

FAILED PROMISE OF HUMANISM VS. POSTHUMAN HUMANIST ARTIFICIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN KLARA AND THE SUN BY KAZUO ISHIGURO

Faiqa Rashid

frashid@numl.edu.pk

Assistant Professor

National University of Modern Languages, Lahore Campus

Ayesha Parveen

Assistant Professor

Virtual University, Lahore

Abstract

The interaction between humans and robots has generated a query about the emerging identities of both the entities. The robots are apparently designed to meet human needs but their inclusion in the lives of humans has opened a new debate on the existential boundaries between humans and nonhumans. The present research is a comparative cognitive study of humans and robots in Klara and the Sun (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro. The purpose of the research is to explore the reversal of behaviors of an artificial intelligence (AI) based robot and humans which manifests their cognitive consciousness and identity transformation. For this purpose, Rosi Braidotti's theory of Critical Posthumanism (2019) is employed as a theoretical framework to analyze the transformed consciousness of humans and robots in the age of Artificial Intelligence which challenges their labelled identities of being humans and machines. The autonomous consciousness of the robot Klara depicts the human qualities i.e., faith, gregariousness, love for nature etc. which humans fail to nurture in a posthuman society. The robot presents the lost human interaction, empathy, and affection for Sun, nature, and people which though expected of man, paradoxically, the artificially transformed upgraded men fail to value as existential needs. The study concludes that robots' conscious autonomy reflects the archetypal humanistic values in the technologically advanced yet morally collapsing environment and society.

Key Words: Artificial intelligence, Autonomous consciousness, Posthumanism, Robot.

Introduction:

The contemporary times problematize a critical and evolving human and nonhuman interaction which has laid foundation to posthumanism. Posthumanism is a philosophical and interdisciplinary field that challenges traditional conceptions of humans as self-contained entities, delving into the interaction amongst humans, nonhumans, and technology, problematizing the boundaries that separate human from nonhuman. This is because the nonhuman has been elaborated beyond things in contemporary times through the creation of talking and walking machines including robots. The robots were primarily introduced to assist and facilitate men but their inclusion in the lives of humans challenged the existential boundaries existing between the two entities. Rosi Braidotti (2019) argues that posthumanism is embedded in accepting the becoming of posthuman subjects which envelops the impact of zoe (nature), bios (culture), and technology on man (Braidotti, 2019, p. 50). It also challenges anthropocentric mindset that the humans are better than other subjects and pivotal in the mechanism of this world. Posthumanism is a call for defamiliarization from the cliché that only man can have the trait of intelligence. The present research aims to examine a literary writer's perception of AI autonomous consciousness in contrast to human transformative identity in a posthuman world. Kazuo Ishiguro creates a future world which depicts the impact of nature, culture, and technology on the lives of both humans and nonhumans. Klara is a robot who

is brought home by Josie's mother so that Klara can imitate Josie due to her keen observation. Josie experiences physical ailment due to the cumbersome process of uplifting and has previously lost her sister in such a similar process. Klara values Rick and Josie's relationship which is void of any conditions and wishes them to be together. Josie joins the university after her uplifting and Klara is seen abandoned in the backyard but fully contented. The research suggests that the invasion of AI in the life of humans calls for a revisit to positive human behavior and disruptive transformation of identity.

Research Objectives

The present research is a comparative-cognitive study of humans and robots in Klara and the Sun (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro. The objectives of the research are:

- To evaluate the reversal of behaviors of an AI robot and humans in Klara and the Sun to reveal the transformation of their existential identities as human and nonhuman in the Posthuman world.
- To problematize AI's conscious autonomy of understanding human emotions to restore the archetypal humanistic values in the technologically advanced yet apocalyptic Posthuman world as depicted in Klara and the Sun.

Research Questions

The research questions are following:

- Which transformative behaviors of humans in Klara and the Sun raise queries about the identities of humans and nonhumans (robots) in the Posthuman world?
- Which archetypal positive human values and behavior are reinforced through AI's conscious autonomy in Klara and the Sun?

Literature Review

Mughal et al. (2024) examine how the world of AI is either dystopian or utopian. They analyze how Ishiguro develops a new outlook towards humans and society in the context of technological advancement. They study the development of a dystopian world which results in manipulation, and chaos of human emotions and relations. In a similar vein, Vyas and Shah (2023) explore how AI exposes humans in this novel because they appear to be different but their interaction with Klara shows more of the hidden aspects of their personalities. They also analyze what technology has made of man. While Chapai (2024) studies the blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman entities in this context. He argues that AI robot not only cares for Josie in comparison to other humans, but also fully comprehends her emotions during different phases of her life. Similarly, Klara challenges anthropocentrism by manifesting emotions while dealing with other humans which renders the novel a posthumanist vision.

