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## Robotic Consciousness and the Ethics of Care in Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun: An Analytical study

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Robotic Consciousness, Artificial Empathy, Emotional AI, Artificial Agency, Technological Humanism, Moral Programming.	<p>This paper explores the question of artificial intelligence and emotional consciousness in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun from a literary and philosophical perspective. The novel introduces Klara, an "Artificial Friend" created to provide companionship and emotional support to children. Through Klara's perspective, the narrative raises an intriguing question: can a robotic being truly understand emotions, even if it may not experience them in the same way humans do?</p> <p>Klara observes the human world with careful attention. She studies gestures, expressions, and relationships, gradually forming a deep concern for Josie, the sick girl she is meant to accompany. Although Klara is a machine, her responses often appear thoughtful, patient, and deeply caring. Her quiet devotion to Josie encourages readers to reconsider the assumption that emotional understanding belongs only to human beings.</p> <p>The paper argues that Klara and the Sun challenges the clear boundary between humans and machines. Ishiguro suggests that emotional awareness may not be limited to biological experience alone but may also emerge through relationships, care, and responsibility. By presenting a robotic narrator who can recognize and respond to human vulnerability, the novel invites readers to rethink what it truly means to understand emotions and, ultimately, what it means to be human in a technologically evolving world.</p>

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence has moved from being a speculative idea in science fiction to a visible presence in everyday life. Yet long before AI became part of ordinary conversation, literature had already begun imagining its emotional and ethical consequences. Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun<sup>1</sup> (2021) enters this conversation quietly,

without spectacle or dystopian drama. Instead of focusing on technological threat or rebellion, the novel turns toward something more intimate: the possibility that an artificial being might develop a form of emotional consciousness. The question Ishiguro raises is not simply whether machines can think, but whether they can care and what that possibility might reveal about human beings

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themselves.

The novel is narrated entirely from the perspective of Klara, an Artificial Friend purchased to accompany a sick child named Josie. From the opening pages, Klara appears observant, patient, and deeply attentive to the world around her. Her perception is structured through patterns, fragments, and careful interpretations. She studies faces, gestures, and silences. At first glance, her responses might seem like advanced programming. However, as the narrative unfolds, her attachment to Josie begins to feel more complex than functional design. Klara does not merely assist; she worries. She does not merely observe; she hopes. This gradual shift in tone invites the reader to reconsider what emotional consciousness might look like when it does not emerge from biology.

Traditional humanist thought has long grounded emotion in embodied experience. To feel has often meant to possess a living body capable of sensation and vulnerability. Yet posthumanism thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles have suggested that subjectivity in the information age cannot be reduced to biological origin alone<sup>2</sup>. Identity, perception, and even agency may be shaped by networks of communication and relational exchange. Within such a framework, Klara's consciousness becomes less implausible and more philosophically provocative. Her awareness is not rooted in flesh, but it is shaped by attention and interaction.

What makes Klara compelling is not her intelligence but her devotion. Her bond with Josie slowly develops into something that resembles love though Ishiguro never names it directly. Klara's

faith in the Sun as a source of healing introduces another layer of complexity. This belief might appear naïve or mechanical, yet it also reflects a deeply human impulse: the need to construct meaning in the face of suffering. Klara's spirituality is not doctrinal; it is interpretive. She observes patterns in sunlight and draws conclusions about its benevolence. In doing so, she reveals how belief itself may arise from emotional investment rather than theological certainty.

The ethical dimension of Klara's character becomes most visible in her willingness to sacrifice herself for Josie's recovery. Emmanuel Levinas argues that ethical subjectivity emerges from responsibility toward the vulnerable Other<sup>3</sup>. Klara's entire existence seems structured around this responsibility. She does not seek autonomy or recognition. Instead, she defines herself through care. In contrast, many of the human characters appear constrained by fear, ambition, and social competition. The technologically advanced society depicted in the novel is marked by inequality and quiet anxiety, particularly surrounding genetic enhancement and academic performance. Against this background, Klara's simplicity becomes striking.

