

Fragmentation and Self-Deception: Study of the Human-Machine Body from the Posthuman Perspective-The Case of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

Jiali Yu

Sichuan International Studies University, China

Abstract

In the context of the unstoppable trend of artificial intelligence, science and technology have become the theme of the times. Will the rapid development of modern technology, such as biotechnology and artificial intelligence, dehumanize us? Can a machine have human consciousness? In his novel *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro criticizes the arrogance of technological rationality and the arrogance of anthropocentrism from the perspective of a “non-human” robot. The relationship between humans and machines has become a problem that humans need to re-examine. With the help of post-humanism, this paper aims to explore the physical changes and behavioral actions of robots and humans in the novel to reveal the “split” between man and machine and the “self-deception” of humans in the novel, so as to finally trigger thinking about how humans and machines can coexist harmoniously at the juncture between humans and posthumans, and provide reference for the future society between humans and non-humans.

Keywords

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun*, human-machine body, post-humanism.

1. Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro is a world-renowned Japanese-British novelist who has been described as one of the “three immigrants to the British literary scene”. Known for his work in many different genres, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Kazuo Ishiguro's first novel after winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, was shortlisted for the 52nd Man Booker Prize in the United Kingdom. It is also another novel with a science fiction background after Kazuo Ishiguro's previous science fiction novel *Never Let Me Go*. It is worth mentioning that *Klara and the Sun* was published during the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic, which has disrupted lives around the world, especially since the beginning of 2020. The isolation and self-isolation of many of the characters in *Klara and the Sun* also mirrors the isolation during the pandemic.

Ishiguro uses the language of children's literature to write a science fiction humanistic novel about a post-human future, and the entire story revolves around Klara's pact with the sun. Klara is an Artificial Friend (AF), a solar-powered artificial intelligence robot designed to keep thirteen and fourteen year olds from falling into loneliness. In the novel's society, children are mostly genetically “elevated”, and as the plot progresses, after joining the family, Klara is told that she is to be used as a “replacement” for Josie when he reaches the end of his life. However, Klara does everything she can to try to save Josie, even at the cost of her own life. As a machine powered by the sun, the sun is the source of these AF energies, and Klara sees the “sun” as the source of all energy, all goodwill, with a mysterious healing power. Klara began to develop a similar worship of the Sun, believing that the sun has great healing powers, not only for robots, but also for humans, so she asked the sun for help, prayed to the Sun, made a covenant with the

Sun, and even made a vow to the Sun. Through Klara's tireless efforts, Josie gains the sun's favor and miraculously recovers, while Klara is cruelly abandoned to her own fate recycle bin.

With advances in gene-editing technology and "artificial friend" robots, Ishiguro's novels depict a post-human world. Eugenics is a prominent theme and setting of the novel, creating "improved" human models by modifying people's genes or identifying specific gene pools, resulting in a seemingly flawless human society. The possibility of a posthuman becoming a machine is extremely frightening in it. The child's genetic enhancement process and the formation and construction of Klara's moral sense seem intertwined in the text, but are distinct concepts of formation. First, "becoming a machine" is a tangible and dangerous process by which humans lose their sense of morality. "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? Something that makes each of us special and individual?" (Kazuo Ishiguro 182). With the acceleration of technology and the development of artificial intelligence, is each of us still unique? If artificial intelligence can dump, copy human personality, thinking, memory, then will one day human will become a mobile hard disk? Humans are gradually being replaced by robots, becoming dispensable in the world. This passage in the novel embodies the anxiety about the future fate of mankind at the center of the trend of technological development. Secondly, in the sense of posthuman, artificial friends are gradually "humanized" morally, blurring the boundaries of non-human beings and becoming "technological others". In this world of rapid technological progress, humans are becoming more and more like machines and vice versa.

Klara and the Sun is a humanistic fable disguised as science fiction. A prominent theme in the novel is the impact of the accelerated development of science and technology on human nature. Different from other science fiction writers who focus on future robots, the author still focuses on humanity itself, and whether the development and iteration of robots will challenge and impact the existence of human beings itself is still a category of humanism. The robot Klara in the novel embodies a strong ability of observation and analysis, empathy and self-morality, while the human body gradually objectification.