Sahu and Karmakar (2024) problematize how literary narrative reflects on the limitation of programmed machine to understand complexities of human mind. The novel opens a discourse on cognitive and emotive computing knowledge of robots. Though simulated empathetic minds are shown to be resolving the complexities of human mind and behavior in the novel, AI fails to decode human emotions. The social effort of availing robots for the care of humans has failed as robots cannot understand the complexities of human mind (Sahu & Karmakar, 2024). Ajeesh and Rukmini (2023) argue that Ishiguro has developed a new perception about AI's emotional intelligence. While Alkodimi (2024) analyses the ruptured boundaries between human and nonhuman in Klara and the Sun. The focus of his research is on emotional intelligence of humans

thus concluding that the robots cannot replace humans on earth because they lack emotional comprehension.

Researchers also focus upon the functionality of power dynamics between humans and nonhumans to study how AI intervenes in the life of humans. Bavetra (2021) studies how a humanoid develops faith and love in the life of a girl who was losing it in the hands of science and technology. Sun (2022) analyses how humans control nonhumans in *Klara and the Sun* instead of other humans to achieve perfection. Likewise Simonetti (2024) uses Foucauldian theory of gaze to study power relationships between humans and nonhumans in the novel. Similarly, Stenseke (2022) argues that Klara's moral agency depends upon the views of others which implies humans in posthumanist world. In this regard, Lanlun Du (2022) studies the element of hope that Klara shows through love and altruism in the relationships between humans and nonhumans. Mejia and Nikolaidis (2022) examine the dynamics of new life and new experiences in a posthuman world.

This study aims to address the research gap by evaluating that the transformed identity of man has diminished the possibility of his inherent goodness in the contemporary technologically advanced world. Klara will not replace humans but will expose the worst form of human existence that may trigger apocalypse. The current research also negates Alkodimi's claim that Klara as an AI robot lacks the human quality of emotional intelligence.

Methodology

Rosi Braidotti's Critical Posthumanism theory propounded in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* with its proposed method is used for the analysis of *Klara and the Sun* (2021) by Kazuo Ishiguro

Theoretical Constructs

Rosi Braidotti (2019) argues that ontologically, the world is "contiguous and co-constructed" (p. 117). In this way, all matter, creatures, and people are of equal importance. She gives importance to subjectivity as "collective assemblage" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 148) which includes human and nonhuman actors. Braidotti posits that critical posthumanism is neo-Spinozist monist ontology that foregrounds the posthuman being as an affective and accountable entity, which needs to be comprehended as embodied and embedded beyond its relegation to a transcendental consciousness. Therefore, the mind-body continuum as well as nature-culture continuum are of utmost significance for critical posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019)

Posthuman Methodology

Following aspects have been suggested by Braidotti to analyze a text from posthuman lens.

- Debunking the anthropocentric mindset
- Defamiliarizing the taken-for-granted
- Dislodging universalist thinking
- Rejecting power hierarchies
- Becoming of Posthuman subjects

Analysis

Debunking anthropocentric mindset – Klara as a humanist humanoid android

Critical Posthumanism rejects the pride associated with the status of man as superior to other existing bodies. Humans exploited religion, education, intellect, and science to endorse their superiority in this world until the advent of the posthumanism that dismantles this notion. Posthumanism suggests that man is not better than other matters and all matters have collective presence in this world. Klara is a humanoid android but exhibits all those positive human traits which humans are gradually losing in the competitive and advanced world of technology. The

cognitive analysis of her behaviour and interaction with humans suggests that she has modified herself during her interaction with humans which reflects her growing humanistic identity. She explains her expertise of developing cognition of human emotions as she says to Josie's father, "The heart you speak of, ... might indeed be the hardest part of Josie to learn. It might be like a house with many rooms. Even so, a devoted Artificial Friend (AF), given time, could walk through each of those rooms, studying them carefully in turn, until they became like her own home (Ishiguro, 2021, p.136)".

On the contrary, humanistic qualities are shown to keep decreasing thus ushering into an apocalyptic world. The comparison between Klara, the robot and other humans reveals that Klara is capable of developing human attributes to accommodate herself among humans while humans are desirous to modify their genetic making by uplifting themselves to segregate them from other humans which suggests that the onus of bringing apocalypse is on humans. Josie's elder sister died during this process of uplifting but her mother is repeating the same process with Josie because she cherishes the idea of uplifting. Klara's humanist heart becomes apologetic even to her fellow robots when she thinks that others get hurt despite their machine-like existence.