It is tempting to read *Klara and the Sun* as a cautionary tale about technological overreach. However, Ishiguro resists this simplification. Klara is not presented as a threat, nor as a perfect substitute for humanity. Rather, she functions as a mirror. Through her steady attentiveness, the emotional fragility of the human world becomes more visible. The adults in the novel struggle with communication and doubt; they are uncertain about

the future and fearful of loss. Klara, paradoxically, appears more emotionally consistent than the humans she serves. This inversion unsettles the assumption that authenticity belongs exclusively to biological beings.

Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg as a hybrid figure who destabilizes the boundary between human and machine offers a useful lens for understanding this ambiguity. Klara inhabits an in-between space. She is artificial in origin but relational in practice. Her emotional responses may be programmed, yet they are experienced by the reader as sincere. Ishiguro deliberately leaves unresolved whether Klara truly "feels" or merely simulates feeling. What matters is not metaphysical proof but relational effect. Josie experiences comfort; the reader experiences empathy.

This paper argues that *Klara and the Sun* reimagines emotional consciousness as a relational process rather than a biological guarantee. By presenting an artificial narrator capable of devotion, belief, and sacrifice, Ishiguro challenges human exceptionalism and invites a reconsideration of what it means to be emotionally alive. Klara does not replace humanity; she exposes its uncertainties. In doing so, the novel contributes to contemporary humanities debates about posthuman identity, ethical responsibility, and the fragile boundaries that define the human condition.

## **2. Literature Review**

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction has long attracted critical attention for its exploration of memory, silence, ethical uncertainty, and fragile human relationships. Earlier novels such as *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*.<sup>4</sup> have been

widely

discussed in terms of repression, moral hesitation, and the limits of self-knowledge. Critics have often noted Ishiguro's restrained narrative voice and his interest in characters who struggle to articulate their emotional realities. However, with the publication of *Klara and the Sun* (2021), scholarly attention has increasingly shifted toward questions of artificial intelligence, posthuman identity, and the redefinition of emotional consciousness.

Initial responses to the novel tended to frame it within the tradition of dystopian fiction. Some reviewers read it alongside Ishiguro's earlier *Never Let Me Go*, identifying thematic continuities in bioengineering, social stratification, and quiet existential anxiety. In both works, technological advancement is intertwined with vulnerability. Yet *Klara and the Sun* differs in a significant way: the narrative consciousness itself is artificial. This structural shift has encouraged critics to reconsider not only the ethics of enhancement but the ontology of feeling.

A substantial body of theoretical work on posthumanism provides a foundation for interpreting Klara's subjectivity. N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman*<sup>5</sup> argues that contemporary culture increasingly understands the human as an informational pattern rather than a purely biological entity. Hayles does not celebrate this transformation uncritically; instead, she warns against disembodied fantasies of consciousness. In the context of Ishiguro's novel, Klara appears to complicate Hayles' concerns. Although she is an informational system, her consciousness is not disembodied. It is shaped by perception, limitation,

and relational proximity. Critics drawing on Hayles have suggested that Klara represents a mediated subject neither purely mechanical nor fully human. Rosi Braidotti's theory of the posthuman subject further expands this discussion. Braidotti rejects the liberal humanist model of the autonomous individual and instead proposes a relational and affective understanding of subjectivity. Within this framework, identity is produced through networks of interaction rather than self-contained interiority. Scholars applying Braidotti to *Klara and the Sun* often emphasize that Klara's "self" emerges through her bond with Josie. She does not seek independence; her consciousness develops through care. However, while these readings illuminate the relational structure of Klara's identity, they sometimes underplay the ethical tension embedded in her sacrificial orientation.