2. Human Self-deception: the Disintegration of Body Subjectivity

Freud emphasized that subjectivity is by no means a constant and definite concept, it is always influenced by the conscious and unconscious. With the rapid development of information science, bioengineering and nanotechnology, mankind has entered the post-human era. Given the close connection between posthuman and technology, the concept of human subjectivity encounters decentralization. The embodiment of the posthuman subject bears a strong resemblance to Merleau-Ponty's "body-subject". *Klara and The Sun* presents a dormant society around the problems of humans and machines. Ishiguro argues that there is an ideological continuity between robot programming and genetic disadvantage. Robots are modified "posthumans", technologically enhanced creatures created by genetic engineering with fundamentally superior capabilities to today's humans. At the same time, these artificial entities are under human control, and in playing the role of "stage puppets", posthuman robots are technological others-of humans. This fiction can easily be extended to humans themselves, who are "above" humans, driven by genetic technology, and may see themselves as masters, while those on the other side of the technological divide are "below" humans and may be seen as slaves. Klara is set to be Josie's faithful friend and a perfect servant. At the same time, she was condemned and mistreated for being different from the host's family, and soon after arriving at Josie's house, Klara suffered hostility from the housekeeper, Melania's housekeeper angrily shouted at Klara because of her frequent presence, "Quit follow me AF get lost!" (45) and was told that, as a robot, one should always "stand by the refrigerator" (46). Before buying Klara,

Josie's mother had Klara imitate the way Josie walked; At Morgan's party with Klara, her mother asks Klara to imitate the way Josie sits, moves, and speaks. At Mr. Capaldi's house, it finally becomes clear that the ulterior motive of her mother's purchase of Klara was not for her to accompany Josie, but for her to learn from Josie, imitate Josie, and eventually become Josie, which explains the mother's confusion as to why she wanted Klara to imitate Josie. With the help of Mr. Capaldi, he is responsible for making an empty body similar to Josie's, and if Josie dies, Klara will take everything she learned from Josie and live in that body, continuing Josie's life for all who love him. In this way, Klara became an artificial replica of Josie, who was prepared for Josie's doom and used to help the mother overcome the loss of her beloved daughter. So, by arrangement with her mother and Mr. Capaldi, Klara was deprived of her autonomy and made an object.

One of the most important future concepts in the novel is the process known as "elevating", or a gene-editing technique, the surgery that parents choose to perform on their children in early childhood to improve their intelligence. Josie's mother Chrissy gave Josie a "lift" when he was a child, which was the main cause of Josie's illness. Josie and Rick childhood, mutual mind, because of the family is poor, as a single mother Helen did not let "promote" Rick. At the communication meeting, Rick, who has not been promoted, stands out among a group of "promoted" children. "It must be weird for him, being here with us." "Why'd Josie ask him? He must feel so weird." (63), reflecting the gap and separation between "ascending" and "being elevated". People are afraid of loneliness, genetic improvement becomes a necessary ritual in this group of children, they subconsciously see themselves as the center of the world, maintaining a sense of self-superiority, the "promoted" children automatically isolate Rick. Rick rescues Klara, and is ridiculed by Danny and the other children and even the parents, after which Rick says, "I don't belong here. This is a meeting for lifted kids." (72). That's why even talented people can't get into elite universities. Genetic optimization creates class rigidity, making it difficult for those at the bottom, that is, those who have not been "promoted", to change their fortunes. As Fukuyama points out, we need to draw a clear red line between "treatment" and "improvement," and research needs to move toward the former, while the latter should be strictly limited, because "improvement" is likely to become a reinvented "eugenics," meaning "exclusively producing humans with preferred genetic characteristics" (*Our Posthuman Future*). Ishiguro uses his novel to warn of the possibility of a future in which the entire social ladder and allocation of resources are constructed through surgical shortcuts, in which only those who have undergone gene editing will be able to access higher education, People who have not undergone gene editing have no chance of getting a higher education because of the "genetic lottery" they were born to draw. After Josie's body was transformed by technology, she felt a sense of uncertainty. First, Josie has a hard time identifying with her identity as an elevated teenager, which makes it difficult for her to construct self-identity. Second, Josie's health was affected. So while becoming a cyborg could lead to a brighter future for Josie in this society, it could also put her life in danger. As a result, Josie effectively faces an uncertain future, and the process of lifting deprives her of the autonomy to control her own destiny. What's more, Josie's poor health leads her mother to prepare for her death by searching for replica of her, which denies her uniqueness as an individual. In this way, Josie's subjectivity will inevitably be threatened.

