Technological Care and the Human Condition: Artificial Intelligence, Emotional Labour, and Moral Responsibility in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun

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***Abstract*—Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) presents a technologically advanced society in which artificial intelligence has entered intimate areas of human life, particularly childhood, companionship, education, health, and emotional care. Narrated by Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF) purchased to accompany the physically vulnerable Josie, the novel complicates conventional distinctions between human and machine while exposing the social structures that make artificial companionship desirable. Existing scholarship has examined the novel through posthumanism, artificial consciousness, affect, emotional labour, ecofeminism, and the commodification of care. This paper extends these discussions by focusing on the technological outsourcing of care and moral responsibility. Through close textual analysis informed by posthumanist theory and the concept of care as relational and ethical labour, the paper argues that Ishiguro does not simply ask whether machines can become human. Rather, he asks what happens to human relationships when care, companionship, education, and even identity are delegated to technological systems. Klara's apparent capacity for empathy challenges an instrumental understanding of artificial intelligence, while her treatment as a commodity reveals the dangers of reducing relationships to functions. The novel ultimately suggests that technology does not eliminate the human need for care; instead, it exposes how societies distribute, commodify, and sometimes abandon care.**

***Index Terms*—Kazuo Ishiguro, Klara and the Sun, Artificial Intelligence, Posthumanism, Emotional Labour, Technological Care**

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between literature and technology has become increasingly important in contemporary literary studies because technological development affects not only material life but also ideas of identity, consciousness, intimacy, agency, and responsibility. Artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and algorithmic systems have moved beyond speculative fiction and become part of everyday experience. Literature consequently provides an important space for examining the ethical and emotional consequences of technological change.

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun, published in 2021, engages directly with these concerns. The novel is narrated by Klara, an Artificial Friend designed to provide companionship to children. She is purchased by Chrissie for her daughter Josie, whose health has been affected by genetic modification or "lifting." Through Klara's observations of Josie, her mother, Rick, Mr Capaldi, and the wider social world, the novel explores changing ideas of childhood, friendship, education, class, technology, and human value.

Much of the critical discussion of the novel has concentrated on whether Klara possesses consciousness, emotion, subjectivity, or humanity. Scholars have also examined posthumanism, artificial subjectivity, emotional labour, affect, and the commodification of care. The present study develops these discussions through a more specific question: What happens to human responsibility when intimate forms of care are technologically outsourced?

The paper argues that Klara and the Sun represents technology as a mechanism through which care can be outsourced without transferring the ethical responsibility associated with it. Klara can perform care, companionship, protection, and emotional support, but human beings remain responsible for the social conditions that make these functions necessary.

The novel therefore uses artificial intelligence not simply to imagine future machines but to expose existing human ethical problems.

Three interconnected arguments guide the analysis. First, the novel challenges the assumption that intelligence is synonymous with human superiority. Second, it presents care as labour that can become commodified when technologically mediated. Third, it demonstrates that the technological reproduction of human functions does not automatically reproduce human responsibility.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

Posthumanism provides an important framework for reading Klara and the Sun. N. Katherine Hayles's How We Became Posthuman questions the separation of information from embodiment and is particularly relevant to Klara's existence as an artificial intelligence whose identity develops through observation and interaction. Rosi Braidotti's the Posthuman challenges anthropocentric models of subjectivity and emphasizes relational forms of existence. Cary Wolfe similarly questions human-centred assumptions about subjectivity and ethical consideration.

Recent scholarship has applied these approaches directly to Ishiguro's novel. Studies have examined the destabilization of the human/non-human boundary, artificial subjectivity, cybernetics, selfhood, agency, and human-machine relationality. Other research has focused on affect and emotional labour, particularly Klara's role as a robotic caregiver and the commodification of emotional relationships. Economic readings have further connected Klara's position to affective labour, surveillance capitalism, value, and consumer culture.

The present study builds upon this scholarship but shifts emphasis from the question of whether Klara is genuinely conscious to the human decision to delegate care to an artificial entity. This distinction is significant. Even if Klara's subjective experience remains uncertain, the human decision to purchase, use, replace, and abandon her remains ethically meaningful. The research gap therefore lies in bringing together technological mediation, emotional labour, and moral responsibility to examine how the outsourcing of care transforms the human condition.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach based on close textual analysis. Posthumanist theory provides the principal conceptual framework, while the idea of care as relational and ethical labour provides a second analytical dimension.

Traditional humanism often presents the human being as an autonomous rational subject distinguished from non-human entities through consciousness, reason, language, and agency. Posthumanism questions these stable distinctions. Hayles emphasizes the tension between information and embodiment, while Braidotti understands subjectivity as relational rather than isolated. Wolfe further challenges species-based assumptions about ethical consideration. These perspectives make Klara significant because the novel places a technologically manufactured being at the centre of a narrative involving love, illness, sacrifice, family, and mortality.

