



HELPLESSNESS EFFECTS ON THE MAIN CHARACTER'S FATE ACCEPTANCE IN *NEVER LET ME GO*

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the pervasive impact of learned helplessness on various aspects of Kathy H.'s life in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, particularly focusing on her role as an organ donor and her interpersonal relationships. Employing close reading and library research methods, the study engages with Boddez et al.'s (2022) framework of learned helplessness to analyze how dystopian structures intensify psychological resignation and foster passive acceptance of fate. The novel reveals how Kathy H., a clone conditioned for organ donation, internalizes powerlessness in the face of inescapable circumstances. Her emotional experience marked by detachment, burnout, and chronic emotional fatigue reflect the broader psychological toll of living within a system that denies autonomy and agency. The illusion of protection within the educational institution and the characters' limited control over their lives illustrate how systemic control cultivates helplessness. This study argues that the normalization of powerlessness within such a dystopian context leads Kathy to quietly embrace her predetermined function, shedding light on the insidious effects of institutionalized control on self-perception and agency. Ultimately, the analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how helplessness is generalized beyond singular experiences to shape one's entire psychological landscape in oppressive systems.

Keywords: *Learned helplessness, Helplessness effects, psychological suffering, Fate acceptance, Never Let Me Go*

1. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* sets itself apart from conventional science fiction by portraying passivity not merely as a character trait but as a manifestation of deep psychological helplessness, particularly embodied in the protagonist, Kathy H. Throughout the narrative, Kathy revisits her formative years at Hailsham, a seemingly idyllic school that ultimately reveals its sinister purpose raising clones for organ donation (Guesse, 2019; Lesiana et al., 2023). Her

reflective memories become central to her construction of identity, emphasizing her internalization of humanity within a dehumanizing system (Utami, 2023; Maarif, 2021). Guesse (2016) further suggests that Kathy's subdued demeanor and compliance with her roles as carer and donor exemplify a quiet surrender to a predetermined fate. Vichiensing (2017) contends that such passivity arises from the psychological weight of societal expectations, where agency is stripped away despite apparent opportunities

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for resistance. This study seeks to analyze how environmental factors at Hailsham, coupled with Kathy's emotional bonds and institutional conditioning, cultivate a learned helplessness that shapes her view of destiny. By employing psychoanalytic theory and literary criticism, the research aims to expose how systemic control and emotional suppression lead to the internalization of powerlessness, enriching our understanding of psychological trauma within dystopian literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers believe that helplessness is a condition where an individual is exposed to uncontrollable stimuli that lead to a negative perception of the outcome. Learned helplessness was initially addressed by Maier & Seligman (2019) (explain as a response to a series of uncontrollable traumas that affected animals' passive behavior that activated when the animals learn the inescapable shocks beyond their control. Therefore, the recent study investigates the behavioral and psychological impact of inescapable traumatic events on some animals, for instance, how passivity reflects an unlearned psychological situation (Maier & Seligman, 2020; Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2019; Jaya et al., 2025). The helplessness theory was later developed by Boddez et al. (2022), who emphasize the helplessness concept as a lack of reinforcement behavior, whether negative or positive reinforcement, and the dysregulation of goal-directed behavior. Consequently, the failure to reach a particular goal influences the other goals because of the similarity between goal stimuli. Helplessness refers to a deficiency in controlling aversive stimuli caused by earlier exposure to unmanageable stimuli (Pryce et al., 2021). Furthermore, Mohanty et al. (2018) propose the idea of parent autonomy level towards their children's helpless situations. The phenomenon of helplessness can be widely found in individuals, especially those going through a challenging period.

