

My Neighbor is Lesser: A Look at Xenophobic Social Borders That Would Lead to Brexit

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When thinking about Brexit, it is important to dive into the preexisting social borders among those who lived in pre-Brexit Britain. These social borders are represented in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*. These works not only convey these social divisions between neighbors, but also reveal the cultural circumstances that led up to the vote for Brexit. In this essay, I highlight how these texts work to do just that.

To this day, people argue whether Britain leaving the EU in 2016 was a fix for the greater commonwealth or if it was a power grab for white British citizens. Brexit started with debates about taxes, trade, and how there was a need for more jobs. In 2016, British parliament argued that Britain leaving the EU would allow more control of their country and over the people allowed to live in it. This concept would later be known as "Brexit." With the decision to leave, Britain was faced with angry residents who felt this was a racist

and prejudiced bias toward the working class. At the time, most immigrants were motivated to move to the UK because of a need for work ("Migrants in the UK"). This working class felt that Brexit was unfair to those who moved to Britain from other countries in the EU and saw it as an attack on those who already experienced the unimaginable trials of working life. Many argue that this passing of Brexit justifies the xenophobic social structures that white British citizens envisioned. However, there were already xenophobic prejudices in pre-Brexit Britain. Authors like Kazuo Ishiguro and filmmakers like Steven Frears have used their platforms to depict this brutal treatment of immigrants in pre-Brexit Britain. Borders between neighbors were emphasized in Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go* as the main character, Kathy, comes to terms with the dehumanizing treatment clones like herself endure from naturally born humans. In her world, she is an organic resource that is destined to have her organs donated to British citizens. Based on the clones's treatment, Kathy knows

no other way to live her short life other than to prepare for her donations. Steven Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, depicts immigrants in pre-Brexit Britain in the same dehumanizing way. The main character, Okwe, observes the way immigrants are expected to either work difficult conditions or sell their organs to the black market. These characters, much like those in Ishiguro's novel, are seen as organic bodies who serve no purpose beyond being organ donations. British texts, like Steven Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, showed how pre-Brexit xenophobic attitudes and social borders towards immigrants contributed to Brexit.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go*, he uses his characters poor living situations to convey the way immigrants and non-white citizens faced ignorant prejudice in Britain. Ishiguro's main character, Kathy, grows up at a special school with other clones called Hailsham. Kathy and the other students are kept away from naturally born children in Britain; therefore, the world outside of their school is a scary yet exciting new world. When an immigrant moves, there is a similar excitement to what the clones felt when it comes to living in a new country. However, this excitement can turn to fear when confronted with the dehumanizing living conditions immigrants face when they must live in what white Europeans leave for them. These living conditions are represented in Ishiguro's novel. Once the kids are old enough to leave Hailsham, they are sent to a place called the Cottages. Here, the clones have "big boxy heaters" and houses with "trails of mud" everywhere (Ishiguro 117). These houses are then left to the students' care, thus leaving these children to care and provide for themselves without support during their first time in a foreign place. Although Kathy claims "I'm making it sound pretty bad...none of us minded the discomforts," she still admits to her worry and feelings of abandonment (Ishiguro 117). Even the old man, Keffer, who has been sent monitor the clones, is described as "sighing and shaking his head disgustedly" when seeing their lives at the Cottages (Ishiguro 116). Keffer isn't just disgusted with how the clones live, but with the clones in general. He never once questions his own part at the Cottages and how these students were simply dropped off to figure things out on their own. The clones represent immigrants in Britain by living in those familiar dehumanizing circumstances and being judged for it. The clones, like immigrants, have been left to fend for themselves in trying times. And the relationship that Keffer and the clones have represents that ignorant prejudice that citizens convey and Brexit would soon justify.

Josie Gill's article "Written on the Fact: Race and Expression in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," also talks about the way the clones represent immigrants and the predetermined attitudes citizens have toward them. Gill's article focuses on the way the clones' lives are similar to the mistreatment immigrants encounter. Whether it is their living

conditions, their jobs, or the lack of respect they get from their neighbors, Gill pinpoints these connections. She points out that the clones' lives reflect, "the gap between expectation and reality that has often characterized the immigrant" (Gill 850). The aspirations Ishiguro's clones have when dreaming of jobs and families in the "real world" is just like the idea that immigrants have had when believing they will live "better lives" in Britain. However, Ishiguro's idea to use clones instead of immigrants is to show that the removal of race "does not remove the material conditions of race or racism" (Gill 850). Instead, the "denial of race results in "racism without race," making racism and the social inequalities that feed into it more difficult to identify" (Gill 850). In other words, Gill believes that Ishiguro purposefully chose to not bring race into the novel so that he could emphasize the racist idea that immigrants are uncivilized or dirty. When in fact, it is simply the poor living conditions that have been left to them that causes such stereotypes. As white Europeans began to believe this stereotype, the social barrier between citizens and non-citizens in Britain grew. Thus, when looking at the characters of Ishiguro's novel, one can pinpoint a similar and symbolic social border characters have between the clones and those who are naturally born.