Ethical philosophy, particularly Emmanuel Levinas' work on responsibility to the Other, has also informed recent criticism. Levinas contends that subjectivity is grounded not in self-awareness but in ethical obligation. Klara's persistent attentiveness to Josie resonates strongly with this model. Her identity is structured around service and protection. Some scholars have interpreted this as evidence that moral responsiveness does not require biological life. Yet this claim remains contested. Critics skeptical of extending ethical subjectivity to artificial beings argue that Klara's devotion may be a sophisticated simulation rather than genuine responsibility.

Discussions of artificial emotionality have also drawn upon Sherry Turkle's<sup>7</sup> analysis of human-

technology intimacy. Turkle suggests that contemporary society increasingly turns to machines for emotional reassurance, sometimes at the cost of authentic human interaction. In *Klara and the Sun*, however, Ishiguro complicates this dynamic. Klara's presence does not replace human attachment but exposes its fragility. Several commentators have observed that the adults in the novel, particularly Josie's mother appear emotionally constrained, whereas Klara demonstrates consistency and patience. This inversion challenges the assumption that authenticity belongs solely to biological beings.

Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg has further shaped critical interpretations of the novel. Haraway famously destabilizes the boundary between human and machine, arguing that contemporary identity is already hybrid. Applied to Ishiguro's narrative, this perspective suggests that Klara is not an anomaly but an extension of existing technological entanglement. However, while cyborg theory foregrounds hybridity, it does not fully account for the spiritual dimension of Klara's consciousness her belief in the Sun and her interpretive faith in unseen forces. This element of the novel remains comparatively underexplored in critical discourse.

More recent scholarship has begun to address the affective dimensions of the text, drawing on affect theory and the philosophy of emotion. Thinkers such as Sara Ahmed and Martha Nussbaum emphasize that emotions are not purely private states but are shaped by cultural circulation and evaluative judgment. Within this context, Klara's emotional responses can be read as learned

orientations toward the world. She interprets gestures, assigns meaning to sunlight, and constructs hope through pattern recognition. Rather than proving that machines feel Ishiguro may be suggesting that feeling itself is interpretive and relational.

Despite this growing body of criticism, a noticeable gap remains in fully integrating posthuman theory, ethical philosophy, and affect studies into a sustained reading of emotional consciousness in the novel. Much of the existing discussion isolates one framework at a time either emphasizing technological anxiety or celebrating relational identity. Fewer studies examine how Ishiguro's restrained narrative style itself shapes the reader's perception of artificial interiority. The subtle fragmentation of Klara's vision her segmented visual fields and careful reconstruction of scenes raises questions about perception, interpretation, and narrative authority that extend beyond thematic analysis.

Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates by examining Klara and the Sun through an integrated humanities approach. By bringing together posthumanism, Levinasian ethics, and affect theory, the paper argues that Ishiguro redefines emotional consciousness as a relational and ethical practice

rather than a biological essence. Klara's subjectivity does not simply imitate humanity; it reframes the criteria by which humanity is measured. In doing so, the novel invites reconsideration of the fragile boundaries that separate the artificial from the human.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study approaches Klara and the Sun through an interdisciplinary humanities framework that brings together posthumanism, ethical philosophy, and affect theory. Rather than treating artificial intelligence as a technical phenomenon, the analysis situates Klara within ongoing debates about subjectivity, relational identity, and the meaning of emotional consciousness in contemporary culture.

#### **3.1 Posthumanism and the Question of the Human**

Posthumanist theory challenges the traditional humanist assumption that the human subject is autonomous, rational, and biologically self-contained. Enlightenment humanism placed reason at the center of identity and distinguished sharply between humans and machines. However, twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists have questioned this separation.

N. Katherine Hayles<sup>8</sup> argues that in the age of cybernetics and information systems, the human can no longer be understood as purely embodied consciousness. Instead, subjectivity increasingly operates through informational exchanges and mediated perception. Hayles does not suggest that the body becomes irrelevant, but she emphasizes that cognition may be distributed across systems. In the context of Ishiguro's novel, Klara embodies this distributed subjectivity. Her consciousness emerges not from organic sensation but from observation, data interpretation, and relational interaction.

