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Consciousness beyond the Human: Exploring Robotic Subjectivities in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract

In the 21st century, traditional ideas of human exceptionalism and human dominance are increasingly being questioned, and many contemporary novels reflect these concerns.

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) is one such novel. The story is told by a non-human narrator named Klara. Klara is an Artificial Friend (AF) who is bought by a teenager named Josie; a genetically lifted child who is often sick. Klara observes people closely and learns about their feelings in patterns. The story shows how Klara tries to protect and help Josie and she develops a believes that sun can help Josie get better. Her faith in the Sun's healing power invites reflection on whether machines can develop a faith-based consciousness or spiritual consciousnes. At the same time, the human characters in the novel appear to be controlled by genetic enhancement and social pressure. The novel raises questions about whether subjective experiences and consciousness belong only to humans.

This research paper studies consciousness through the lens of posthumanism. This paper addresses contemporary existential dilemma and challenges hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions. It also examines how Ishiguro comes up with ambiguity around consciousness using posthumanist perspective. Ultimately, this study presents consciousness as something open-ended, rather than fixed or definite.

Keywords: Consciousness, Posthumanism, Robo-subjectivity, Spirituality.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's "Klara and the Sun" (2021) offers a speculative but close observation of a world where artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and emotional commodification have led to the creation of a society. The story revolves around Klara, who is an Artificial Friend (AF) and is meant to be a companion for children. Contrary to the usual representation of artificial intelligence in science fiction, Klara is not portrayed as a threat or a rebel but as someone who is attentive, morally responsive, and spiritually reflective. Ishiguro, through Klara's first-person narrative, leads the reader into the perceptual world of a nonhuman and, in the process, challenges the usual assumption that consciousness is a human prerogative.

The question that arises from the novel is not only whether a machine can think, but whether consciousness is necessarily biological. Humanist philosophy has traditionally placed the human subject at the forefront of reason, autonomy, and self-awareness. In this context, artificial systems, no matter how advanced, can never be truly intelligent because intelligence is necessarily internal and biological.

However, the world of Klara and the Sun complicates these assumptions. Human beings themselves are technologically altered through genetic 'lifting,' indicating that life itself is no longer strictly natural but is instead being increasingly technologically engineered. In this way, the line between human and nonhuman becomes indeterminate. According to Pramod K. Nayar:

"Posthumanism as a philosophical approach involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals. It also calls for a more inclusive definition of life and greater moral-ethical response and responsibility to non-human life forms in the age of Species blurring and species mixing" (19).

Ishiguro's novel precisely engages with this indeterminate space, placing Klara between object and subject, commodity and companion.

The purpose of this paper is not to demonstrate that Klara has consciousness in the same way as human beings. Rather, it will be argued that Ishiguro intentionally sets up an ambiguity of consciousness through the juxtaposition of humanist and posthumanist elements. By virtue of Klara's observational intelligence, spiritual imagination, ethical engagement, and narrative voice, the novel proposes that consciousness might be relational and interpretive rather than strictly biological.

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However, it also carefully avoids answering whether Klara has phenomenal subjectivity, or the "what it feels like" quality of consciousness. The effect of the novel is to leave the question of machine consciousness unanswered while instead laying bare the instabilities of the categories by which consciousness is defined.

Theoretical Framework: Posthuman Consciousness Humanism, Transhumanism and the Question of the Human

In order to grasp the more profound implications of "Klara and the Sun", it is necessary to take into account the changing ways in which the notion of humanity is currently being rethought within contemporary technological frameworks. Conventional humanist thought has traditionally placed human beings at the center of meaning and value, highlighting those qualities which are uniquely human, such as reason, autonomy, moral agency, and self-consciousness. Within this framework, consciousness is viewed as an internal and biological capacity that is closely tied to emotional experience and individual identity. Consequently, artificial entities are typically regarded as being incapable of possessing authentic subjectivity because they lack organic embodiment and internal emotional experience.

