

Sense of self

It is those of us who have a strong sense of self who are capable of resisting control.

Under the asphyxiating confines of a totalitarian governance, we may struggle to preserve our sense of self and triumph over state control. In their historical and dystopian novels, Anna Funder and Kazuo Ishiguro explore the attempted suppression of the human spirit by dictatorial regimes. In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are reared on a plethora of lies, effectively disguised by the guardians under Hailsham's idyllic facade of normality. Consequently, as they are treated like homogeneous machines, their personal identities are inhibited and they lack the capability to break free of their predetermined fate as organ donors. In contrast, although the GDR citizens in Stasiland are equally subjected to relentless cruelty and manipulation, their exposure to an alternative lifestyle provides them with increasing self-awareness and an innate determination to thwart the government. In this way, while Ishiguro captures the possibility for complete subservience in a fantastical dystopian past, Funder's depiction of reality's past events indeed enlightens us to the human condition's inevitable scope for resistance.

An omnipotent totalitarian state endeavours to unrelentingly employ physical and psychological torture, rendering us victim to dehumanisation and debilitated sense of selves. Yet, this can only be successful if we accept our reality and refrain from using our own strengths to challenge the authority. Barred by the gates surrounding Hailsham House and the Wall dividing Germany, the clones and the East Germans are entrapped by structures that symbolise repression of freedom and manipulation by despotic leaders. Initially, as Kathy articulates, 'my name is Kathy. H', Ishiguro unlocks the door to an unjust world where something as essential as a name and therefore identity, is denied, exposing the underlying quashing of the clones' existence by the rest of their society. Realising she is 'different to them', Kathy divulges her stultifying and burdensome existence, in which she and the rest of the clones allow themselves to be shunned to the peripheries of society; they fail to maintain self-confidence and subsequently are vulnerable to being controlled. Just as in East Germany, where 'trading in humans was a source of hard currency', the clones' are 'created' for the sole intention to 'donate [their] vital organs', accentuating the way these minorities are

commodified, regarded as nothing more than a mechanism to be abused by these autocratic governments. Like the inhumane oppression imposed upon the clones, Funder explains that ‘the Stasi were methodical’, as they apply brute force and use torturous methods to suck the life out of dissidents, in order to maintain state control and prevent rebellion. After months of ‘solitary confinement’, deprived of any ‘contact with the outside world’, Miriam, internally wounded and scarred, describes herself as ‘locked in an interminable present’; she encapsulates the barbaric and ruthless nature of the GDR, a state that fetters and suffocates the freedoms of its people. However, unlike the clones’ passivity, it is Miriam’s tenacity to defy the GDR that leads to the Stasi confining her to a prison cell. In the harsh realm of subjugation by a draconian government, we are often left demotivated and helpless, devoid of the self-efficacy that drives our will to resist control. And yet, we might understand that believing in our own abilities catalyses resistance.

Despite these autocratic rulers intending to quash the extraordinary nuances that define the uniqueness of human beings, our awareness of our milieu may enable us to cultivate our own identities. Even when despotic figures of authority aim to pervade the fabric of society, using censorship and propaganda as tools for obfuscating reality and encouraging absolute obedience to the dominant ideology, there may be a chance for us to prevail. The clones are constantly monitored, convinced that ‘there was always someone likely to be passing by within earshot’, reflecting the paranoia bred by the omnipresence of the ruling force. Kathy has ‘no idea if anyone [is] actually watching’, highlighting the crippling power of intangible and nebulous control to generate submissiveness. Contrarily, although the GDR is labelled as the ‘most perfected surveillance state’ and equally scrutinises the citizens’ every move, its overt and visible army of informers is in fact limited to the public sphere. The citizens of the GDR are fortunate enough to live with an awareness of ‘what could be discussed’ in the home, rendering possible the whispers of protest and the fuelling of treasonous fires behind closed doors. Consequently, as they have access to a private life hidden from the Stasi’s prying eyes, their sense of selves are accordingly strengthened. Evidently, as Funder’s historical fiction is based on the reality of the past, she underscores the inability for a state to be completely omnipotent and omnipresent. There is a prospect for dissent, as a clear boundary exists between the public and private spheres, leaving the GDR vulnerable to destruction, and increasing people’s capacity for ambition and hope for the future. In stark contrast, Ishiguro’s alternative dystopian past is fantastical and instead unveils a hypothetical perfected autocracy, in

which there is no freedom from the all-pervasive control. However, as the Stasi 'couldn't control' people's access to 'western television', the East Germans have a point of comparison that provides them with insight into an alternative lifestyle, serving as an open window through which critical and individual thought can drift. We can acknowledge that cognisance is inextricably linked to building a strong sense of self, and thereby increases our ability to defy the rigid paradigms of mass oppression.

