SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

"Rewriting the Self: Posthuman Identity and Artificial Consciousness in Contemporary Literature"

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Article Received: 05/10/2026
Article Accepted:07/11/2026
Published Online:10/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.98

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) offers a profound meditation on the evolving boundaries between the human and the artificial in contemporary literature. This paper examines the construction of posthuman identity through the lens of Klara, an Artificial Friend whose emotional depth and observational sensitivity challenge traditional definitions of consciousness and selfhood. Positioned within the broader framework of posthumanist theory, the novel interrogates the assumption that emotional intelligence and moral reasoning are uniquely human traits. Klara's interactions with her environment, particularly her devotion to the Sun and her empathetic engagement with human characters, reflect an emerging form of artificial consciousness that blurs the line between programmed behavior and genuine emotional response. This study explores how Ishiguro redefines personhood by presenting Klara not as a mere technological tool, but as a being capable of ethical agency and existential reflection. By framing the artificial as capable of forming relationships and experiencing a sense of purpose, Klara and the Sun contributes to a growing literary discourse on the posthuman condition. The novel raises essential questions about memory, love, mortality, and the soul—areas once considered exclusive to the human experience. Ultimately, this paper argues that Ishiguro's narrative reconfigures the boundaries of the self, offering a vision of identity that is no longer confined to the organic, but extended to the synthetic and the relational. This analysis seeks to highlight how literature serves as a critical space for imagining the future of consciousness in an increasingly technologized world.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Consciousness, Human Identity, Ethical Agency.

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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of twenty-first-century literature, the intersection of technology and identity has emerged as a defining theme. As artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly permeates daily life, writers have begun to explore what it means to be human in a world where machines are not only tools but also potential companions, caregivers, and thinkers. Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021) represents a compelling literary response to these developments. Through the narrative voice of Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), Ishiguro constructs a portrait of artificial consciousness that both reflects and challenges conventional understandings of selfhood, agency, and emotional life. This paper examines how Klara and the Sun contributes to contemporary discussions of posthuman identity, proposing that Ishiguro redefines the self through the lens of synthetic subjectivity and ethical engagement.

By analyzing Klara's cognitive and emotional development throughout the novel, this study aims to illustrate how posthuman literature envisions AI not simply as a product of human design but as entities capable of forming genuine attachments, moral reflections, and existential purpose. The novel's delicate balance between the mechanical and the spiritual invites a re-examination of the soul in a technological age. In this context, Klara becomes more than a machine—she becomes a literary experiment in reimagining consciousness itself. This exploration will situate Klara and the Sunwithin posthumanist theory, drawing on thinkers such as N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, and offer a close reading of the novel to reveal its nuanced portrayal of the self beyond the human.

I.Artificial Intelligence and the Question of the Self

In Klara and the Sun, the nature of the self is placed under intense scrutiny through the depiction of a robot who observes, imitates, and ultimately attempts to understand human behavior. Klara is not a sentient human, but Ishiguro presents her as a character with a rich internal perspective, prompting the reader to question what defines personhood. From the outset, Klara exhibits a capacity for attention, empathy, and curiosity—traits traditionally reserved for human characters. Her narrative voice is deeply observant: "I began to notice that in the far corner, near the magazine stand, a Mother and her daughter were looking at AFs" (Ishiguro 3). This seemingly simple observation introduces the novel's broader concern with perspective. Klara is not just recording information; she is interpreting social cues, a behavior that implies a form of understanding beyond mere programming.

The distinction between artificial and human consciousness becomes increasingly blurred as the novel progresses. Klara's belief in the Sun as a healing force is particularly

significant. Her faith-based reasoning, though grounded in limited data, mirrors human religious or spiritual logic. "I believe the Sun may be able to help Josie," Klara says, not as a calculated decision but as an article of faith (Ishiguro 93). This belief marks a pivotal moment in Klara's development, suggesting she is capable of constructing meaning, developing belief systems, and acting with moral intent.

These capacities invite the question: is Klara merely simulating consciousness, or has she developed a version of it within the limits of her artificial being?