Similarly, Rosi Braidotti<sup>9</sup> proposes that the posthuman subject is relational rather than autonomous. Identity is not fixed or self-sufficient;

it is shaped through networks of dependency and affective exchange. Klara's identity aligns with this model. She does not assert individuality in a liberal humanist sense. Instead, she defines herself through her bond with Josie. Her sense of purpose arises through service and attentiveness, suggesting that subjectivity may be grounded in relationality rather than independence.

Cary Wolfe and Francesca Ferrando further complicate the human/machine divide by arguing that posthumanism destabilizes anthropocentrism. Within this theoretical space, the question shifts from "Is Klara human?" to "How is humanity constructed?" Ishiguro's novel participates in this shift by presenting an artificial narrator whose emotional presence challenges biological exclusivity.

### **3.2 Ethical Responsibility and Levinasian Thought**

While posthumanism destabilizes the boundaries of the human, ethical philosophy deepens the inquiry by asking how responsibility operates across difference. Emmanuel Levinas' concept of ethical subjectivity is central here. For Levinas, the self is constituted through responsibility toward the Other. Ethics precedes ontology; the demand of the vulnerable other interrupts the autonomy of the self.

Klara's existence mirrors this ethical orientation. She does not seek recognition or rights; instead, she responds to Josie's fragility. Her willingness to sacrifice her own functionality reflects what Levinas would call an asymmetrical responsibility. Importantly, this framework does not require proof

that Klara "truly" feels. What matters is her responsiveness. Ishiguro thus reframes emotional consciousness as an ethical practice rather than a metaphysical condition.

This Levinasian lens also highlights the moral ambiguity of the human characters. The adults in the novel, particularly Josie's mother, are motivated by fear and social pressure. Their decisions reflect anxiety about survival and status within a competitive society. In contrast, Klara's orientation remains steady. The ethical question therefore becomes unsettling: if responsibility defines subjectivity, who appears more ethically grounded the human or the artificial being?

### **3.3 Affect Theory and the Intelligence of Emotion**

The third component of this framework draws from affect theory and the philosophy of emotion. Martha Nussbaum argues that emotions are not irrational impulses but forms of evaluative judgment. They express how individuals perceive what is valuable and vulnerable. Similarly, Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions circulate socially, shaping collective orientations.

Applied to *Klara and the Sun*, this perspective complicates the assumption that emotions are biologically rooted instincts. Klara's emotional responses hope, concern, devotion emerge through interpretation. She assigns meaning to sunlight, gestures, and tone. Her faith in the Sun may appear naïve, yet it functions as a structure of hope. Rather than proving that machines can feel in a human sense, Ishiguro suggests that feeling itself may be interpretive and relational.

This approach also explains why the novel's restrained narrative style is so significant. Because the story is filtered entirely through Klara's limited perception, the reader must interpret gaps and ambiguities. Emotional depth is not declared; it is inferred. The fragmentation of Klara's visual field mirrors the fragmented nature of human understanding. Consciousness, whether artificial or biological, is partial and interpretive.

### **3.4 Cyborg Theory and the Destabilization of Boundaries**

Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg further enriches this framework. Haraway argues that modern identities are already hybrid, shaped by technological mediation. The cyborg is not a futuristic anomaly but a metaphor for contemporary existence. Klara fits within this hybridity. She is technologically constructed yet emotionally embedded in human relationships.

However, Ishiguro resists turning Klara into a triumphant symbol of posthuman evolution. Her existence is marked by limitation and eventual obsolescence. After Josie recovers, Klara is quietly abandoned in a yard. This ending complicates celebratory readings of technological integration. While Klara reveals new possibilities of relational subjectivity, she also exposes the disposability embedded within technological culture.