3. The Divided "Grid" World: the Machine's Self-Construction

In terms of physical structure, artificial intelligence Klara has a human shape and body, and its interaction with the surrounding environment is observable and embodied. "The embodied approach imagines intelligent artifacts as not just computer programs, but as having a body and performing and completing tasks in the real world" (*Body Intelligence* 12). Klara, who relies on

the sun for energy, “reached out both hands to the Sun’s pattern on the floor... But as soon as my fingers touched it, the pattern faded, and though I tried all I could – I patted the spot where it had been, and when that didn’t work, rubbed my hands over the floorboards—it wouldn’t come back” (Ishiguro 1). In general, software agents and computer programs are non-embodied, and Klara’s body is capable of carrying physical processes such as gravity, friction, and energy to interact with the environment, which in the case of biological agents is related to the connection between body and brain. “Embodiment is a prerequisite for cognition or thinking; in other words, it is a prerequisite for any intelligence” (*Body Intelligence* 13).

As a robot, Klara sees the world as many grids. The three-dimensional world passes through her machine’s sight, compressed into plans, which are then broken up into smaller moments. On the question of whether Klara can completely replace the human Josie, Ishiguro did not give a direct answer, but from another angle. The sun was able to get Klara’s power back up and running quickly. Although Klara is an artificial intelligence with superior intelligence, but its setting is a robot that grows up with children, and its cognitive perspective is relatively naive and childlike, she believes that the process of sun-charging is the process of accepting the nourishment of the sun, and the energy absorbed is like breastfeeding herself. For Klara, the sun was a divine and authoritative being, like a human religion. When she looked at the world in the window, the first thing she noticed was the orbit of the sun, observing the building not to see how many windows there were, but to see the sun dividing it into several triangles, and this dividing line would slowly climb and change. So the sun in her world is a living, willing God-like being.

The positive aspects of Klara’s body enable her to change her situation and open herself up to other situations, whether real or virtual, thereby entering new ones. As a result, Klara was endowed with the ability to enter other people’s situations and feel empathy. Klara herself thought that the more she observed, the better she understood Josie. She believed that with her unremitting efforts, one day she would fully understand Josie. The main purpose of AF is to be friends with humans, but this friendship is not reciprocal, and the obligations that come with friendship are not reciprocated, because humans see robots as inferior others-with little responsibility for the harm they cause or the harm they may cause themselves. The damage is likely to be greater only if the robot is considered “perfect”, which it is not. In this particular moral context, accepting their imperfections is like accepting humanity’s own imperfections. Klara especially liked to look out the window at the street, where she could see people outside in the sun. She gets frustrated every time she sees a sprayer, a construction vehicle that spews pollutants that block out the sun. One day, Klara saw a man-she called him “beggar”-stop in the street. He seemed dead, but when the sun came out the next morning, he was alive again. Klara is solar-powered, so the sun actually provides her with nourishment, and when she doesn’t get enough sunlight, she’s sluggish. Perhaps because of this, Klara seems to have overestimated the sun’s influence on humanity, at one point believing that the sun had saved beggars from dying and that the sun had the power to heal and nourish humanity. Klara developed rituals about how to communicate with the sun, further giving it a divine authority. Faith in the sun, in a way, gave Klara not only hope and meaning, but agency. Therefore, the sun symbolizes the power to believe in something greater than oneself. Meanwhile, Klara’s subjectivity is based not only on her belief in the sun, but also on the intersubjectivity she shares with the sun and humanity. However, the people around Klara never thought of turning to the sun for help. Thus, the role of the sun in the novel also represents the extent to which humans are disconnected from the natural world. Klara’s violation of her own inner code in order to save Josie demonstrates her belief in the goodness of human nature and her deep respect and reverence for human life.

