

Navigating Kazuo Ishiguro's Critical-Posthumanist Imaginary of the Anthropomorphized Nonhuman as a Subversive Agent in *Klara and the Sun* (2021)

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Abstract:

In *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Kazuo Ishiguro's futuristic America harbors a post-anthropocentric society floundering in environmental crisis, emotional dryness and moral futility. From harnessing the power of technology to subjugate children to genetic tampering, to designing AF robots to compensate them for the emotional void wrought by the absence of human relations and affection, technology seems to profoundly infiltrate Ishiguro's imaginative America, yet still deemed an anxiety-provoking entity that can never be truly embraced. Hence, this article argues that to challenge such apprehension, Ishiguro's novel stages an act of criticism instigated by a posthuman imagination that calls into question humanity's negligence towards the Earth, the far-reaching impact of their activities, and their misuse of technology. Rivetingly, the author chooses to deliver his critique through the narrative gaze of an onhuman agent: the humanoid robot Klara, whose consciousness and empathy prove agentive in the sense that they are pitched to posit readers to ponder moral conundrums afflicting technologically advanced societies. Drawing upon an array of theoretical insights belonging mainly to critical posthumanism the present article seeks to grapple with a fundamental question: How does Klara's savvy critique of a society that is plunged into environmental crisis and moral decay inform

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about Ishiguro's post-anthropocentric imaginary of the anthropomorphized nonhuman as a subversive agent?

Keywords: anthropomorphized nonhuman; critical posthumanism; *Klara and the Sun*; post-anthropocentrism; subversive agency.

INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in 2021, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* has garnered significant academic interest and sparked a spirited debate among scholars with regard to its profoundly perspicacious imaginary of posthumanity as well as its astute portrayal of a post-anthropocentric America. Ishiguro explores the concept of post-anthropocentrism, wherein traditional human-centered perspectives and hierarchies are challenged and de-centered, and raises questions about the nature of humanity, the boundaries between humans and artificial intelligence, and the role of technology in shaping our understanding of our ontology within a mechanized world that is deeply altered by human's great reliance on technology.

2. Entering the Anthropocene

It is the Dutch atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Jusef Crutzen who, in a 2000 conference of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Project, introduced the term 'Anthropocene' to describe a new geological epoch that is defined by the profound and irreversible impact of human activities. These activities, Crutzen reports, have significantly altered the planet's geology, ecosystems, and natural processes. What concerns contemporary geologists and climate scientists is, in this context, the fact that human-induced environmental changes, like climate change, are anticipated to have far-reaching and potentially calamitous implications for the Earth and its inhabitants.

In other words, the 'Anthropocene' indicates the time in the geological record when humans have moved planetary life outside its natural limits,

creating a life condition that threatens the future of humanity and is expected to eventually trigger human extinction: “The Anthropocene is a period in which human beings and their actions are having an indelible and irrevocable impact on the earth system and on the formation of geological strata, with all the potential implications of this for humans, nonhumans, and planetary life in general” (Herbrechter et al, pp. 9-10). Etymologically, the word ‘Anthropocene’ posits ‘*anthropos*’, or ‘man/human’, as its marker and maker, suggesting that humans enact a form of geomorphic agency that certainly establishes humanity’s centrality and dominance over natural life. In recent years, the focus of multiple academic discourses on this notion has been frequently mobilized by a call to rethink and call into question the role of the human on Earth, not only in the Natural Sciences but particularly in the Humanities, where anthropocentric perceptions of the supposedly uniqueness of humans’ subject position have vehemently been placed under vigorous scrutiny. The perhaps most intense criticism in this respect has emanated remarkably from the field of posthumanism and its diverse branches, where scholars are deeply invested in theorizing beyond the human as well as in critically evaluating and deconstructing the “exceptional” position that humans have continually attributed to themselves.

3. Critical Posthumanism: A Theoretical Discourse Informed by a Post-Anthropocentric Ethics

As will already be clear, this article’s navigation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s futuristic scenario of an impending posthuman age is informed in large part by critical posthumanism. In light of the changes wrought by contemporary science and advanced technologies which have brewed a world where “complex machines are an emerging form of life” (Pepperell, 2003, p. 177), critical posthumanism can be understood as a radical approach that substantially invites radical rethinking of what it means to be human and radical re-conceptualization of human ontology.