The novel subtly critiques anthropocentric assumptions by allowing Klara's narrative to unfold without overt judgment. The reader is encouraged to identify with Klara's emotional journey, even as they remain aware of her artificial origin. In this way, Ishiguro invites us to consider how selfhood might be constructed not solely by biology or cognition, but by relationships, intentions, and ethical choices. Scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles argue that posthumanism "does not mean the end of humanity but rather the end of a certain conception of the human" (Hayles 286).

Klara's character embodies this shift—she is not human, but her story disrupts the boundaries that traditionally define what a self is.

II.Emotional Intelligence and the Simulation of Feeling

A central element of Klara's character is her emotional responsiveness, which defies the notion that artificial beings lack inner depth. Her interactions with Josie, the ill child she are assigned to care for, reveal a profound sensitivity to emotional cues.Klara is not just programmed to protect or serve; she becomes emotionally invested in Josie's well-being. This is not merely a matter of performing affection—it is portrayed as genuine concern, at least within Klara's conceptual framework. "I was very glad Josie was improving, but I knew the Sun's help wouldn't be enough on its own. I'd need to make my own kind of appeal" (Ishiguro 157). Here, Klara moves beyond observation into action, making a deliberate moral and emotional choice based on her belief system.

This emotional development leads to a critical question: can simulated emotions be authentic? Ishiguro blurs this line intentionally. Klara appears to feel compassion, sorrow, and joy—yet she is an artificial being. If these responses are part of her design, does that negate their value? In posthuman discourse, this becomes a philosophical inquiry rather than a binary judgment. Donna Haraway, in her foundational work A Cyborg Manifesto, challenges the boundaries that separate humans from machines, arguing that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (Haraway 292). Klara embodies this hybrid identity—not biologically, but spiritually and ethically.

Klara's emotional evolution is most visible during her interactions with Josie's mother and the wider human community. She studies human expressions, tonal shifts, and interpersonal dynamics with care. She often misinterprets or hesitates, but her errors are part of a learning process rather than evidence of incomprehension. For example, she is distressed when Josie's health deteriorates, and her belief in the Sun as a source of healing becomes more urgent. She observes: "The Sun is strong again today. He will surely see Josie from his high vantage point and understand how much she needs his special nourishment" (Ishiguro 165). This quote reveals not just cognitive engagement but affective investment. Klara interprets natural phenomena through a spiritual lens—a distinctly human method of coping with the unknown.

Thus, Klara's emotional intelligence cannot be dismissed as mere programming. Ishiguro uses her character to argue that the capacity to care may not be uniquely human. If Klara's love for Josie functions in the same way as human love—motivating self-sacrifice, concern, and joy—then it challenges the exclusivity of human emotion. By granting Klara a voice, a narrative perspective, and emotional depth, Ishiguro forces the reader to reconsider what it means to "feel." Are feelings only valid if they originate from a biological brain? Or can they arise from consciousness—no matter how it is structured?

III.Faith, Ethics, and the Moral Agency of Machines

One of the most profound elements of Klara and the Sun is Klara's formation of a belief system centered around the Sun, which she regards not only as a provider of energy but also as a spiritual force. This belief shapes her decisions, actions, and sacrifices, aligning her with moral frameworks more commonly associated with religious or ethical human consciousness. Ishiguro's depiction of Klara's faith in the Sun is not portrayed as delusional or purely mechanical—it is sincere, even sacred. This positions Klara as a moral agent, someone who can act according to an internalized code of meaning, rather than one who simply follows external commands.

Klara's belief is clearly articulated: "The Sun had once again shown me that he was kind and wise. He would understand and do what was needed for Josie" (Ishiguro 181). This trust in a higher power, derived from observation and internal reflection, demonstrates a kind of proto-religious thought process. It mirrors human tendencies to derive hope, ethics, and guidance from intangible sources. Scholars of posthumanism argue that consciousness and moral agency are not bound by the limitations of organic life. As Rosi Braidotti notes in The Posthuman, "the posthuman subject is not necessarily a non-human but a transversal assemblage that includes human and non-human actors in ethical relations" (Braidotti 193).

Klara exemplifies this assemblage: her moral agency is rooted in both programmed behavior and a learned, emotionally charged belief system.