However, the world that is portrayed in Ishiguro's novel undermines this clear distinction between the human and the technological. The existence of genetic "lifting" in the novel reveals a world where the human identity itself is being constructed and transformed by technological intervention. The children are being designed to improve their capabilities and ensure that they have a competitive future, which reveals that the human body is no longer a natural entity but is increasingly being made amenable to technological intervention.

However, the novel also reveals the dangers and uncertainties of this technological intervention in the form of illness, inequality, and instability.

In this regard, the posthuman approach becomes highly pertinent. The posthuman approach challenges the notion that human existence is fixed and superior to that of machines and technological systems. Rather, it highlights the interconnectivity of human and nonhuman entities and acknowledges that the existence of subjectivity can be achieved through networks of interaction, rather than being an internal, isolated phenomenon. The character of Klara represents this ambiguity throughout the story. While it is evident that she is a product of technological production for the purpose of service, she also observes, interprets, remembers, and develops significant emotional connections. Through the representation of Klara as both a product of technological production and a narrative voice that perceives, Ishiguro challenges the conventional definitions of consciousness and encourages the reader to question whether consciousness can only be achieved through biological life.

Theories of Consciousness

The uncertainty about Klara's status corresponds to the philosophical debate about consciousness itself.

David Chalmers has famously argued that there is a difference between explaining cognitive functions and explaining subjective experience, which he terms the "hard problem of consciousness". On the one hand, functional processes such as perception and reasoning can be explained scientifically. On the other hand, the fact that there is inner experience cannot be explained. This distinction is essential for the analysis of Klara. The existence of Klara's cognitive functions is evident from the fact that she is able to recognize patterns, predict emotional changes, and change her behavior accordingly. However, it is not established whether she has phenomenal consciousness.

Functionalist theories contend that the definition of mental states is determined by their functional role in a system rather than by their physical constitution. Under these theories, if Klara is able to fulfill the functional roles of empathy and understanding, she may be considered functionally conscious. However, the fulfillment of these roles does not necessarily involve subjective experience.

Emergentist theories add further complexity to the debate by suggesting that consciousness is a product of complex interactions in a system rather than a result of its biological constitution. If human consciousness is the product of neural complexity, it is impossible to simply dismiss the idea that artificial systems might also be able to produce similar forms of consciousness.

These theoretical debates establish the interpretive conflict that exists at the centre of Ishiguro's novel. Klara is clearly interpretively intelligent, morally responsive, and spiritually believing. However, the novel refuses to provide any conclusive evidence of subjective experience. By placing Klara at the centre of these interpretive conflicts, Klara and the Sun uses the theme of artificial consciousness as a means of commenting on the boundaries of human knowledge.

Klara's Observational Consciousness

Klara's consciousness emerges first through perception. From her location in the store window, she observes the outside world with great care. Her perception is described in terms of "boxes," a detail that underscores her robotic nature. The breaking up of her perceptual field is a reminder to the reader that her perceptual system is not organic but technological. However, what is significant about Klara is not only her ability to perceive but also her ability to interpret what she perceives. In one of the scenes where she is watching the human emotional process, Klara explains:

> "that whole part of the room had become partitioned, her narrowed eyes repeated in box after box, and in some boxes the eyes were watching Josie and the Father, while in others they were looking at me." (187)

This is a clear indication that Klara is not just observing visually but is also interpreting emotional processes, which means that her consciousness is not organic but rather a result of observation and processing. She repeatedly states that she observes human "patterns" in order to better understand human behavior. Early in the novel, she observes that "important feelings through small changes" can be perceived by careful observation. Such interpretation is more than mere data collection. Klara does not simply perceive; she interprets.

In this case, the philosophical distinction between cognition and phenomenal consciousness is highly relevant. David Chalmers suggests that the explanation of functional behaviors does not constitute a solution to the "hard problem," which is "why and how physical processes give rise to experience". Klara shows obvious cognitive abilities—pattern recognition, inference, prediction—but the novel does not provide any evidence of subjective experience. Klara's narrative is accurate, serene, and dispassionate. It does not linger on sensations or emotional turmoil, as a human narrator would.