In *Posthumanism* (2014), Pramod K. Nayar defines critical

posthumanism as the “radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines”. Critical posthumanism, therefore, theorizes towards an inclusion of the nonhuman as an agent constituting an integral part in the experience of the human, whether this nonhuman is a machine, animal, Artificial Intelligence, or extraterrestrial aliens. The core of critical posthumanism, Nayar explains, is to think of posthuman settings as harboring a complexity of “human-machine assemblage” (p.11), which will not only change the meaning of humanity, but more importantly, help humans rethink their role in shaping a healthy future life. He goes even further, suggesting that nonhuman subjects will supplant the human in the post-Anthropocene. Sharing the same line of argument is the cultural critic Derek Woods who claims that the agents of the post-Anthropocene are the nonhumans while referring to the ethical issues humans deeply enmeshed with due to their abuse of nature (as cited in Reddick, 2023, 35).

Triggered and nurtured by a post-anthropocentric ethos, however, critical posthumanism represents a theoretical framework outlined to caution as well as theorize about an age where *anthropos* is challenged, if not, replaced by posthuman beings and where the environmental crisis brought about by the Anthropocene have changed the Earth. The underlying discourse of post-anthropocentrism is based on a decentralization of humankind and it is this discourse that aligns post-anthropocentrism with the theory of critical posthumanism. According to Katherine Hayles (1999), living in a world where the relationship between humans and technology is becoming more intriguing, and where man dwells a technosocial reality, humanistic conceptions of man need to be called into question:

emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject’s manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. (Hayles, 1999, p. 288)

Hayles's claim gestures towards understanding critical posthumanism as a theoretical framework that embraces an interdisciplinary perspective. Indeed, the interdisciplinarity of this newly-emerging critical discourse allows scholars apprehend and explain relationships in a multiplicity of factors that have contributed to the decentralization of the Anthropos.

4. Navigating the Post-Anthropocentric World of *Klara and the Sun* through the Gaze of a Nonhuman:

In *A Tale Told by a Machine: The AI Narrator in Contemporary Science Fiction Novels* (2023), Heather Duerre Humann states that: "science fiction stories have long been narrated from nonhuman viewpoints, just as the substantial section of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) that is told from the Creature's perspective demonstrates". It is in this way, Humann adds, that Shelley, "gives voice to *the nonhuman's* feelings and experiences" (Introduction, italics mine). In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro aligns his fictional conceptualization of 'the nonhuman' with Shelley's tradition, where he chooses an AI creature, Klara; instead, to govern the narratorial perspective of the novel. In so doing, Ishiguro presents readers with an "uncanny perspective, at once familiar and strange, disarming and disorienting" (Defalco, 2023, p.2) so that readers are to understand the implied meaning of the story only through the gaze of Klara. Besides, and more importantly, the sense of defamiliarization emanating from such an authorial choice is meant to challenge readers to see through a nonhuman vantage point. Sharing the same line of argument, Humann registers that this sense of estrangement highlighting "much about Klara's nature as well as her precarious position in a landscape populated by humans" (2023b, p.11), transports readers, I contend, to a post-anthropocentric America whose landscape is circumvented by artificial intelligence and environmental crisis.

In this novel, Ishiguro's privileging an AI narrator to caution about environmental degradation underscores the post-anthropocentric dimension of his imaginary that "decentralizes the human being from the reassuring

perimeter of anthropocentric epistemology” (Marchesini, 2017, p. 112). Indeed, there are many instances where Klara observes problems with natural life. She manifests an awareness of environmental crisis and the deadly effect of air pollution early in the book when she relates the fading of the sun to suffocation, “I saw how the sun was fading, how it was losing its strength. I saw how it was becoming harder for people to breathe” (p. 5). Besides, her concern with the sky becoming darker implies that pollution turns out to be a pervasively indelible issue in post-anthropocentric America: “The air was full of floating particles that made everything look blurred” (p. 90). She will then realize that “fumes from vehicles” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 215) is what actually causes the blurring.

Cunningly, Ishiguro crafts a nonhuman narrator to enunciate a deliberate critique of the destructive human activities that nowadays participate in the making of the Anthropocene and eventually rob the earth its natural aspect. From the scarcity of trees, “There were many places where trees had been cut down or burned away” (p. 123) to the disregard for environmental preservation, “The river was full of rubbish and debris” (p. 179), Klara’s observations are meant to emphasize humans lack of concern for nature. She even calls attention to the loss of biodiversity, reduced pollination activity, and collapse of aquatic ecosystem as she laments the diminishing presence of animals due to pollution and habitat destruction: “There were fewer insects buzzing around flowers, and I saw fewer bees pollinating them ... The birds were fewer now, and many had stopped singing... The water in the lake was murky, and there were no fish swimming beneath its surface” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 76). Here, she warns about the ecological imbalance caused by humanity’s disruption of natural processes.