Klara is able to learn about things that interest her through direct interaction with her environment, or help her understand human emotions. Her awareness of the world is a derivative of her sensory experience. In this sense, Klara is not just a data processor, but “a true

agent, with agent capabilities, able to absorb information from the environment and adjust behavior to adapt to environmental changes” (Zhu 2022:77). Thus, Klara is capable of establishing her own subjectivity. Klara wants to learn more about the human world and understand human emotions in order to better serve the children she accompanies. Klara’s starting point is selfless and altruistic, in order to protect people from negative feelings, she must understand the causes of negative feelings, she will observe, interpret and analyze the causes of the gap between her mother and Josie, Josie and Rick, and she will try to avoid similar contradictions through her own efforts. Therefore, Klara does not avoid negative emotions, what she needs to do is to understand the negative emotions of human beings and try her best to avoid such emotional contradictions in the future, and the ultimate goal is still to serve mankind. Klara is more human than humans think, and she seems to have an infinite tolerance for human frailty. This also makes her vulnerable to human cruelty and indifference. At the party, faced with insults from the “promoted” guests, Klara sees their hostility as a “fun” way to understand Josie, while she comforts Rick, who is similarly scorned on the grounds that children are “They fear loneliness and that’s why they behave as they do”. (73) When the reader is convinced by the way Klara speaks and the way she perceives the world that Klara has feelings, but at the same time is really different from humans. In fact, Klara’s subjectivity began to emerge during her time in the store. As a result of her sensory and visual perception, Klara develops an original perspective on the world and humanity that diverges from the information she was given. For instance, while the manager consistently claims that every AF standing in any position has an equal chance of being selected, Klara observes that “the gaze of a customer entering the store would fall first on the front alcove” (Ishiguro 9). Despite the manager’s assurance that no one would fall ill due to pollution from the Cootings Machine, Klara senses herself weakening as smoke obscures the sun. Furthermore, Klara possesses a unique voice. Although her vocabulary is limited, she can coin names and adjectives based on her physical experiences. For example, she refers to a tablet or mobile phone as a “rectangle” and describes the sky as “the color of the lemons in the fruit bowl” (48) or “the gray of the slate chopping boards” (48). In short, Klara’s mission is to empathize with humanity and be a qualified artificial friend. In order to develop empathy for humans, Klara takes every opportunity to experience the human condition through her body, which shows that she has agency. In the process, Klara realizes her limitations in understanding the human condition. Therefore, based on her understanding of her own situation and the human condition, she refuses to be a substitute for Josie and acts to save Josie’s life, which demonstrates her autonomy. As Klara endeavors to empathize with humans, it is evident that her subjectivity is characterized by self-awareness and autonomy.

4. Absence of Empathy: the “Cyborg” of Human Beings and the “Humanization” of Machines

With the outbreak of the third scientific and technological revolution and the rapid development of computer and information technology in the world, a series of ethical and political issues have emerged gradually, which have aroused the concern and reflection on human subjectivity. Stacy Gillis, for example, argues that the so-called “posthuman” that accompanied the emergence of computers and information technology marked the break-up and end of the autonomous rational subject in the Western tradition of humanism, that is, “the subject has become decentralized not only in its relationship to itself, but also in its relationship to the world” (*Cybercriticism*). Cyborg is a compound word for cybernetic and organism. According to Donna Haraway, Cyborg is the creation of the controlling organism, the hybrid of machine and organism, social reality and science fiction (Haraway, 1991). As an imaginary representation of the “post-body”, the Cyberborg shows the breakdown and blurring of the