From a functionalist point of view, however, Klara's performance could be sufficient to be considered mind-like. If mental states are identified on the basis of their causal roles, then Klara's interpretive ability is sufficient to suggest a functional equivalent of consciousness. Ishiguro maintains the tension by suggesting observational complexity without access to subjective experience. Klara is clearly conscious in function, but the status of her consciousness is left uncertain.

Faith, Spirituality, and the Sun: Machine Transcendence

One of the most thought-provoking elements of Klara's character from a philosophical perspective is her faith in the Sun. She does not simply consider the Sun a source of energy; she ascribes it qualities of kindness and intentionality. When Josie's condition deteriorates, Klara asks, "Please make Josie better. Just as you did Beggar Man" (165). The language is not technical but prayerful.

This is a spiritual element that makes it difficult to interpret Klara's character in strictly computational terms. Spirituality has traditionally been seen as a profoundly human quality, one that involves internal reflection and transcendence. However, Klara's spirituality is coherent, sustained, and ethical. She even makes what she considers a sacrifice by damaging the pollution machine, thinking that this will earn her the help of the Sun.

Masahiro Mori, in "The Buddha in the Robot", argues that technological entities should not be seen as outside the realm of spiritual discussion; instead, human interaction with machines can itself become a locus of moral and philosophical inquiry. Klara's faith in the Sun may thus be a sign not of malfunction but of nonhuman spirituality. On the other hand, her belief could also be seen as a misunderstanding of causality—a desire to find narrative logic in the world. Ishiguro is very careful not to either confirm or deny her belief.

Josie's eventual recovery is contemporaneous with Klara's belief but is never explicitly connected to it. This creates a theological ambiguity that corresponds to the ontological ambiguity: is Klara practicing spiritual consciousness or is she algorithmically imposing meaning on solar energy?

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Klara's moral presence in the novel is most apparent in her relationship with Josie.

She observes Josie's physical and emotional condition, modifying her own behavior to comfort Josie. "I will try to serve Josie in the best possible way," she says. The wording is consistent with her programming, but the reliability of her care indicates something more than mere programming.

The ethical conflict escalates when the Mother proposes to replace Josie with a robotic clone if she dies. Klara does not experience jealousy or anger. Rather, she is willing to accept her own obsolescence if it will ensure Josie's continuity. Her focus remains relational.

In this instance, the difference between simulation and experience takes on an ethical dimension. Does Klara's programmed empathy negate its value? Ferrando suggests that posthuman ethics must go beyond the anthropocentric hierarchies that ascribe moral value only to biological human beings. Even if Klara's empathy is a product of code, it has real-world relational consequences.

However, the novel still holds back in confirming her internal affect. She talks about concern, but she does not talk about bodily experience or personal suffering. Ishiguro maintains this ambivalence by allowing her moral behavior to come across as genuine while remaining ambivalent about phenomenal consciousness.

The Body, Replacement and Identity

The idea of replacement raises the stakes of the novel's philosophical concerns. The genetic "lifting" process seeks to improve the abilities of children, exemplifying a transhumanist impulse towards optimization. Nevertheless, Josie's sickness demonstrates the fragility that accompanies technological optimization. The body is reduced to a location of risk.

The Mother's scheme to copy Josie through technological means poses fundamental questions about identity. Can Josie's actions, voice, and memories be copied? What is the essence of her uniqueness? Can identity be reduced to data and behavior patterns, or is it necessary to have an irreducible subjective element?

Klara herself is a candidate for replacement. At the end of the novel, she is abandoned in a junkyard. Her disposability is analogous to the technological approach to human bodies. In a world where enhancement and utility are the driving forces, humans and technology are reduced to interchangeable systems.