As well as the imperative for us to be educated and vigilant, as human beings, we crave meaningful relationships with others, that contribute to shaping our identities and our understanding of our place in the world. And yet, endemic to the maintenance of a totalitarian state is the attempted destruction of these very relationships, that isolates individuals in order to impede challenging the regime. However, prior to Kathy and Tommy learning the demoralising truth behind their existence, Kathy reflects on how she and Tommy are able to become 'close again', as they firmly believe they can achieve 'three years just to themselves' if 'they could prove they were properly in love'. Their belief in the power of love to protect them from their fate, by means of the rumoured deferrals, temporarily unites them through an icon of hope, that enhances their potential for a strong identity. Conversely, Frau Paul sorrowfully admits that she had to 'decide against [her] own son', highlighting the Stasi's determination to break families apart, in order to crush the human spirit and leave the individual susceptible to dominion by the authorities. Nevertheless, Frau Paul's decision is not made in vain, as she justifies, 'I couldn't let myself be used in this way', demonstrating immense courage and resilience that signify her powerful sense of self. In contradistinction, Ishiguro instead focuses on how Kathy and Tommy are forced apart by their society's overwhelming power to vanquish their existence. Kathy watches as Tommy 'slipped and fell out of view into the blackness', suppressed and vacuumed into an abyss of nihilism. In opposition to this bleak and pessimistic perspective, Funder instead turns to the inevitable rebuilding of human connections. Miriam hopes that 'the puzzle women in Nuremberg find out something about Charlie', expressing determination, courage and a firm belief that the truth will hold the state accountable for destroying her love and leaving her emotionally scarred. It is our genuine human connections that provide us with hope, and contribute to our self-understanding, enabling us to maintain our ambition and motivation for standing up to the adversity of tyranny.

In order to successfully resist control, we should strive to harness our individual abilities and oppose tyrannical forces through acts of sedition, so that we may progress forward in a fight for future

prosperity. Hagen Koch steals a plate from his prior office as 'a final small defiance', that signifies his personal freedom from the Stasi's suffocating bounds. As it hangs on his wall, it serves as a symbol of his self-confidence and perpetuates his victory. Moreover, as the East Germans are 'aware their lives [are] observed, manipulated and sometimes ruined', they are propelled to revolt 'against the communist dictatorship', emphasising the imperative of unity and social awareness in achieving liberation. Their awareness stems from having a point of comparison with West Germany, unlike the clones, who only know Hailsham. In stark contrast to the GDR citizens' strength and determination to triumph over the totalitarian government, Kathy decides 'to drive off to wherever it was [she] was supposed to be', remaining a passive and weak product of her society's conventions. Clearly, she lacks the language for rebellion, and is therefore unable to question the clones' inviolable future of organ donations. She ultimately allows herself and the rest of the clones to be consumed by the power of the society's 'normal' people. While Ishiguro ends his novel devoid of any hope for objection, Funder highlights how there can be no peace 'until Miriam has some kind of justice', signifying Miriam's determination to seek the truth about Charlie's death, despite living in a world of obfuscation. Accordingly, Miriam epitomises resilience and resistance to the subjugation of the intimidation and falsehood established by the GDR despite the pervasive injustices committed, all of which are absent in Kathy's somnambulistic gravitation towards her expected role in society. Thus, for Funder, the tenacity of the human pursuit for truth resists the oppression of dictatorial regimes, and stands defiant against attempts of state control. Essentially, we need to understand that totalitarian states and autocratic bodies only prevail if dissent is prevented, ignorance maintained and our personalities quashed and moulded into passive automatons. It is up to us to be aware and actively harness our awareness to instigate change, reflecting the capacity of our own sense of selves.

Delving into the nature of life controlled by totalitarian hegemonies, Funder and Ishiguro explore the potential for self-efficacy to free us from the immobilising bounds of state control. In Stasiland, the East Germans have exposure to the West, which provides them with the self-awareness and courage to overthrow the destructive government, and resist the nightmarish era of subjugation. Contrarily, in *Never Let Me Go*, the clones lack external awareness and distinctive identities, rendering them incapable of dissent as they remain nothing more than marionettes of unexplored potential. Our ability to thrive hinges on our sense of self, which is shaped by our knowledge of the world, our scope for active change, our relationships and our sense of hope. Together, these

qualities may contribute to our long-term prosperity, paving the way for a world that blossoms and sparkles with every unique human spirit.