boundaries of various relationships, for example, man and animal, organism and machine, body and non-body. Such disruption and ambiguity lead to the formation of a new body subject, and at the same time imply the gradual mechanization of human beings and the loss of subjective empathy. The body of Cyborg carries the intersection of various cultures and orders, indicating a unique body space, which is not a simple human-machine hybrid, but a multi-subject in the post-human perspective. "The fundamental difference between artificial intelligence and human beings is not so much 'no consciousness' as 'no body', or rather 'body-consciousness' that relies on the unique human way of being". Under the condition of scientific and technological empowerment, artificial intelligence robots are seeking their own subject position, and machine will and human consciousness are interwoven in the post-human field, which also brings a new ethical perspective on interpersonal relations. The passivity of Josie's body is related to the fact that Josie lives in an elite society. The promotion program, or boosting intelligence through gene editing, is the sorting mechanism in this elite society because it is seen as almost the only ticket to admission to a regular university that guarantees a bright future. Therefore, in order to have a good life, Josie has no choice but to lift herself under her mother's arrangement. As a result, Josie became a hybrid of organism and technology, or more specifically, a cyborg. It is widely believed that the term "cyborg" was coined in 1960 by Manfred Klein and Nathan Klein in the book *Cybbos and Space*, which detailed the idea of implanting devices inside astronauts to help them adapt to the space environment. "Cyborgs deliberately incorporate exogenous components, extending the organism's self-regulatory control functions in order to adapt it to new environments. (Clynes&Kline 27) The word "cyborg" is actually a combination of the words "cybernetics" and "organism".

One of the many ironies implied in the text is that Klara, a robot originally programmed to have no feelings, has more empathy than humans. Klara was created to interact with humans and display human-like emotions and behaviors. At the beginning of the novel, Klara is displayed in a store window as an artificially intelligent robot for people to choose from. The sole mission of these AFs is to serve the buyers who buy them and to accompany their children to grow up. Commodities are devoid of emotion and moral consciousness, whereas Klara has a meticulous ability to observe and learn, blurring the boundaries of non-human beings. Even gradually "humanized", with their own emotional representations, joys and sorrows, moral values, can rely on their own moral judgments and ethical choices, with a high level of observation, reasoning and empathy. Standing in the display window, she watched the street people and the children who came to watch, always hoping that someone would pick her up soon, until Josie made a deal with her to let Klara hold out until he came to take her next time, even though the manager warned Klara after she turned down another girl's offer to buy. "They come to the window, they promise all kinds of things... But more often than not, the child never comes back"(33), she gave up the opportunity to be selected by other children, gave up the realization of the value of goods, but also still abide by the agreement with Josie, she has her own expectations and persistence. As she waited in the store to be sold, she would be surprised and disappointed, and could feel the anger and fear of the other AFs and the loneliness and greed of the children. Drawn from the beginning by the "mystical emotion" behind human behavior, she has always longed to "see more of the outside – and to see it in all its detail."(12), as she herself puts it, "but the more I watched, the more I wanted to learn"(20). Klara is also like an unpromoted robot version compared to the B3 high level AF version, while Josie is in a state between promoted and unpromoted, and when she chooses to be promoted, she becomes an adult, parting with the former Josie and joining the group of children who have been promoted. Mother and Josie stride off into the new world, while Klara and Rick remain in their own.

One of the first things Klara learned from Josie was the human capacity to hide imperfections: "people often felt the need to prepare a side of themselves to display to passers-by"(74). This is especially true for those "ascended" who fear exposure, loneliness, and isolation. Her only

wish is to become Josie's AF and fulfill her duty to save Josie. But unlike Josie, who sees their friendship as nothing more than a contractual obligation—"You're my AF. So we must be good friends, right?" (95), while Klara regards Josie as her true friend and is always eager to help her. In order to save Josie, she spared no effort to ask the sun's help. She goes to great lengths to help Josie and Rick, and even when she learns at the end of the novel that they have gone their separate ways, she firmly believes in their love. She blames herself when things go wrong, and her established role as a submissive servant is repeatedly restored, if not always fully restored. Even after being abandoned by Josie and her family, she insisted, "I believe I gave good service and prevented Josie from becoming lonely." (249). "It was the best home for me. And Josie was the best teenager." (250).