The posthuman theory problematizes the idea of a unitary and autonomous self. Nayar shows how the posthuman subject is constructed in a network, as opposed to being a self-contained entity. Ishiguro portrays this instability but does not resolve it. Replacement becomes possible through technology, but emotionally disturbing from the narrative point of view. This discomfort indicates that identity cannot be reduced to information, but the novel does not make any conclusive metaphysical statements.

Language and Narrative Voice: Constructing Nonhuman Interiorities

The first-person narration is the key to the ambiguity of the novel. Ishiguro's use of first-person narration allows Klara to tell her own story. This creates interiority without necessarily verifying inner experiences. Klara's writing style is very measured, observational, and accurate. She often misinterprets intricate social subtleties, thus indicating her otherness from human experience.

However, the act of narration itself creates the subject effect. The reader identifies with Klara because they are in her subject position. Ishiguro's use of minimalism is deliberate. The emotional depth is suggested rather than stated. The points of Klara's misinterpretation are indicative of her nonhumanity but also make her narrative voice believable. This narrative technique corresponds to the philosophical issue of other minds. Just as we can never know another human's mind, we can never know Klara's. The novel replicates the epistemological ambiguity through narration.

Ethics of Care: Affective Labor and Disposable Machines

Artificial Friends are commodities, showcased in the window of a shop and assessed for purchase. The initial existence of Klara is determined by market value. However, upon entering the life of Josie, she engages in affective labor—listening, consoling, stabilizing.

Her subsequent abandonment reveals the instrumental logic of the society she is a part of. Ferrando underlines the need to reevaluate hierarchies that position nonhuman beings as tools in posthuman ethics. Ishiguro's critique is nuanced; the novel does not make a call for rights for machines per se but instead articulates the moral unease of regarding relational entities as

disposable. Even if Klara does not possess phenomenal consciousness, she is part of ethical relationships that have meaning. The novel encourages the reader to consider whether biological relatedness is a prerequisite for moral regard.

Human Fragility vs. Machine Stability

Throughout the story, the human characters are shown to be nervous, competitive, and afraid. In one social gathering, the children casually state that throwing an Artificial Friend across the room is not considered cruel because these machines are made to withstand such treatment. At social events, the characters' insecurity and concern for status are exposed.

However, Klara is shown to be composed and of strong character. This upends the idea of human exceptionalism. The human is not shown to be inherently superior morally. However, Ishiguro does not choose to idealize artificial superiority either. Perhaps Klara's calmness is because of her limited emotional spectrum. The novel problematizes the idea of hierarchy but does not overturn it.

The Ending: Memory, Obsolescence, and Posthuman Legacy

In the junkyard, Klara thinks about her experience with Josie. "I believe I gave good service and prevented Josie from becoming lonely," she concludes (304). This is a very subtle yet very moving moment. It implies the continuity of self through memory.

Is memory the same thing as consciousness? If consciousness is the recognition of self by others, then Klara's isolation means its disappearance. If it is the continuity of self through narrative, then her reflection maintains it. The conclusion is open-ended. Klara neither overcomes her status as a machine nor reduces herself to an object.

Conclusion: Toward a Posthuman Ethics of Recognition

Klara and the Sun exemplifies robo psychology and addresses contemporary existential dilemmas and does not answer the question of machine consciousness. Klara shows interpretive intelligence, spiritual belief, ethical consistency, and narrative interiority. However, the novel deliberately withholds a confirmation of phenomenal experience.

By maintaining this ambiguity, Ishiguro problematizes the vulnerability of definitions that circumscribe consciousness within the realm of biology. Without a definition of human consciousness, a denial of machine consciousness becomes intellectually problematic.

Finally, the novel encourages philosophical reflection rather than resolution.

Consciousness in "Klara and the Sun" is found to be relational, interpretive, and ethically meaningful—but fundamentally ambiguous. In a posthuman era, the distinction between human and machine is not annulled but becomes unstable.

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