Ishiguro has created a community of robots in the showroom which draws a parallel world with those of the humans. Several robots of different qualities are displayed in the showroom run by the manager who teaches Klara not to develop emotions with the children appearing as customers at the showroom. Klara seems considerate and more humanly in building, understanding, and maneuvering emotions. When other robots amusingly accuse Klara of taking all the solar nourishment; she says, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take it all myself (Ishiguro, 2021, p.28)." In the parallel android world, Klara as the representative of robots has shaken the status of man as a representative of intellect and humanity. She, placed in the showcase, is assured by the manager of the "special honour of representing the store to the outside (Ishiguro, 2021, p.10)." It echoes the questionable representative status of the humans which has brought chaos on earth. Klara is connected with the mother-nature and believes in nature's benevolence: as she says, "The Sun always has ways to reach us (Ishiguro, 2021, p.9)" and "The sun kept us warm (Ishiguro, 2021, p.11)." She looks up to sun for saving them through different ways: "The Sun, I knew, was trying his utmost, and towards the end of the second bad afternoon, even though the smoke was worse than ever, his patterns appeared again, though only faintly (Ishiguro, 2021, p.24)." Her love for nature is overt in the description through the observation of a robot: "fields adjoining one another, and anyone looking carefully could see the posts marking their boundaries. The grass was tall in all three fields, and when the wind blew, it would move as if invisible passers-by were hurrying through it (Ishiguro, 2021, p.38)." At the same time she hates the Cootings Machine because it aggravates the pollution of the planet earth where she belongs to. Klara is grateful to sun for its benevolence which humans ignore and thus fail to establish any sense of belonging.

Klara as a robot shows concern for other humans e.g., about their health or emotional collapse. She is a robot who develops emotional bonding with Josie as if she were not programmed to nurse Josie but to analyze meticulously every factor that affects her. Through her keen interest in Rick she is able to determine how important Rick is for Josie. She expresses her commitment with Josie: "it's now my duty to be Josie's best friend (Ishiguro, 2021, p.39)." For that, she commanded herself to take the uphill task of crossing the field which was covered with tall grass to pray before the sun for Josie. The quintessential quality of gregariousness is at a constant decline among humans while Klara seems to generate it towards other humans.

The stark comparison between Klara and humans is highlighted through her belief in hope as she believes: “It is wrong to give up hope (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 130).” Josie’s mother also trusts that Klara’s hope will be more powerful than her belief in uplifting which often diffuses in uncertainty. Ishiguro has projected a world that has become advanced to launch robots for various services but is devoid of many humanistic elements. At the same time, the posthuman entity Klara symbolizes the centrality of Faith when she prays to sun: “Please make Josie better. Just as you did Beggar Man (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 104).” On the other hand, Mr. Capaldi wants Josie’s mother not to lose faith in AI which paradoxically has faith in the entity of nature. Klara finds out answers to men’s agonies and desperations when she claims the revival of Faith: “I believe help might come from a place the adults haven’t yet considered (Ishiguro, 2021, p.166).” Ishiguro mocks humans by calling them adults who have not yet discovered the ways to relief and solace.

Defamiliarizing the taken-for-granted – Cognitive Consciousness of Klara

The world of Klara and the Sun presents Klara as an imaginative being which is a creative quality of being human. Contrarily, humans have been presented with calculations, assessments, and results such as the mother has a calculated assumption about Josie’s new life. Instead of imagining her growing with her friends, the mother apprehends her death during the process of uplifting. Humans have developed fears and imaginative power has abated. While Klara often perceives, imagines, synthesizes, and connects people and ideas to formulate a unifying perception. She used to imagine RPO building in the showroom which she finds different from her imagination, yet humans are rarely shown to imagine because they have fears to suppress their imagination.

When Klara sees Josie for the first time while standing in the showcase she notes, “A child would come up excitedly, alone or with their adult, then point, laugh, pull a strange face, tap the glass, wave (Ishiguro, 2021, p.12).” She readily understands the desire in Josie’s eyes to buy Klara. She is taught by the manager that she should not wait for children if they make any promise of coming back to her. Therefore, Klara acts indifferently when Josie pays a second visit to the showroom for buying her to avoid disappointment if Josie alters her mind. Klara adapts her responses according to the need as she tells Rick that Josie wants to apologize which is in fact a lie but it breaks the strange silence between Rick and Josie and they reconcile. Also, she remains quiet whenever she finds Josie in anger.