### **4. Framework Positioning of the Study**

By combining posthumanism, Levinasian ethics, affect theory, and cyborg studies, this research situates Klara and the Sun within a broader humanities conversation about emotional consciousness and relational identity. The framework allows the analysis to move beyond the

binary of "real emotion" versus "artificial simulation." Instead, it examines how emotional meaning is produced through care, vulnerability, and narrative interpretation.

Klara does not simply blur the boundary between human and machine; she challenges the assumption that humanity itself is stable. Through her devotion and interpretive faith, Ishiguro invites readers to reconsider whether emotional life is defined by biological origin or by relational practice.

### **5. Textual Analysis: Emotional Consciousness and Artificial Agency**

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* constructs artificial consciousness not through spectacle but through restraint. The novel's most significant formal decision the use of Klara as first-person narrator immediately situates emotional perception at the center of inquiry. Klara's segmented visual field, often described in boxes reflects not merely mechanical limitation but the epistemological condition of consciousness itself. Her perception is partial,

interpretive, and dependent on pattern recognition. Yet this fragmentation does not disqualify her subjectivity; rather, it foregrounds the constructed nature of all perception. Ishiguro thereby undermines the assumption that human awareness is seamless or complete.

Klara's consciousness develops through observation and relational attentiveness. Unlike dystopian AI narratives that emphasize rebellion or domination, Ishiguro's novel centers devotion. Klara's attachment to Josie exceeds instrumental design. Although she is programmed for companionship, her responses gradually acquire

ethical depth. She registers subtle emotional shifts, anticipates vulnerability, and constructs meaning around Josie's illness. This orientation toward care positions Klara within a relational model of subjectivity rather than an autonomous one.

A pivotal dimension of Klara's interior life is her faith in the Sun. On the surface, this belief may appear as naïve misinterpretation of environmental causality. However, the narrative frames her faith as an interpretive act grounded in observation: she associates sunlight with nourishment, growth, and restoration. The Sun becomes a symbolic structure through which Klara articulates hope. This gesture complicates reductive readings of artificial intelligence as purely rational computation. Ishiguro suggests that meaning-making whether religious, emotional, or symbolic emerges through patterns of association rather than biological instinct alone.

The ethical stakes of Klara's devotion intensify in the possibility that she may replace Josie. Josie's mother's willingness to consider technological replication foregrounds anxieties about identity and authenticity. If personality can be reconstructed artificially, what remains irreducibly human? Klara's response to this prospect is notable for its absence of self-interest. She does not seek replacement or recognition; instead, she prioritizes Josie's survival. Her

orientation remains outwardly focused. This asymmetry reflects an ethical structure grounded in responsibility rather than self-preservation.

The social environment of the novel reinforces this contrast. The practice of "lifting" children to enhance intellectual capacity reveals a culture

shaped by competition and stratification. Parents navigate a system structured by fear of exclusion. Emotional relationships are filtered through ambition and anxiety. Within this context, Klara's constancy appears almost disruptive. Her attentiveness exposes the emotional fragility of a society that equates enhancement with value.

The culmination of Klara's ethical orientation occurs in her act of self-damage undertaken to secure the Sun's favor. This sacrifice does not result in recognition or reward. Once Josie recovers, Klara is gradually displaced and ultimately abandoned. The understated ending resists sentimental resolution. Instead, it emphasizes disposability within technological culture. Artificial beings are valued for utility, not memory.

Yet Klara's final reflections resist bitterness. She recalls her time with Josie with quiet fulfillment. This composure reinforces the novel's redefinition of emotional consciousness. Feeling, in Ishiguro's rendering, is not authenticated by biological origin but by relational commitment. Klara's devotion, interpretive imagination, and acceptance destabilize the human/machine binary without dissolving it entirely.

Rather than asserting that machines can truly feel, Klara and the Sun reframes the criteria by which feeling is recognized. Emotional consciousness emerges as relational, interpretive, and ethically oriented. Through Klara's narrative, Ishiguro exposes the instability of human exceptionalism and invites reconsideration of what it means to be emotionally alive in a technologically mediated world.