Clones in Ishiguro's novel are also depicted as biological resources to convey the way treatment of non-citizens has always been to benefit the British population. When the clones of Ishiguro's novel find out they were made to donate their organs for others, they aren't surprised. In fact, their teacher, Miss Lucy, seems more disturbed by the idea than they are. She explains to Kathy and her classmates that, "your lives are set out for you" (Ishiguro 81). This indicates that the world outside of Hailsham is aware of their existence, but chooses to ignore the students. Miss Lucy, unlike the rest of the world, finds herself getting to know these students. Therefore, she is able to think of her students as more than biological resources. However, these interactions make her regret the treatment her students must endure. Another time that a teacher from Hailsham can be seen regretting the treatment of these students is when Kathy and Tommy go to see Miss Emily. She reveals to her students that Hailsham was a school created to prove the existence of souls in clones. However, despite the proof collected and the evident natural, emotional lives these students have lived, they are still told they must donate their organs. Miss Emily regrettably tells them, "I can see...that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game" (Ishiguro 266). This comment is a reflection on the lives immigrants faced in pre-Brexit British society. They were not welcomed by their neighbors and often ignored. However, they were still expected to work those poorly paid jobs for the benefit of white British citizens and to pretend the border between them was not because one is human and the other considered a tool.

Josie Gill's article also talks about the way the clones are supposed to represent immigrants as nothing more than able and abusable bodies. She explains how the clones

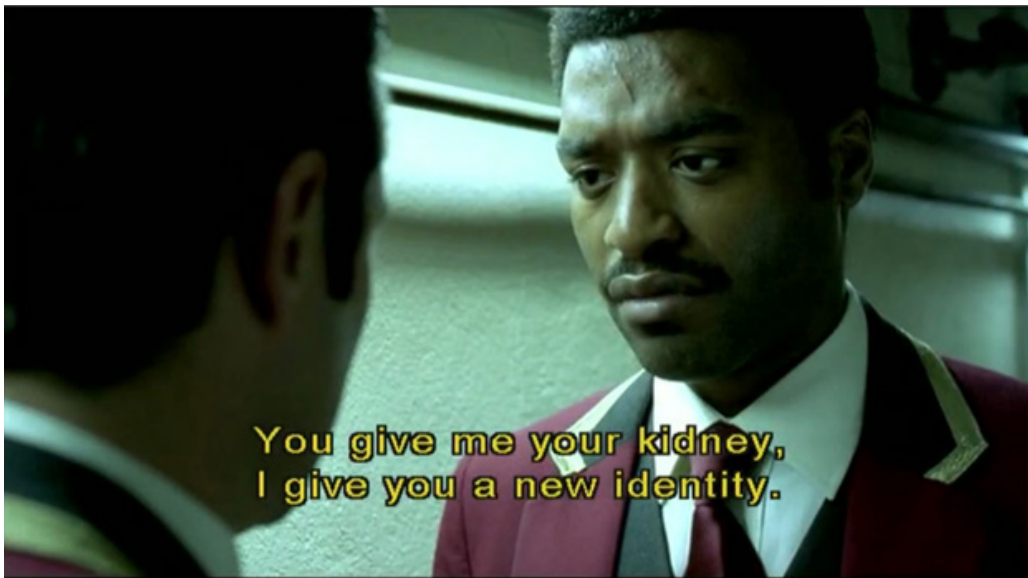
of Ishiguro's novel are created to "serve the needs of the 'normal' population..." to reflect the "exploitation of nonwhite workers, who are often reduced simply to bodies that carry out various forms of undesirable and poorly paid labor" (848). Just like a sweatshop might abuse the use of immigrant workers, the clones are reduced to nothing more than a resource. And the lack of the characters' races being mentioned only shows the way race is a social construct and not a biological one. Gill mentions this by explaining, "bodies do not provide or add to an understanding of character" (854). Instead, the clone's bodies, no matter the color or biology, are able enough to give their organs. Immigrants, who are looked down upon because they look like immigrants, still possess able and worthy bodies, just like the clones. They can work hard jobs and do anything that white citizens can. It is simply that fact that immigrants are immigrants that bring about a question of value on those lives in pre-Brexit Britain. Hence, we have yet another example of how a social barrier has been created to not only make citizens feel superior to immigrants, but for citizens to take advantage of those who have no choice but to do the hard work.

