies. Here are two. The bodies of the clones are sites where civil society's demands are made. They want essential organs, the clone supply. They are there to serve, they will supply. So, the vital organs when the humans have some disease, say the liver or something like that, it's never made very clear, except that we are told that the vital organs are donated. At this point, we don't quite know the process, but we do know that they are medically operated upon.

What is going on here? Two things are going on. One, that their bodies are available for the civil society, for the human race to do whatever they wish. The second is that they are lower classes. They come from, as you can see from that passage, from trash, junkies and prostitutes and winos and tramps. Just as the slaves had no control over their bodies, just as the 19th century working classes had no control over their bodies, the clones have no control over their bodies. So, you can see very clearly a parallel, a continuum of slavery, working classes and clones. This is posthuman vulnerability. This is the vulnerability of creatures, of creations appearing in the technological era, whose purpose is to serve

humans, whose destiny is to serve humans and who have no functional autonomy over their bodies. There's no question of free will. There's no question of autonomy.

They exist to serve and they serve in a social order where the hierarchy is humans, first, clones, lower. Humans priority, clones no priority. Exactly as the slaves had no priority before. Exactly as the working classes had no role except as servants, as workers before. So, Ishiguro is actually giving us quite a lot of interesting insights into the power structure but also into our histories, as in our human histories. In the previous era, the workers were exploited, the slaves were exploited for their bodies, as in their labour. The clones are also exploited for their bodies except in this case, the exploitation is not for their physical labour but for their organs. It's a matter of difference in terms of degree, not in kind. The labour is the same. The working-class body or the clone body is the same.

It is there to be exploited. It is there to be controlled. There is no question of the clones ever having a social status except as donors. There's no question of the clones acquiring privilege or power alongside their human counterparts just as the slaves didn't. The slaves were valuable, the working classes were valuable and if you know your 19th century Victorian England novels of Charles Dickens, the writings of Arthur Mayhew and even Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, you will know that the concern was with the urban poor, the working classes of London because their entire lives were spent at the bottom of the social order, at the bottom of the social hierarchy and its only job was service. Nothing else. Now the clones occupy that and the purpose of the clones is to donate. Nothing else.

So if previously they were meant, they were designed to work, we now see the clones also working except that their work is in the form of donation of their vital organs. Eventually they will die. If you look at the next excerpt also from *Never Let Me Go*, this is the protagonist who survives at the end of the tale who's saying, "The memories I value most. I don't see them ever fade. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them ... Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be some- thing no one can take away."

Myra Seaman, the critic pointing to the debates around the clones and the humans, argues that the human is characterized by having a sense of interiority, a sense of the self, which can be expressed, described, made visible. The clones in Ishiguro and Myra Seaman, is writing about Ishiguro's novel, The clones who are the protagonist of the tale do meet that requirement. They do have an interiority. They do have a sense of self. To argue that they don't have a sense of self, they don't have a sense of their destiny or their future is a little problematic. As Myra Seaman argues, and that is our clear-cut definition of just human vulnerability in fact, "Being human is revealed as a certain *feeling* vulnerability and

ability to love others". So, this loving others, this vulnerability is sometimes undertaken in the face of one's own inevitable and untimely death. We have that potential and so do the clones.

So the question then is, how are they different from us? As in what makes them distinct from us? Jennifer Robertson, who writes on robots and artificial beings, argues that irrespective of the level of autonomy, a robot must meet two criteria. Its body must resemble a human being. So, it should have a physical resemblance to us and it has to perform in a human-like manner. It should be like us. So, if they meet these two criteria, then it becomes very difficult to understand the distinction between robots and humans, as we will see when we look at the next example, which is Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me*.

And if you look at these excerpts, where you see that the artificial being is called Adam, first of its kind. And the protagonist of the tale, Charlie Friend says, "I've been expecting a friend. I was ready to treat Adam as a guest in my home". Although the nature of the home would be different. And he's speaking about his girlfriend, Miranda, who also thinks be part of it. "We would be partners, and Adam would be our joint concern, our creation. We would be a family...". Think about that. So, the purpose here is that Adam would fit into the family, where Charlie Friend and his girlfriend, Miranda, would take care of Adam as though he's one of the family. So, he designs the personality to fit that family, Adam's personality.

McEwan's novel complicates the ideas of the domestic space and the family where Miranda, Adam and Charlie become a trio because Miranda has an affair with the Robot Adam and the humanoid Robo sapien, which is the term I used before. And I draw upon Jennifer Robertson's work here. Adam becomes a lover to Miranda. So, incorporating Adam into the home becomes a method of exploring the human non-human dynamic. The ways in which this particular artificial being would fit into the family structure, a heterosexual family structure.

When Adam then becomes a lover to Miranda, that family structure breaks down. The sequel to Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* in *Klara and the Sun*. Also we have a similar attempt where the artificial being, Klara, has to fit into the family, take care of Josie. And she says towards the end that the purpose of her being in the family was that when Josie dies, she would take the place of Josie. And that's when she makes the statement, which is now up on your screen, that "however hard I tried, I learned to be Josie, but I knew something. Whatever I did, however much I tried, there'll be something beyond my reach". Josie's mother, her best friend Rick, all of these people, they would have something in them that they loved her. And that is something she couldn't acquire. In

short, what Klara is pointing to is that what makes us individuals is not by virtue of who we are as this or that person. It is what we share with others. The subjectivity of Klara, the artificial being, is constructed as an intersubjectivity with humans. Just as we mentioned in the case of Adam, his being, his identity is because he fits into the family with Miranda and Charlie's friend. Klara's subjectivity, Klara's identity, her sense of self is because she is within the structure of the family. And the expectation is that she will one day replace the daughter of the house when the daughter dies.

And she says that's not possible. The point here is the artificial being has to fit into situations, constructions, structures in which humans live. Philosophers and people who write on robotics like Michael LaBossiere and Stephen Peterson have argued that if artificial beings could do the things that humans do, then humans will have an obligation to treat them as humans. If a human does something for you, we are under an obligation to take care of that human, right? So, if a robot does it, how can we not have the same obligation towards the robot? If an artificial being takes care of you, how can we not have the same sense of obligation to that particular creature or creation or what we think of as machines? So, the point here is we can actually design robots who will want to serve us. And the ethical, the moral problem here is, is it all right to create such creatures? If the function of the robot, if the purpose of the robot is to serve us, then would it not be unfair to not allow them to fulfill that aspiration? Note what I'm arguing. The robot has been created to serve the humans, that is its function in lab, that is its destiny.

And then you say, "no, no, no, they should be having their rights. They should not be asked to serve us". But that was their aspiration. That is what they're trained to do. That is what they think they should be doing. So, is it all right then to prevent them from doing what they're supposed to be doing? Moral ethical dilemmas. So, the question of vulnerability as explored in literary fiction to do with posthumans and artificial beings asks five key questions. If an artificial being undertakes, performs all the tasks that a human, does it create a moral obligation to recognize it? Do we recognize it as at least a substitute moral person, an "ersatz moral person", the term that Michael LaBois here uses? Is it ethical to create vulnerable posthuman beings whose primary job is to serve humans? Would the creation of such beings not be a reiteration of the slave system? Are the artificial beings persons? And finally, what are the rights of such persons?

So, as you can see, we have covered a wide range of the problems with the borders of the humans to the questions of rights of the posthuman, the artificial beings, their location, the identities. Posthuman vulnerability is a very broad category and I only scratched the surface here, but the novels that I have mentioned are very key explorations into this thorny and troubling moral ethical debate around posthumans. Thank you.