Care is equally important to the analysis. Care involves attention, dependency, vulnerability, responsibility, and relationships; it is not merely a practical function. In the novel, however, care becomes commercialized through Klara's position as a purchased Artificial Friend. This raises an important ethical question: can care retain its relational meaning when it becomes a technological service?

The study therefore understands technological care not simply as artificial imitation of human emotion but as a social arrangement in which technology performs emotional functions that human beings may be unwilling, unable, or structurally prevented from performing themselves.

IV. KLARA AS A TECHNOLOGICAL CAREGIVER

Klara begins her existence inside the Artificial Friend store, where she is displayed as a product awaiting selection. Her identity is therefore commercial from the beginning. After being purchased by Josie's family, she becomes a companion and caregiver, yet her status as a commodity never disappears. She is simultaneously a technological device, companion, caregiver, observer, and quasi-personal subject.

Klara's method of understanding the world is based on careful observation. She studies gestures, expressions,

conversations, physical spaces, and emotional conflicts. Her limited perspective does not necessarily make her less perceptive. On several occasions, her distance from human assumptions enables her to recognize patterns that human character's overlook.

Ishiguro therefore reverses the conventional representation of artificial intelligence. Klara is not a machine possessing perfect rational knowledge. Her understanding is partial, interpretive, and relational. Her care for Josie develops through observation, attachment, interpretation, and belief. The novel deliberately leaves uncertain whether these qualities constitute genuine emotion. This ambiguity is important because the ethical significance of Klara's actions does not depend upon the reader receiving a scientific proof of consciousness.

V. THE OUTSOURCING OF EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Klara performs emotional functions that include companionship, reassurance, observation, and protection. These roles might otherwise be performed by family members, friends, or a wider social community. Her presence therefore demonstrates how technology can transform care into something that can be purchased.

The outsourcing of care has two major consequences. First, it changes the economic status of intimacy. Care becomes a service performed by a technological product rather than an activity necessarily grounded in reciprocal relationships. Second, technological solutions can conceal the social causes of loneliness. If a child is isolated, purchasing an artificial companion may solve the immediate problem without addressing the social conditions responsible for that isolation.

The novel does not, however, simply condemn technological companionship. Klara provides genuine comfort and meaning to Josie. Ishiguro's point is more complex: technology can address an immediate human need while leaving its underlying social causes unresolved. Technology is embedded in ordinary human desires—the desire to protect children, overcome loneliness, preserve relationships, and resist death. The ethical problem arises when these legitimate desires become increasingly dependent upon technological substitutes.

Klara consequently exposes a paradox: the more successfully technology imitates human intimacy, the easier it becomes to treat intimacy itself as replaceable.

VI. JOSIE AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT OF THE HUMAN BODY

Josie's physical vulnerability introduces another dimension of technological intervention. Her condition is associated with genetic modification or "lifting," showing that the technological management of the human body has already become part of the social order.

The issue is not simply that technology can modify the body. More significantly, technological enhancement is connected with education, class, social opportunity, and future success. Scientific advancement therefore operates within systems of social inequality. Technology is not neutral; its consequences depend upon the values and structures within which it is used.

Josie and Klara represent two forms of technological existence. Josie is biologically human but technologically modified, while Klara is technologically manufactured but capable of behaviour resembling empathy. Their relationship complicates the simple opposition between "natural human" and "artificial machine." The novel consequently destabilizes the assumption that biological origin alone determines moral significance.

VII. SACRIFICE, INTELLIGENCE, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Klara's willingness to act for Josie becomes one of the novel's most significant ethical elements. Her faith in the Sun provides a symbolic framework through which she understands suffering, healing, and hope. Although her belief may appear irrational from a scientific perspective, Ishiguro uses it to challenge the assumption that intelligence should be measured only through rational calculation.

Klara's intelligence is observational, relational, interpretive, and ethical. Yet the novel never confirms that she possesses human consciousness. This uncertainty prevents Klara and the Sun from becoming a conventional story about a robot becoming a person. Instead, Ishiguro asks why humans require proof of human-like consciousness before extending ethical consideration to a being capable of care and sacrifice.

The reader is therefore placed in an ethical position similar to that of the characters. Klara is simultaneously treated as an object and represented as a being capable of attachment and sacrifice. The tension between these positions makes the reader question whether moral value should depend entirely on conventional definitions of personhood.

VIII. THE DESIRE TO REPRODUCE AND REPLACE THE HUMAN

The proposal to create an artificial representation of Josie represents one of the novel's most disturbing technological possibilities. The idea assumes that an individual might be reproduced through observable patterns gestures, speech, memories, preferences, and behaviour.

The proposal emerges from the fear of losing a loved one. Technology appears to offer a solution to mortality, but the possibility of reproduction also reveals the limitations of reducing identity to information. Human identity cannot necessarily be separated from embodiment, individuality, memory, relationships, and mortality.

The proposal also transforms the meaning of parental love. A desire to reproduce a dying child may be understood as an expression of love, but it can simultaneously become a refusal to accept the child's individuality and mortality. Technology is therefore ethically ambiguous: it may express love while also turning the object of love into something apparently reproducible.