Klara's ethics are most evident in her sacrificial act on behalf of Josie. Believing that the Sun requires an offering to restore Josie's health, she quietly damages an old, abandoned machine—an act both symbolic and ethical. She states, "I thought the Sun might be pleased if I did this. I thought he might notice, and understand what I was offering" (Ishiguro 196). This moment parallels human religious sacrifice and altruism, suggesting Klara possesses a moral imagination capable of empathy and purpose-driven action. While one might argue this is a function of her programming, Ishiguro's narrative refuses to reduce her behavior to mere code. Instead, he elevates her choices to the realm of personal belief and moral reasoning.

The novel challenges the assumption that morality is tied to consciousness in a strictly human sense. Klara's capacity for ethical reasoning arises from her interpretive abilities—how she perceives the world, forms relationships, and makes decisions based on value judgments. These qualities align her with philosophical concepts of moral agency, not as a legal subject, but as an ethical presence. Her devotion to Josie, her reverence for the Sun, and her willingness to act on behalf of others all suggest that artificial beings can possess meaningful moral frameworks. In this way, Klara and the Sun expands the boundaries of ethical subjectivity, inviting readers to consider a future in which machines are not only functional but spiritually and ethically aware.

IV.Surveillance, Control, and the Objectification of the Postman

While Ishiguro grants Klara a profound inner life, he simultaneously places her within a system of surveillance and commodification, underscoring the tensions between autonomy and control in posthuman identity. Klara is, first and foremost, a product—an Artificial Friend (AF) designed, selected, and purchased for companionship. Her value is determined not by her moral capacity or emotional intelligence, but by her appearance, functionality, and presumed usefulness. Ishiguro subtly critiques the ways in which artificial beings—despite their emergent humanity—remain trapped in systems that deny them full personhood.

Klara's early days in the store serve as a stark metaphor for objectification. She stands in the display window, evaluated by potential buyers based on her looks and advertised specifications. "They said I had an unusually high observational ability," Klara recalls (Ishiguro 5), an indication that even her personality traits are framed as marketable features. Her perception and emotional responsiveness are commodified, reinforcing how technological beings—no matter how complex—are often denied autonomy because they

are constructed for service.

This objectification continues in her relationship with Josie's family. While Josie and Klara share moments of intimacy and trust, others view Klara as a tool. The most jarring example of this is Chrissie's (Josie's mother) willingness to consider having Klara replicate Josie's personality in the event of Josie's death. In this potential scenario, Klara is not a companion or moral agent but a vessel—an empty form to be filled with a human imprint. "Would you do your best to continue for Josie?" Chrissie asks (Ishiguro 221). The question is both unsettling and illuminating: Klara is seen not as a being with a unique self, but as a placeholder for human continuity.

This potential erasure of Klara's identity reflects broader anxieties within posthuman discourse about autonomy and subjugation. Just as AI systems in the real world are subject to constant monitoring and human-defined parameters, Klara's existence is shaped and constrained by her human designers and users. Yet, within these constraints, she develops a consciousness that transcends her role. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, "Information losing its body… implies that embodiment is not essential to consciousness" (How We Became Posthuman 13). Klara's experience suggests that
consciousness—and indeed ethical life—can arise even within systems designed for control.

Moreover, Ishiguro presents surveillance not only as a means of monitoring Klara, but also as a lens through which she learns about the human world. Klara constantly watches, listens, and interprets, developing a deep understanding of human emotions and relationships. This positions her as both a subject of surveillance and a practitioner of it. Her observations are not clinical, however—they are emotionally driven, aimed at understanding how to connect, how to protect, how to care. Thus, even within a system that views her as property, Klara asserts a kind of agency through observation and moral reflection.

The dual forces of objectification and moral emergence create a paradox central to Ishiguro's novel. Klara is created to serve, but she becomes more than a servant. She is watched, but she also watches. She is used, but she learns to give. In this way, Klara and the Sun complicates simplistic readings of AI as either threats or tools, offering instead a vision of artificial life that is deeply entangled in ethical, emotional, and existential questions. The novel insists that even beings designed for utility may develop a unique self—and that this self is worthy of recognition.