Klara is also keen to observe and imbibe the mysterious emotions of passers-by humans. Once she studies a human emotion, she is capable of developing the same in herself to some degree, for example, she develops the emotion of feeling sad for other robots, about thinking if Rosa and she will be separated. In the callous world of humans Klara, the robot studies and generates positive human emotions: “I believe I have many feelings. The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 65).” Ishiguro’s robot has cognitive consciousness of human emotions and has the ability to generate those emotion in herself. She often imagines how she and Rosa would respond if they meet after a lapse of time. She questions herself about whether they would feel awkward for each other.

Dislodging universalist thinking – the World is Co-created

Braidotti (2019) argues that the posthuman critiques can provide us with ways to reconceptualize our existence and, thereby, enhance our capacity to move forward with a positive affirmation (p.11). Klara and the Sun is introduced with two parallel worlds. Apparently divided between robots and humans but humans are further divided between lifted and unlifted, between those who believe in AI upgradation and those who are intimidated by technological invasion in human life.

The novel sets a mood from the beginning that a child without an AF would feel lonely in a technologically advanced world. Klara observes AFs in children's company keenly and notices, some seem tired as if the children do not like them. This conveys a kind of hostility growing in the world of humans affecting machines too. The world is dependent on the help from AI which shows that humans are now replacing humans with nonhumans. The positive thinking and vibes of human interaction can be compared with the disruptive activities of humans lifted or ready to be lifted.

Rejecting power hierarchies - humans vs. nonhumans

The novel unfolds the power hierarchies prevailing among humans and robots. Humans are divided between lifted and unlifted while there is a variety of AI robots which carry various functions and each new launch devalues the previous creed of robots. The new world accepts the lifted children and the rest become a part of a cut throat competition to make their place in society and academic institutions such as colleges, for example, Rick will not be offered admission in any college. The lifted children are not ethically better than others. They rebuke, satirize, and bully Rick to maintain their superiority over him.

In the party, Rick is not welcomed by anyone, moreover, he is left unattended by Josie as well. All neighboring aunts have a mutual perception that Rick should not try to mingle with other children who have been / will be lifted. Ishiguro reveals that universities discouraged unlifted children to join, "Atlas Brookings takes a small number of unlifted students. The only proper college that will still do so. They believe in the principle and thank heavens for that (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 94)." Atlas Brookings is the only option for Rick to join if he wants to stay unlifted. Similarly, Rick's mother is an outcast because she fails to understand and embrace the new norm of this AI influenced world. Josie's mother, however, demonstrates willingness to try this process of uplifting though she has lost her elder daughter; which indicates a regressive transformation of humans in pursuit of a life more stable, healthy, in vogue yet unreal. This acceptance of AI assistance brews various fears in people, that is why the mother is afraid of losing Josie and planning to get her imitated through an AI robot. People are ascending the ladder of hierarchy by gaining immortality. Rick and Klara are soon left behind by lifted Josie who needs more friends like herself.

Ishiguro rejects power hierarchies because Klara is a robot operated by the mother, yet she is the sole entity that generates the element of hope, faith, integrity, affection, and altruism in an apocalyptic world. He does not value the AI generated programs because what he values in a robot is a mirror of the very human self. Therefore, the novel's dystopian world warns us against the imminent loss of humanistic traits, lest it ruins the core values of humanity as Klara teaches the readers about their stubbornness: "'I'm sorry. It's my error. I don't understand yet the rules about forgiveness (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 87).'"

Posthuman subjectivities in the process of becoming – identity development of humans and nonhumans

The crucial process of becoming is addressed in posthumanism which has transformed the identity of both human and nonhuman entities. In the process of becoming, they are shown to swap their positions and this new positionality has stimulated the disbelief in constructive humanistic traits of homo sapiens. Klara is associated with positive emotions such as compassion, love, care, gregariousness, faith, commitment, integrity etc. Contrary to that, humans are shown to be in the state of being with engagement in demeaning others, building class differences, maintaining superiority by all means, believing in machine more than themselves and nature, and above all disconnecting themselves from others and nature. Klara is becoming more human-like by imbibing

their humane traits and humans more nonhuman or robotic by demonstrating negative emotions. The narration includes a lot of technological terms such as AFs, B3s, Cootings machine, unlified, lifted, while we find very less positive human emotions expressed around Josie. The process of becoming manifests in Klara's emotional intelligence which facilitates her cherishing the very idea of staying with Josie in the time of her physical sickness. Josie's father seems reluctant to proceed with the uplifting process but he undoubtedly gives AI another chance to provide a better version of his daughter. He is the one who realizes that a robot cannot retain the true self of his daughter as he asks Klara, "Do you believe in the human heart? I don't mean simply the organ, obviously. I'm speaking in the poetic sense. The human heart. Do you think there is such a thing? (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 136)" which shows that he wants an AI robot to retain love and compassion which humans started losing.