IX. COMMODIFICATION AND THE ARTIFICIAL OTHER

Klara's eventual abandonment exposes the economic structure beneath her intimate relationships. After she has served her purpose, she becomes disposable. Her movement from desirable commodity to obsolete object reflects the logic of technological consumption. This transition is ethically disturbing because the novel has encouraged readers to recognize Klara as a relational subject. Technology can therefore produce emotional attachment while simultaneously maintaining the technological object's status as disposable property.

Klara's situation also reflects a wider problem concerning the value of care. Human caregivers may similarly become undervalued when care is treated as invisible or replaceable labour. Klara makes this contradiction especially visible because her commodity status is explicit. The novel thus asks whether technological progress changes structures of exploitation or merely creates new forms through which exploitation can operate.

X. TECHNOLOGY, NATURE, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The Sun functions as an important symbolic presence throughout the novel. Klara depends upon the Sun as a source of energy and attributes to it a healing power. This relationship complicates the assumption that technology and nature are opposites.

Human beings in the novel attempt to control bodies, education, relationships, reproduction, and even death through technology. Klara's dependence on the Sun introduces a different logic: dependence rather than mastery. From a posthumanist perspective, this is significant because it challenges the ideal of the autonomous human subject.

Human beings are dependent upon other people, technological systems, environments, and material conditions. Vulnerability and dependence are therefore not weaknesses external to the human condition; they are fundamental to it. Klara's relationship with the Sun makes this relational condition visible.

XI. FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO ARTIFICIAL INTIMACY

One of the novel's most significant contributions to literature about artificial intelligence is its emphasis on intimacy rather than computational superiority. Many AI narratives ask whether machines can become more intelligent than humans. Ishiguro asks a different question: What happens when machines become sufficiently intimate with human emotional life to participate in relationships?

Klara participates in childhood, illness, friendship, parental anxiety, love, and mortality. Her technological identity therefore becomes inseparable from the emotional lives of the humans around her. The novel suggests that the future relationship between humans and machines may be characterized less by separation than by increasing entanglement.

Such entanglement makes responsibility difficult to locate. If a technological system participates in care, responsibility may be distributed among designers, manufacturers, purchasers, users, and the social structures that create demand for such technology. Ishiguro does not provide a legal solution. Instead, he demonstrates the ethical difficulty that emerges when agency is distributed between humans and machines.

XII. DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that Klara and the Sun should not be understood simply as a warning against artificial intelligence. Technology in the novel is neither entirely destructive nor entirely liberating. Klara provides meaningful companionship; technological modification offers social possibilities; and scientific development creates opportunities unavailable in earlier societies. At the same time, technological systems produce new forms of inequality, commodification, dependency, and emotional displacement.

The central issue is therefore not technology itself but the social and ethical structures through which technology is used.

Klara is especially significant because she reverses the conventional hierarchy between human and machine. Although technically subordinate to humans, she repeatedly demonstrates attention, loyalty, patience, sacrifice, and devotion. This does not prove that she is human. Instead, it makes the category of "human" ethically unstable.

The novel consequently shifts attention from the machine to the humans who create relationships with machines. The central ethical question is not simply whether Klara possesses feelings but whether humans are prepared to recognize value beyond conventional definitions of personhood.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun offers a significant literary examination of artificial intelligence because it places technology within the intimate spaces of human life. Klara is not merely a machine operating in the background; she becomes a companion, caregiver, observer, and emotional participant in Josie's life.

This paper has argued that the novel's central technological problem is the outsourcing of care. Klara performs emotional and social labour that human beings increasingly find difficult to provide within their own relationships. Her presence reveals how technological development can transform understandings of intimacy, dependency, responsibility, and human value.

The novel also challenges anthropocentric definitions of intelligence. Klara's observational ability, emotional responsiveness, and willingness to sacrifice complicate the assumption that artificiality excludes ethical significance. Yet Ishiguro deliberately leaves machine consciousness unresolved. This ambiguity prevents the novel from becoming either a celebration or a condemnation of artificial intelligence.

More importantly, Klara and the Sun demonstrates that technological progress does not eliminate human vulnerability. Illness, loneliness, fear, love, grief, and mortality remain fundamental aspects of human existence. Technology can intervene in these experiences but cannot necessarily remove them.

The novel therefore turns the technological question back toward society. If machines can be designed to care, humans must ask why care has become something that can be purchased. If machines can imitate intimacy, humans must reconsider what makes intimacy meaningful. If technology can reproduce aspects of identity, humans must question whether identity can truly be reduced to information.

Ultimately, technology functions in Klara and the Sun as a mirror rather than merely a threat. The artificial being reveals the desires, inequalities, vulnerabilities, and ethical structures of the human world that created her. The novel's most important question is therefore not whether technology will replace humanity, but whether technological development will compel human beings to understand more deeply what care, responsibility, identity, and human connection mean.

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