As helplessness evolves into an adaptation rooted in an uncontrollable environment, the generalization effects characterized by two: an inability to control specific outcomes in the same situations; and transferring the feeling from one to another problem, resulting in doubt their ability to regulate their life if experiencing failure in the same settings (Lieder et al., 2013). Such failure in a goal has far-reaching effects: it can eradicate the motivation to accomplish goals due to the similarity of the unobtained goal and how they perceive other goals. Consequently, the passiveness that occurs might lead to various forms of psychological conditions, such as burnout, attachment-based problems, and fatigue complaints (Boddez et al., 2022). On the other hand, another study found that the manifested increased reports of anxiety, sadness, and job disengagement occur on rising levels of learned helplessness (Qourrichi et al., 2024). The helplessness phenomenon also influenced an agent's decision-making process, as it intersects with other self-control situations (Boureau et al., 2019). However, while the research on helplessness has been done in real-world contexts, there is still a gap in the literary context.

There is no study regarding the psychological effect of helplessness in terms of literature books and how helplessness leads to passive fate acceptance in individuals. Research indicates that fate acceptance may influence the outcomes. The notion of "negotiating with fate" proposes that individuals can influence outcomes within the concept of fate, contrasting with fatalism's assertion of fixed outcomes (Au & Savani, 2019). This belief emerges in response to constraints in coping with adverse events. The student's unfortunate situation relates to discrimination, indicating that students' creations cannot change their pre-determined roles in misfortune (Barchiya et al., 2024; Kafarina et al., 2023). Likewise, Zhuangzi's concept of "contented acceptance of fate" explains a voluntary adherence to the inherent

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nature of events, potentially facilitating disaster education and adaptability in misfortune (Lenehan, 2020). Nevertheless, excessive fate acceptance can prove harmful, exemplified by a hypothetical case where a man declines assistance and perishes due to his inflexible acceptance of fate (Gadini, 2022). Traditionally, Stoic philosophy, especially in Seneca's texts, articulated a coherent doctrine of fate, emphasizing the psychological difficulties in accepting fate and the pragmatic navigation of its uncertainties (Hågemark & Gårdenfors, 2025; Doz et al., 2024).

Across some studies, there remains a gap in understanding how the phenomenon exists in a fictional context, especially concerning the fate acceptance in characters experiencing helplessness. The gap lies explicitly in the representation of helplessness in the fictional characters of literature books. Further, this study aims to understand the helplessness experienced by the main character while also examining the helplessness effects possessed by the main character, Kathy H., in *Never Let Me Go*. Through a detailed analysis of Kathy's psychological suffering in the context of helplessness, this study intends to unfold the factors that turn her into a helpless state as well as the impact on her perception of fate, in this case, accepting her fate. The findings of this study are expected to provide a broad understanding of how mental struggles are reflected in the literature study. Hence, this analysis will provide the scholarly discourse by linking literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory.

3. METHODS

In analyzing Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, a qualitative descriptive method is conducted to explore the main character's perspective of helplessness. This research will be gathered using qualitative research to analyze the helplessness phenomenon. Qualitative research is characterized by emphasizing the researcher's perspective on the

data interpretation, with a literature study, such as textual analysis by written and visual materials (Syamira & Thohiriyah, 2022). Thematic analysis or a theme-based analysis is a research method using qualitative methods in order to identify, analyze, and interpret the data's meaning through a repetitive pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher will begin by gathering the information needed in the novel to support the research arguments in this paper. The primary source of the data is the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, published in 2005 by Faber and Faber Publishers. The data will be presented in the form of quotations, sentences, or character dialogue in the novel that conveys the helplessness phenomenon in the main character.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this novel undermine a pivotal role of helplessness towards fate acceptance that leads to several trauma effects, which are 1) Helplessness in Hailsham Boarding School, 2) Kathy H.'s Psychological Issue in Experiencing Helplessness, and 3) Helplessness Impact in Kathy H.'s Fate Acceptance. The issues are reflected in:

4.1 *The Helplessness in Hailsham Boarding School*

Kathy H. reflections on her memories at Hailsham are a bittersweet ride, highlighting the contrast between her experiences in the earlier years and the last years at Hailsham. In her early life, she captures them as a "golden time", reinforcing the friendship bond between the students that blossomed during this age. Contrary to her early life, Kathy's last year as students shift into "darker & more serious", emphasizing the complexity of Kathy's personal life, which emerges into helplessness and her acceptance of her fate. Nevertheless, the comfort of the golden era that Kathy experienced reveals its weaknesses. Kathy realized that the warm environment she once perceived as caring transforms into a silent, controlling system. The gradual realization that their actions have minimal impact on

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controlling their fate reflects the psychological mechanism of helplessness outlined by (Boddez et al., 2022).