Since Anthropocentrism advocates the belief that nature exists only for “the benefit of man and as a commodity to be used for the good of humanity and improved human quality of life” (Baofu, 2014, p. 218), Ishiguro’s probably sharpest criticism of this solipsistic, human-centered perspective toward the natural world can be best fathomed in the manner how the sun is differently perceived by humans and nonhumans in the

novel. The sun is fictionally rendered to emblemize the power of nature and the humans of Ishiguro's post-anthropocentric America seem to exhaust many natural resources including solar energy as they happen to inhabit a technologically advanced society that manufactures solar-powered humanoids like Klara. This in fact underlines their perception of this natural element as a source of energy awaiting harnessing. However, unsurprisingly, Klara, who knows that she and other robots cannot function without exposure to sunlight, looks at the sun as a source of nourishment instead of energy. Her appreciation of its existence is best elucidated in the following words: "I shook my head and raised my hands, palms up, to indicate the loveliness of the Sun's nourishment falling over us" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 16).

Not only representing a source of nourishment, a statement that is so recurrent throughout the novel, the sun, according to the narrative perspective of Klara, is a source of life; a life giver. Always observing the street outside the store where she is exhibited for sale, Klara gets used to see 'Beggar man' and his dog. But one day "Beggar Man never moved, and neither did the dog in his arms...it was obvious they had died" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 36). The next day, however, Klara is shocked that "they weren't dead at all" then just to believe that:

a special kind of nourishment from the Sun had saved them. Beggar Man wasn't yet on his feet, but he was smiling and sitting up, his back against the blank doorway, one leg stretched out, the other bent so he could rest his arm on its knee. And with his free hand, he was fondling the neck of the dog, who had also come back to life and was looking from side to side at the people going by. They were both hungrily absorbing the Sun's special nourishment and becoming stronger

With making Klara the only character in the novel revealing a unique perception of the sun, and through her unwavering revering of this natural entity as a "source of all life" (Ganteau, 2022), Ishiguro deliberately

fictionalizes this nonhuman character, one may say, to communicate a post-anthropocentric philosophy that quintessentially put forward to inveigh against the rupture between human and nature.

5. Klara through the Prism of Critical Posthumanism: An Anthropomorphized Nonhuman Enacting a Multiplicity of Subversive Agency

Perhaps, the complexity of Klara's characterisation lies in her ability to enact a multiplicity of subversive agency that is endowed to her so as to raise a critical-posthumanist critique of a post-anthropocentric ontology where the supremacy of humanity is called into question and boundaries between man and technology are disturbed. Such intricacy, I argue, is attributed to the novelist's anthropomorphization of a nonhuman character, which, of course, allows him address moral conundrums of posthumanity.

As AI machines make up an undeniable facet of a posthuman America, and whose presence is remarkably diffused, technology seems to create a new lifestyle where the anthropocentric figuration of man as "supreme sovereignty" (Mellström and Pease, 2022) is no longer valid. This humanistic status is demeaned as humanoids start to compete humans for jobs to eventually render the latter unemployed, making AI a subversive agent dismantling the privileged position of humanity over other beings. On this point, Ishiguro makes the question of human substitution in technologically advanced societies worth pondering. Through Klara's gaze which notices a store where "There were no humans inside... Everything was done by machines" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 30), Ishiguro envisions a futuristic America defined by an increasing reliance on machines to perform tasks that were once carried out by humans, which, of course, results in job displacement and, more importantly, shifts in societal dynamics. Critically, a subsequent impact of these shifting dynamics is reflected in a loss of identity. Indeed, living in a posthuman time "may entail the loss of certain experiences that some humans currently value" like their sense of identity (Chand and Harris, 2012, p. 86)

In *Losing Ourselves: Why the prospect of loving machines is so sad* (2021), William Lombardo considers the issue of identity loss within a mechanized world governed primarily by AI algorithms. Commenting on how Ishiguro's deployment of humanoids as substitutes for humans leads to the latter's loss of identity, Lombardo argues, "the prospects of truly human-like AI even if it is for now only a pipe dream, rattles that foundation. If our intelligence is all that defines us, who are we when AI matches it?". Hence, in depicting an anthropomorphized nonhuman, Ishiguro not only destabilizes human/nonhuman dichotomy, but also seeks to inspire his readers to think about a future posthuman existence where nonhumans may share the same properties *anthropos* have.