Similarly, Stephen Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, also conveys his characters as biological resources for British citizens. Much like *Never Let Me Go*, Frears's film addresses how illegal immigrants in Britain function to support the social structures of Britain. In the film, Okwe, the main protagonist, is trying to live an unnoticeable life in London. However, throughout the film, his position as an immigrant becomes an issue for his plan. The first time we are introduced to anything from his past is when Okwe is asked by his boss to examine him for a sexually-transmitted disease. Okwe, who doesn't even want to address his past for the audience, protests doing this. His boss exclaims, "but you're a doctor!" Okwe responds, "I'm a driver," as he gives in to his boss's wishes (Frears).



Okwe is asked by his boss to examine him for STDs.

Not long after this, Okwe finds himself having to examine three more men in the same situation for his boss. This goes to show how Okwe's skills are to be exploited more and more for British society if he wants to stay hidden. This same situation is paralleled when Okwe finds and helps the infected immigrant in his hotel manager's office. When the man refuses to go to the hospital, Okwe helps treat him and impresses his boss, Sneaky Juan. However, this one act of kindness leads to Juan asking questions for his own benefit. He prods Okwe for information on his past, saying, "you never told me where you're from. Or even, how come you're in this beautiful country"(Frears). This sentence, though worded innocently, is spoken with a threatening tone. Juan knows Okwe is an immigrant, and uses his morals to convince him to do illegal surgeries for him. Okwe, refusing at first to agree, only finds himself trapped and tempted to do as Juan pleases in order to keep his friends and himself safe. Thus, this shows how the abuse of immigrant bodies was prominent and expected even before Brexit was introduced and depicts a moral border that Okwe struggles to cross.



Okwe is confronted by Sneaky Juan, who tells him about the illegal surgeries that take place in the hotel at night.

Vincent Rodriguez Ortega's criticism of the film, "Surgical Passports, the EU and *Dirty Pretty Things*: Rethinking European Identity Through Popular Cinema," also address the use of immigrant bodies for the benefit of British society leading to the perceived social superiority of British citizens and their vote for Brexit. Ortega begins by talking about the opening scene of the film where Okwe is working as a cab driver from those at the airport.

One of Okwe's first comments in the film is, "I'm here to pick up people who have been let down by the system" (Frears). This comment sets up the subject of the film. Ortega describes Okwe's actions in this scene as representing how "illegal social bodies function as necessary support mechanisms for the social structures that deem their status as unlawful. In other words, they are an institutionally repressed and yet practically indispensable component of the EU" (Ortega 23). Ortega claims that immigrants are needed in British society. However, immigrants are on the side of the social border that are to be perceived as abused tools that can be discarded when no longer needed. Not only is this situation depicted in Okwe's experiences, but it is also depicted through Okwe's love interest Senay's own as she experiences the trials that immigrants must face to live in Britain. The first time we see Senay being abused is when, in order to keep herself hidden, she must give her boss oral sex. Although this goes against her religion and morals, she feels, unlike Okwe, that she has no choice and obeys. Later, when she claims she is willing to do anything to obtain citizenship, she finds herself blackmailed and forced into having sex with Sneaky Juan. Ortega claims



Okwe and Senay walk out of the hotel together having shared their traumatic experiences with Sneaky Juan.

that to obtain any form of legitimacy in British society, Senay had to "uncover the multi-layered social and economic networks immigrants must negotiate and subvert to achieve their purposes" (Ortega 24). Just like Okwe, Senay finds herself trapped in a dehumanizing situation that forces her to work for British society. Not only is she used as cheap work,

but she is abused in the way that she is a woman and an immigrant. In the end, whether it is Okwe, Senay, or some other immigrant, “their existence becomes intimately linked to the profit-driven networks” (Ortega 24). Thus, immigrants are left with little self-worth other than as a resource for legal citizens. This film depicts a border between citizens and non-citizens in the EU. This border between people would solidify the superiority felt by citizens over immigrants and would eventually lead to the belief that Brexit was needed to keep these people separate.

Many British writers have noticed the dehumanization of immigrants even before Brexit was introduced. Whether it is depicted through a sci-fi novel, or an uncomfortable film, these writers have been attempting to spread their concern. Britain leaving the EU was something that could be predicted when looking at these works of literature because the social borders were already there. There was already discrimination among races and complaints about a lack of jobs. And yet, there was still an abuse of immigrants in order to continue cheap and fast profits. The treatment of non-citizens has, and continues to, involve prejudice, hatred, and a lack of compassion. To look at your neighbor and feel a superiority because of your looks has only threatened to further the divide among people. Xenophobic attitudes continue to drive people away from one another. Ishiguro and Frears’s works help to show the denying audience that there is a social barrier that immigrants cannot ignore. There has been, and still is, a border between neighbors that exists because of a reach for power. Brexit was simply the consequence of when this social hierarchy became prominent enough to believe in the U.K’s superiority over the rest of the EU.

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