The sense of helplessness that Kathy experienced was reflected in her days at Hailsham Boarding School, where the school restrained the students in several ways. The school has designed the future for each of the children in Hailsham, which underlies the helplessness issues. Through Hailsham, various methods control students' fate. In their earlier lives, they were asked to create artwork or poems to be exhibited in the gallery. However, the initial intention is to exhibit the students' souls. The art depicted in *Never Let Me Go* discusses issues, how art defines the clones' personalities, and how they perceive themselves (Gombert, 2019). Hailsham masks the illusion of safety by letting the students be hopeful throughout situations, such as a dream job. The only job they are enabling the students is a career. Students are not allowed to pursue another career, like acting. In the last timeline of the students' lives, they will become the donor, the primary purpose. Life in Hailsham is to explore the lives of cloned students, where they have a pre-determined fate as organ donors (Wang Xue-juan, 2023). For those reasons, Kathy grew up as a passive individual who accepts her fate. Thus, this section will examine the helplessness experienced by Kathy H. throughout the illusion of safety and the students' absence of self-autonomy.

The Illusion of Safety

Hailsham School creates the illusion of safety by providing a false sense of security. The supportive environment disguises itself as a control for the students over their donor fate. On the surface, Hailsham seems to encourage the students to create artwork. However, students cannot escape societal expectations and fulfil the standards of creativity. The specific statement from Kathy implies that your value is determined if you accomplished your artwork straight to the Gallery, "*how good you were at 'creating'*" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.16). The Gallery selects "*worthy*" art even though the vague criteria turn students like Tommy, who

are going through hardships because of their art. The student's unfortunate situation relates to discrimination, indicating that students' creations cannot change their pre-determined roles. Boddez et al. explain helplessness as disengagement from a lack of reinforcements, as the result does not match the effort.

Aligns with the lack of reinforcement, Hailsham boarding school pressured the students to produce their creative works, such as pictures and poetry, to reveal their inner souls, not a form of free expression, "*She said they revealed your soul.*" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.16). The practice is evoked through the selection system of the Gallery, the mysterious place where only extravagant works are displayed as a tool to manipulate the students. Hailsham manipulates the students to trust their artworks, which are admitted to the gallery, determining their identity and status. They are rewarded equally if their work is enough to make it to the gallery. Students' helplessness appears as they give up trying to qualify for the Gallery. For instance, when Tommy stumbled upon failure to meet the criteria, his art was rejected despite his uniqueness. Art, no longer a medium to foster the students' creativity, has become a sinister way to prove the students' humanity. Children in Hailsham are taught art to be accepted in society as clones of the actual citizens (Kumar, 2020). The school taught them art while blurring the distinctions between freedom of expression and institutional control. Clones are transformed into commodified entities serving as organ donors for non-clones, thus resulting in their dehumanization, rendering their deaths as instances that are not worthy of grief (Maurel, 2022). Kathy's belief in the system embedded helplessness as her art altered the role.