The famous critical posthumanist Pramod K. Nayar (2014) posits posthuman beings displaying anthropomorphic tendencies and experiences within a phenomenological frame that "complicates the supposed distinguishing feature of the 'normal' human race". Ishiguro's non-anthropos Klara fits squarely into such positioning as her anthropomorphized nature weaves a critical-posthumanist discourse that problematizes crucial elements of human nature like consciousness, memory, and empathy. One of the most striking aspects of Klara's anthropomorphic character is her consciousness. She possesses a self-awareness that goes beyond mere programming. Klara constantly reflects on her own thoughts and experiences, contemplating her purpose and existence: "I was conscious that I was observing myself thinking" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 54). This introspection highlights Klara's ability to engage in metacognition, a trait commonly associated with human consciousness. Besides, another human quality is implied here which is observation. The manager of the store where Klara is put for sale notices this quality early in the novel, declaring:

Klara has so many unique qualities, we could be here all morning. But if I had to emphasize just one, well, it would have to be her appetite for observing and learning. Her ability to absorb and blend everything she sees around her is quite amazing. As a result, she

now has the most sophisticated understanding of any AF in this store, B3s not excepted. (Ishiguro 2021, 42)

The act of observing is what ensures Klara ‘the most sophisticated understanding’ the manager alludes to here; she claims “The more I observed, the more I wanted to understand”. However, Klara’s power of observation which focuses on feelings, human’s and nonhuman’s, “The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 111), grants her an affective agency that stands in sharp contrast to a dystopian America marked by emotional dryness and lack of genuine human connection.

Klara is also able to reveal a conscious awareness intermingled with an awareness of remembering whenever she has those moments when she finds herself ruminating about past memories:

Over the last few days, some of my memories have started to overlap in curious ways. [...] I know this isn’t disorientation, because if I wish to, I can always distinguish one memory from another, and place each one back in its true context. Besides, even when such composite memories come into my mind, I remain conscious of their rough borders—such as might have been created by an impatient child tearing with her fingers instead of cutting with scissors— separating, say the Mother at the waterfall and my diner booth. And if I looked closely at the dark clouds, I would notice they were not, in fact, quite in scale in relation to the Mother or the waterfall. (Ishiguro 2021, 301-302)

Nevertheless, Klara’s memory is deliberately different from that of humans. She possesses what Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2017) distinguishes as ‘posthuman memory’. In the above passage, when Klara maintains that she has the ability to place each memory back in its original context, Ishiguro wants to offer a new conception of memory, a posthuman memory, “envisioned to have different capabilities” (Thomsen, p. 517) analogous to those of Klara’s. The intricate agency of her nonhuman memory is

translated in her making sense and controlling a 'composite memories' that she remains aware of the rough borders separating them, which is something human consciousness is undoubtedly incapable of.

Perhaps, it is Klara's empathic agency which intelligibly informs about Ishiguro's posthuman imaginary of a post-anthropocentric America. Designed as an Artificial Friend (AF), robots like Klara are manufactured to compensate children for the emotional void wrought by the absence of their parents' attention and affection. In the novel, Klara is bought to care for a 14-years-old Josie who suffers from a health issue after her parents expose her to a form of genetic tampering, Ishiguro repeatedly refers to as the 'lifting'. Klara's empathic agency is evident in her relationship with the sick girl as she consistently exhibits a keen awareness of the girl's emotional state and actively seeks ways to support her. When Josie is feeling down, Klara remarks, "I was aware that Josie needed me to be there for her" (Ishiguro, p. 78). This quote showcases Klara's understanding of her role as an emotional support system for Josie and her determination to fulfill that role.

Another important dimension of the empathic agency of Ishiguro's nonhuman protagonist is her capacity to perceive and respond to the emotions of others. She possesses an acute sensitivity to subtle cues and non-verbal communication, allowing her to grasp the tacit feelings of those around her. For instance, when Josie's mother felt hopeless and helpless about her daughter's condition, Klara observes, "I could tell from the way she spoke that she was feeling sad" (Ishiguro, p. 89). Here, Ishiguro emphasizes Klara's perceptive nature and her ability to empathize with others through her careful observation.