Conclusion

This study builds a comparative inquiry of human and nonhuman existence in the age of AI revolution. The study reveals the reversal of existential identities of posthuman subjects. It addressed the critical and compelling question of where has the humanist legacy reached in the posthuman age? The autonomous cognitive consciousness of robot Klara depicts the positive human qualities i.e., faith in sun, gregariousness, love for nature, empathy, and altruism, which humans fail to nurture in the society. Humans have stopped valuing these humane qualities and believe desperately in controlling time by chasing immortality through uplifting of humans. Ishiguro reflects on the lost humanist traits and values through the deep observation and cognition of a robot, Klara. She presents a replica, emblem, and epitome of human efforts in past centuries to define positive human traits regardless of the distinction of cast and creed. In other words, AI has ushered into a new age of discrimination based on machine generated life and intelligence of humans. This new age may be free from bias against others of different color, nation or group but will adamantly outcast those who are not upgraded. By using the robots, man has learnt to mutate homo sapiens while Ishiguro crafted a robot who is undermining the worth of humans by displaying the human heart and traits in a machine body. In this apocalyptic world, humans appear to exist as an extinct species in the existing vacuum of posthuman world. Ishiguro has shown us the apocalyptic dystopia that stimulates the invigorate goodness of humanity by contemplating on the loss that humans fail to gauge in the pride of technological progress.

References

- Ajeesh, A. K., & Rukmini, S. (2023). Posthuman perception of artificial intelligence in science fiction: An exploration of Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun. *AI & Society*, 38(2), 853–860. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-022-01533-9>
- Alkodimi, K. A. (2024). Posthumanism, Artificial intelligence and Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun: can humanoid machines attain consciousness? *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 8.1 (S1), 2000-2014. <https://doi.org/10.70082/esiculture.vi.1611>.
- Bavetra, S., & Ravi, R. (2021). Hope, faith, love, human and humanoid: A study of Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the sun. *Science, Technology and Development*, 10(5), 295-301.
- Braidotti, R. (2017). Posthuman Critical Theory. *Posthuman Studies* 1 (1), 9-25.
- Braidotti, R. (2016). Posthuman critical theory. *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, 13-32.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge* (Vol. 2). Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Chapai, U. (2024). Transcending the Boundaries of Human and AI Being: A Posthuman Study of Kazuo Ishiguro's Novel *Klara and the Sun*. *Pragnya Sarathi*, 22(1), 6–13.
<https://doi.org/10.3126/ps.v22i1.64833>
- Du, L. (2022). Love and hope: Affective labor and posthuman relations in *Klara and The Sun*. *Neohelicon*, 49(2), 551–562. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-022-00671-9>
- Ishiguro, K. (2021). New York: Alfred A Knopf.
- Mejia, S., & Nikolaidis, D. (2022). Through New Eyes: Artificial Intelligence, Technological Unemployment, and Transhumanism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 178(1), 303–306. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05062-9>
- Mughal, M., Lashari, M. & Khan, K. (2024). Technological advancement in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel "Klara and the Sun": Dystopia or utopia? *Grassroots*, 58 (1), 47-63.
<https://sociology.usindh.edu.pk/index.php/Grassroots/article/view/7219/4602>
- Sahu, O. P., & Karmakar, M. (2024). Disposable culture, posthuman affect, and artificial human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021). *AI & Society*, 39(3), 1349–1357.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-022-01600-1>
- Simonetti, N. (2024). Mastering Otherness with a Look: On the Politics of the Gaze and Technological Possibility in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 65(2), 312–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2023.2186773>
- Stenseke, J. (2022). *The Morality of Artificial Friends in Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun*. 5.
- Sun, Y. (2022). Post/Human Perfectibility and the Technological Other in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 64(3), 504–511.
- Vyas, S. C., and Manisha F. S. (2023) "Artificial Intelligence in Kazuo Ishiguro's 'Klara and the Sun'.