Students' Absence of Self-Autonomy

Autonomy is an individual's capacity to self-regulate independently of others (De-Juanas et al., 2020). Individuals with clearer life goals and objectives who can better regulate their surroundings to meet their wants, giving them greater autonomy (De-Juanas et al., 2020; Raleigh, 2019). At Hailsham, pupils are

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expected to maintain their physical health, yet they are trained to passively accept their predefined roles. This dynamic is also demonstrated by another remark in the novel where Miss Emily explains to the students that smoking's effects are worse for the students, more than for the guardians themselves. The psychological aspects lack autonomy, promoting a severe sense of helplessness, consistent with Boddez et al.'s theory that helplessness develops in those exposed to unpredictable life circumstances. This passivity worsens as their bodies are considered commodities, valued solely for their ability to donate organs rather than for their innate human worth. This externalized valuing prevents the formation of an authentic self or a sense of autonomy, which can be seen in the following scene:

"You're... special. So maintaining yourselves well, staying really well inside, is far more vital for each of you than it is for me." (Ishiguro, 2005, as cited in Andrade, 2023)

The above excerpt shows a lack of autonomy and privacy at Hailsham in the quotations, where the students are obliged to maintain their health. The school contributes to the illusion of safety and imposes heavy rules on students' self-autonomy, such as being mindful of their physical state. Their bodies and behaviors are regulated by authority figures, which aligns with the school's initial objective, preparing students for organ donation. The students are raised in a strictly controlled environment that damages their self-esteem, especially as they begin to recognize the fundamental difference between themselves and figures like Madame—between what is considered human and inhuman.

"You realise that you really are different to them" (Ishiguro, 2005, as cited in Andrade, 2023)

As a result, the illusion of safety fails to materialize. Even their everyday routines, including their health practices, are shaped by an institutional structure that values compliance and utility over originality. Hailsham's curriculum also fosters a sense of bodily responsibility in students, closely related

to their future role as donors. Guardians frequently emphasise the value of excellent health, not just for the sake of having satisfying lives. Carefulness becomes a means of control. Students are trained not to regard their bodies as their own but as commodities to be maintained for later use. Individuals have autonomy when it comes to making health-related decisions based on reasonable calculations (Gandsman, 2018). The following quotation shows Madame staring at Kathy with an indescribable gaze that turns into a creep.

"But she just went on standing out there, sobbing and sobbing, staring at me through the doorway with that same look in her eyes she always had when she looked at us, like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps." (Ishiguro, 2005, as cited in Andrade, 2023)

The above excerpt illustrates the disorientation experienced by Kathy, as Madame, the one she looks up to, looks disgusted at her while she is dancing to the song *Never Let Me Go* by Judy Bridgewater, while imagining losing her baby. The layers behind the quotations generate the idea of students' lack of autonomy, especially for the girls at Hailsham. They are required to donate their organs, preventing them from having a baby, while being encouraged to have sex. This dependency suggests that Hailsham did not give its students a sense of personal autonomy. Instead, it fostered an environment of submission and passivity. When the appropriate adult fails to engage, Kathy becomes confused and disoriented, displaying her lack of control and comprehension over her behavior. The institution's refusal to provide clones with agency eventually makes them emotionally vulnerable and mentally immature, confirming their status as submissive subjects.

4.2 Kathy H.'s Psychological Suffering in Experiencing Helplessness

Kathy H.'s psychological state during *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates the profound emotional cost of being raised in a system that denies autonomy and demands conformity. Kathy has gradually attempted to repress her

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emotions without properly conveying her feelings. The guardian's role as an attachment figure is to provide the students with protection, warmth, nurturance, and support so that the infant's attachment system can become deactivated (Oral et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Kathy did not experience warmth and nurture from the guardian. The students' caregiver, as an institution, emphasizes physical well-being and creative expression, but diminishes the value of personal emotions. This institutional control creates the conditions for long-term psychological issues. Kathy looks composed and reserved when handling the issues, yet beneath the layers, there are traces of unresolved trauma, emotional exhaustion, and a generalised helplessness. Those contributes to Kathy H.'s psychological impacts, such as attachment problems, burnout, and fatigue complaints.