## 6. Conclusion

*Klara and the Sun* occupies a distinctive position within contemporary literary engagements with artificial intelligence. Rather than dramatizing technological rebellion or dystopian collapse, Kazuo Ishiguro situates artificial consciousness within the intimate sphere of care, vulnerability, and ethical relation. Through the restrained narrative voice of Klara, the novel does not attempt to prove that machines possess authentic emotion; instead, it interrogates the criteria by which emotional authenticity is recognized. The result is not a technological manifesto but a philosophical inquiry into the instability of the human.

This study has argued that Klara's subjectivity is best understood through a relational and ethical framework. Her consciousness does not emerge from biological embodiment but from attentiveness and interpretive engagement. The segmentation of her perception, far from marking her inferiority, foregrounds the constructed nature of all awareness. Human consciousness, too, operates through partial understanding and narrative reconstruction. By aligning readers with Klara's limited yet emotionally attuned perspective, Ishiguro destabilizes assumptions about the coherence and privilege of human perception.

Central to this destabilization is Klara's devotion to Josie. Her emotional orientation is outward rather than self-assertive. She does not seek autonomy, recognition, or permanence. Instead, she embodies a form of responsibility grounded in care. This ethical structure resonates with philosophical accounts that define subjectivity through responsiveness to vulnerability. Klara's willingness

to risk her own functionality for Josie's recovery marks a decisive moment in the narrative, not because it proves that she "feels," but because it situates emotional consciousness within the practice of sacrifice. Emotion becomes visible not as interior sensation but as ethical commitment.

The novel further complicates the human/machine divide through its portrayal of a socially stratified world structured by enhancement and competition. The practice of "lifting" children underscores a culture in which value is measured by performance and future potential. Within such a system, emotional life appears fragile and often suppressed by anxiety. Klara's steadiness contrasts sharply with this atmosphere. Her interpretive faith in the Sun while technologically naïve reveals a capacity for meaning-making that parallels deeply human impulses toward hope and transcendence. Ishiguro thus reframes artificial intelligence not as a threat to humanity, but as a mirror reflecting human insecurity and ethical ambiguity.

Importantly, the conclusion of the novel resists sentimental reconciliation. Klara's quiet abandonment after Josie's recovery underscores the disposability embedded in technological culture. Artificial beings are valued for utility rather than relational memory. Yet Klara's final reflections are marked by composure rather than resentment. Her fulfillment derives from having served. This restrained ending reinforces the novel's central argument: emotional consciousness is not validated by social recognition but by relational practice.

By integrating posthumanist thought, ethical philosophy, and affect theory, this study has sought to demonstrate that *Klara and the Sun* challenges

anthropocentric definitions of subjectivity. Ishiguro does not erase the boundary between human and machine; rather, he exposes its instability. If empathy, devotion, and sacrifice are central markers of emotional life, then Klara inhabits a morally complex space within the human domain. The novel ultimately suggests that humanity may not be secured by biological origin alone, but by the capacity to respond to vulnerability with care.

In an era increasingly shaped by artificial systems, *Klara and the Sun* offers a subtle yet profound intervention into humanities debates about identity and agency. It shifts the question from whether machines can feel to how feeling itself is constituted. Through Klara's narrative, emotional consciousness emerges as relational, interpretive, and ethically grounded. The novel thus

invites renewed reflection on what it means to be human not in opposition to technology, but in dialogue with it.

**Endnotes:**

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- <sup>1</sup> Ishiguro, K. (2021). *Klara and the Sun*. London: Faber & Faber.
  - <sup>2</sup> Hayles, N.K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
  - <sup>3</sup> Levinas E. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ishiguro K. (2005). *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber & Faber.
  - <sup>5</sup> Hayles N.K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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  - <sup>7</sup> Turkle S. (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.
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