Moreover, Klara's empathic agency is characterized by her genuine concern for the well-being of those she cares about. She takes proactive measures to alleviate their suffering and bring them comfort when mostly needed. When Josie falls ill, Klara seeks ways to help her recover, stating, "I had an idea that if I could find the right kind of nourishment, I might be

able to help Josie get better” (Ishiguro, p. 173). This statement underscores Klara’s initiative and her willingness to go beyond her programmed boundaries in order to support the girl she has been purchased to take care of. Additionally, Ishiguro extends her agency to enable her form deep emotional connections with others. She experiences a profound bond with Josie and demonstrates a strong sense of loyalty and devotion towards her: “I felt my heart was breaking at the thought of leaving Josie” (268). Not only this, Klara willingly takes action to mitigate the suffering of those around her. This is so evident as she feels determined to find a way to get Josie healed. Despite her limited knowledge and resources, Klara is driven by her deep empathy for Josie’s pain, “I had an idea that if I could find the right kind of nourishment, I might be able to help Josie get better” (Ishiguro, p. 173).

In fact, Klara’s empathic agency is not exclusively understood within the contours of her relationship with Josie. Ishiguro, rather, stretches it beyond her immediate interactions with her human companion as she demonstrates a genuine concern for other characters’ well-being as well. A case in point is when she encounters Rick, a troubled friend of Josie, she intuitively recognizes his pain and attempts to console him: “I felt it was important I should try to help him” (Ishiguro, p. 196). This instant highlights Klara’s proactive nature in seeking out opportunities to provide comfort and assistance.

It is however worth to mention that in his attempt to craft a nonhuman character enacting an empathic agency that is intricately multi-layered in nature, Ishiguro seeks to confront readers with future ethical problems technological misuse may engender. One of the most significant ethical conundrums featuring a post-anthropocentric America is genetic manipulation. In the novel, children like Josie are genetically modified so that their intellectual performance can be improved and this, their parents opt, will boost “their social standing and academic prospect” (Humann, 2023). However, not every child may survive the ‘lifting’. Notwithstanding Josie’s sister death because of the procedure, her mother feels no reluctance to expose her last child to a risky experience. She even looks at the whole

thing as a matter of loss or win:

I was wondering if right now you might be feeling like you're the winner. Like maybe you've won.' 'I don't understand, Mrs. Arthur.' 'I've always treated you okay, haven't I, Rick? I hope I have.' 'You certainly have. You've always been very kind. And a great friend to my mother.' 'So, I'm now asking you. I am asking you, Rick, if you feel like you've come out the winner. Josie took the gamble. Okay; I shook the dice for her, but it was always going to be her, not me, who won or lost. She bet high, and if Dr. Ryan's right, she might soon be about to lose. But you, Rick, you played it safe. So that's why I am asking you. How does this feel to you just now? Do you really feel like a winner?' (Ishiguro, p. 276)

Even Klara, the nonhuman subject, is taken aback by the inhumanity of Josie's mother when she proposes that Klara is to take Josie's place after her death. Right after getting Klara, Josie's mother repeatedly orders Klara to mimic Josie's behaviors: "Since Josie isn't here, I want you to be Josie. Just for a little while" (104). But it is when she confesses to Klara that she is "not asking you to train the new Josie. We're asking you to become her" (Ishiguro, p. 206) that Ishiguro invites readers to contemplate a cautionary depiction of how humans will become in a post-anthropocentric life condition.

4. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* is one of the most riveting texts that present a fecund ground for the exploration of critical posthumanism and nonhuman agency through its title character, Klara, who is fictionally rendered as an anthropomorphized nonhuman. Narratively woven as a post-anthropocentric account, the novel challenges traditional notions of humanity and agency, which have long been upheld by humanistic discourses, as it crafts Klara, an AI being, as a sentient entity capable of displaying humane qualities like consciousness, empathy, memory and even

proactive action. These qualities are, cunningly, envisioned to put readers into a destabilizing situation whose estranging effect is not meant to create a gulf between them and the story in as-much as it estranges them from a future where humanity is about to experience a different shape of existence; an existence that is devoid of natural resources and dominated by technology. Through such intriguing yet cautionary envisioning, Ishiguro is pushing humanity to face its precarious existence and contemplate the consequences of their present irresponsible actions that have led to the making of the Anthropocene.

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