Attachment Problems

Attachment theory discerns four attachment types, highlighting the emotional bonds between caregivers and children. There are four attachment types concerning children and their primary caregivers: insecure-avoidant, secure, ambivalent/resistant; and disorganized (Naveed et al., 2020). The parental absence for the students hints at the causes of insecure-avoidant attachments in the story. The children experiencing emotional unavailability or neglect by their caregivers have difficulties forming deep connections (Simonova & Камнева, 2024). The difficulties in forming a deep connection are reflected in Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy's friendship dynamic. The clones, for instance, Ruth, are growing up without parental figures. She is showing signs of insecure-avoidant attachment, as inferred in the quotation "*I know he doesn't see you like, you know, a proper girlfriend.*" (Ishiguro), The quotation reflected the strained relationship between Ruth and Kathy, leading to attachment problems. The painful memory of Kathy H.'s rejection of her unrequited feelings for Tommy contributed to her helplessness. Kathy's ability to suppress her emotions aligns with findings about attachment styles that shape memory for her emotional experiences. In this case, the

indirect rejection from her friends amplifies the helplessness to process emotional adversity. Although those two have formed friendships in Hailsham for all their lives, Ruth is the only one who shows dominance towards Kathy by concealing her emotions. Due to Ruth taking control of most situations, Kathy finds it hard to resist Ruth's dominance, which turns her into a helpless, insecure attachment.

Kathy's relationships are significantly impacted by attachment issues that affect her emotional health and social interactions. Inconsistent support from her guardians in childhood led to her feelings of avoidance and anxiety, which encouraged a profound fear of abandonment, hindering her ability to establish trust with others. Recognizing these attachment issues is essential for Kathy to foster healthier relationships and improve her emotional navigation, as demonstrated in "*...you've been told and not told*" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 58). In the quotation above, Kathy shows evidence of avoidant attachment, most likely rooted in an institutional childhood without parental figures or stable emotional anchors. Her interactions with Tommy and Ruth are characterized by emotional hesitancy and avoidance. She avoids confrontation, conceals her needs—such as her romantic affections for Tommy—and frequently enjoys her time alone. Moreover, this is consistent with an attachment-avoidant attachment style, in which intimacy is feared and independence is cherished. Initiating relationships and intimacy is uncomfortable for someone with avoidant attachment (Verma, 2024).

Burn-Out

Learned helplessness contributes significantly to burnout by generating a sense of powerlessness and disengagement. Particularly in academic settings, academic burnout at high levels leads to psychological adaptation mechanisms that interact with depression and anxiety symptoms. This statement indicates that burnout could affected mental health outcomes, instead of being a separate issue. Individual's initial motivation for dealing with bad situations could gradually

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diminish, resulting in a decline in problem-solving abilities and a feeling of helplessness (Jiang et al., 2024). Consequently, students no longer take an interest in previously enjoyable activities. Thus, Kathy H.'s experience as a carer for twelve years illustrates the devastating consequences of learned helplessness. Despite her initial dedication to her job, Kathy eventually got disengaged from her job, resulting in feelings of burnout and powerlessness. Moreover, the disengagement from Kathy's experience led her into a more passive state due to the generalization in Hailsham, as illustrated in the following quotation:

"I wasn't sobbing or out of control. 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, as cited in Andrade, 2023)

The quotation above symbolizes that Kathy's lengthy career as a caregiver directly results from emotional fatigue. She describes being a "good carer," but her words are tinged with silent tiredness and emotional remoteness. Her tone is frequently distant, indicating emotional exhaustion. The repeated nature of her profession: seeing people decline, administering consolation, and finally letting them go. The endless pain kept circling around her. Instead of challenging the system, Kathy internalizes it, resulting in burnout symptoms such as emotional numbness, detachment, and generalized passivity. Her concluding comments convey the depth of her detachment when she thinks of Tommy and Ruth's deaths.