5. Conclusion

Klara and the Sun looks at the changing world of human society from the perspective of robots, dealing with the fate of human artificial intelligence, gene editing, meritocracy, big data, climate change and other major issues. Ishiguro reflects on the individual condition of the post-human era and explores ways in which post-humans can live in peace and harmony with one another. "When human bodies can be built and taken apart like Legos, when human intelligence and emotions can be plugged and played like USB sticks, our personal identity, the unity of life and even culture itself fall apart" (*Our Post-Human Future* 15). In the current rapid development of science and technology, post-humanism can make humans gradually disenchantment with themselves, get rid of arrogant self-centered imagination, correctly handle the relationship with others, and let people and non-people share the community of destiny, rather than the binary opposition. This paper studies the subject change of Klara and Josie from the perspective of body. Klara's artificial body and Josie's cyborg body threaten their subjectivity to varying degrees.

Ishiguro explores the perplexity of humanity as it enters the age of artificial intelligence by describing the changing relationships and ethical choices between humans and robots, as well as the gene-editing technology that goes against our accustomed pattern of changing destiny through effort and ingenuity. He stressed that in the era of artificial intelligence, humans need to re-examine the relationship between humans and technology, and need to reconsider how people can live in harmony with technology when faced with robots that are more like humans than humans. In the novel, the author expresses his concern about the numbness, indifference and selfishness of human nature caused by the elimination of human subjectivity in the era of rapid development of science and technology. He advocates getting out of the trap of anthropocentrism and actively building a community with a shared future for human-beings and machines.

Acknowledgements

Research and Innovation Project for Post-graduates Funded by Sichuan International Studies University.

References

- [1] Chen Tingting: The Technicalization of Life, the Objectification of the Body and the Crisis of Empathy: a Metaphor of Medical Humanism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, *Foreign Literature*, 01 (2023), p.160-168.
- [2] Clynes, M.E., & Kline, N.S.: *Cyborgs and Space Astronautics*, Vol. 14 (1960) No. 9, p.26-27.
- [3] Francis Fukuyama, Trans., Lizhi Huang: *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of Biotechnology Revolution* (Guangxi Normal University Press, China 2016). (In Chinese)

- [4] Gu Yeping, Guan Yunxia: Decentralization, Dematerialization and Community Construction: Klara and the Sun in the Post-Humanistic Context, *THEORY HORIZON*, 04 (2022), p.102-107.
- [5] Haraway, Donna: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, the U. S. 1991).
- [6] Hiroshi Ishiguro (Japan), Translated by Cao Qian: *Final lecture: Humans and robots a thousand years later* (Straits Book Publishing House, China 2022).
- [7] Kazuo Ishiguro: *Klara and The Sun* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2021).
- [8] Li Yue: On the Image of Machine and Human-Machine Relationship in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, *New Perspectives on World Literature*, 03 (2021), p.103-111.
- [9] Liu Ke: Acceleration, Loss of Control and Resonance: A Critique of Technical Rationality in *Klara and the Sun*, *New Perspectives on World Literature*, 03 (2022), p.5-14.
- [10] Peng Yue, Si: Study of the Construction of Posthuman Subjectivity in *Klara and the Sun* under Merleau-Ponty's Body Phenomenology (MS., Guangxi Normal University, China 2022).
- [11] Rolf Pfeifer, Josh Bongard, Trans., Wenwei Yu, etc.: *Body Intelligence* (Science Press, China 2009). (In Chinese)
- [12] Shang Biwu: Can Machines Replace Humans? -- Robot Narrative and Ethical Choice in *Klara and the Sun*, *Foreign Literature Studies*, 01 (2022), p.28-44.
- [13] Wang Minan: *Body, Space and Postmodernity* (Jiangsu People's Publishing House Co., Ltd., China 2006).
- [14] Wenjing Zhou: Robotic Narrative and Effect in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* *World Literature Studies*, Vol. 11 (2023) No. 2, p.152-158.
- [15] Yuqing Sun: Post/Human Perfectibility and the Technological Other in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, *CRITIQUE: STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION*, Vol. 64 (2023) No. 3, p.504-511.
- [16] Yuan Xinyue, Shang Biwu: Technology and Humans in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, *Foreign language and Literature*, 05 (2022), p.1-7.