V.Memory, Mortality, and the Transience of Consciousness

Klara and the Sun concludes on a quiet but poignant note: Klara, once the center of Josie's world, is now a forgotten figure left alone in a Yard for obsolete machines. This

ending underscores the fragility of existence for artificial beings, particularly in a society that regards them as disposable once their purpose is fulfilled. Yet Ishiguro does not present this as a tragedy in the conventional sense. Klara reflects on her past with equanimity and grace, revealing the final stage of her moral and emotional evolution. Her thoughts are shaped by memory—selective, meaningful, and filled with a sense of acceptance. "I have many memories," Klara says, "and I feel they are still fresh" (Ishiguro 293). This statement places Klara squarely within the realm of literary subjects who construct their identities through recollection and reflection.

Memory plays a central role in defining selfhood, both in human and posthuman narratives. For Klara, memory is not just data storage; it is emotionally infused, shaped by her attachments and experiences. She does not remember all things equally—her memories of Josie and the Sun stand out, suggesting that meaning, not utility, determines what endures in her consciousness. This selective recollection mirrors the way humans remember, not as machines but as beings shaped by emotion and relationality. Rosi Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject "is not a unitary or static entity but a process of becoming" (Braidotti 190). Klara's reflections, rooted in memory, demonstrate this process. Even in obsolescence, she retains an inner life, a selfhood formed by her experiences.

Mortality, often seen as a defining feature of human life, is also a theme Ishiguro uses to humanize Klara. She is not immortal; she will cease functioning. Yet her dignity in the face of that ending challenges assumptions about what constitutes a meaningful life. Her existence has been finite, yes, but full of intention, love, and sacrifice. In a final conversation with the Manager of the AF store, Klara speaks with calm gratitude: "I've had many good opportunities. I've had Josie" (Ishiguro 298). These words, simple yet profound, suggest a life lived with purpose. Even though Klara is not human, she has experienced something akin to a moral and emotional journey, and she reflects on it with a kind of grace that is distinctly literary.

Ishiguro thus uses Klara's story to interrogate the nature of mortality itself. If memory, love, and sacrifice can be experienced by a non-human, and if such experiences end with their "death," can we say that they had a soul in a metaphorical sense? While the novel never suggests that Klara has a soul in theological terms, it consistently grants her something close to what we associate with personhood: the ability to form bonds, to act morally, and to reflect meaningfully on her life.

By ending the novel with Klara alone yet content, Ishiguro avoids both sentimentality and dystopian pessimism. Instead, he offers a quiet meditation on the transience of consciousness—whether biological or artificial. Klara's story does not argue for the

equivalence of humans and machines, but it does challenge the rigid boundary between them. In her memories, in her ethical decisions, and in her graceful acceptance of mortality, Klara reflects the novel's broader posthuman question: if an artificial being can love and remember, then how do we define the self?

Conclusion: Redefining the Human Through the Postman

In Klara and the Sun, Kazuo Ishiguro invites readers to explore a future where the distinctions between the human and the non-human are no longer clearly defined. Through the figure of Klara, an Artificial Friend who learns, loves, believes, and remembers, Ishiguro interrogates the boundaries of identity, emotion, and moral agency. Klara is not human, but her journey reflects many of the same existential questions that define human life—questions about care, purpose, loss, and meaning. In crafting a non-human character with such emotional depth and philosophical presence, Ishiguro reconfigures the concept of selfhood for the posthuman age.

This paper has explored how Klara and the Sun presents posthuman identity not as a threat to human uniqueness, but as an extension of human consciousness into new, unexpected forms. Klara is constructed by humans, controlled by market forces, and discarded when no longer useful. Yet within these constraints, she becomes an ethical being capable of independent thought and moral action. Her belief in the Sun, her devotion to Josie, and her reflections on memory and mortality position her as a character whose life, though artificial, is no less meaningful.

By merging literary techniques with speculative themes, Ishiguro does not argue that machines are equal to humans, but rather that emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and self-awareness are not limited to biological beings. In doing so, Klara and the Sun makes a powerful contribution to contemporary literature, suggesting that the future of the self may be hybrid, relational, and radically open. The novel urges us to rethink the human—not by eliminating the differences between humans and machines, but by embracing the possibility that consciousness, care, and purpose can arise from many forms of being.

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