Fatigue Complaints

Physical effects do not just bind Kathy's exhaustion, but also existential. As she recalls, she frequently mentions being "tired" or traveling "just a little further." Her exhaustion reflects not just the demanding demands of caregiving, but also a life lived in continual psychological expectation of loss. This silent suffering reveals indications of chronic fatigue syndrome or psychosomatic reactions to emotional repression. The loss of autonomy, realizing an impending future, and her emotional work all contribute to a dull,

continuous exhaustion. Another quotation reflects the emotional fatigue and existential confusion towards Kathy's experience after graduating from Hailsham: "We had this feeling we'd been given a task to do" (Ishiguro, 2005). for some reason we weren't doing it properly." Fatigue complaints begin with an ambiguous "task" and a sense of inadequacy. Kathy's life becomes a series of passiveness—from student to caregiver to donor—with no inner desire or fulfilment, leading to her profound mental tiredness and sense of meaninglessness.

4.3 Kathy H.'s Fate Acceptance

In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro explores helplessness through the generalization and resigned acceptance of fate in Kathy H. Driven by uncertain circumstances in Hailsham, from her repression and illusion of freedom until experiencing fatigue complaints as a carer, her journey embarks on a path of helplessness. As death is approaching, Kathy's passivity reflects acceptance of fate. Aligning with cancer patients who find peace through enhancing quality of life or condemning good deeds, Kathy is expanding her life quality through passive acceptance of fate (McLeod-Sordjan, 2019; Upasen & Thanasilp, 2020). The realization of the students' existence is only to become a donor, which creates a final acceptance of the unwanted, predestined fate. Fate acceptance is the recognition of occurrences as unchangeable, allowing people to adjust to uncontrollable situations (Au & Savani, 2019). A misleading feeling of normalcy and soft kindness characterises Kathy's early experiences at Hailsham, as reflected in the quotation below:

"It's possible the guardians managed to muggle into our heads a lot of the basic facts about our futures." (Ishiguro, 2005, as cited in Andrade, 2023)

The above excerpt demonstrates Kathy's assumption that the fate of being a donor has been instilled in the students from an early age, as they become familiar with that idea. The guards disguise the freedom of choice as art, for example. Their juxtaposition conceals the

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predetermined fate and freely forms an artwork or literary creation. Over time, institutional norms such as health monitoring, regulated artistic expression, and "deferral" helplessness issues arise. Moreover, the discovery of love and art cannot delay the donations provided by Hailsham, turning Kathy quiet in accepting the truth. It reflects the system that is rooted deep in her being, passive. Unlike equality of patient autonomy, the students are forced to be donors without the right to life. In contrast, Fontalis et al. (2018) demonstrate that patients should decide about their health and have options for end-of-life care; the fundamental right to life should also be protected. Kathy's incapacity to challenge the system originates from a lifetime condition that discourages resistance and emphasizes obedience. As a result, Kathy becomes a passive narrator, observing and accepting her reality rather than attempting to change the outcome.

2. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* delves into the psychological dimensions of learned helplessness, particularly through the quiet yet profound acceptance of fate by the protagonist, Kathy H. The narrative intricately weaves her emotional ties with friends and guardians into a broader exploration of systemic control and emotional resignation. Kathy's journey is marked by repeated experiences of failure, rejection, and the gradual loss of people and ideals she cherishes. Ishiguro portrays how the characters' search for meaning is ultimately confined by their inability to challenge their preordained roles as organ donors. This internalization of helplessness, reinforced by a manipulative educational system and emotional detachment, reveals a nuanced psychological conflict between individual agency and institutional fate.

For future research, scholars are encouraged to explore comparative studies of learned helplessness in other dystopian or posthuman narratives to better understand how literature mirrors real-world psychological conditions under oppressive systems.

Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating trauma studies, bioethics, and education policy may offer deeper insights into the psychological construction of identity and autonomy in controlled environments like Hailsham. Further examination of alternative characters' responses to fate could also enrich discussions on resistance, adaptation, and emotional coping mechanisms in dystopian settings.

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