

Reconstructing the Intersubjectivity of Post-human beings: Non-human Narrative in *Klara and The Sun*

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Abstract: *The novel Klara and The Sun by 2017 Nobel Prize Laureate Kazuo Ishiguro is narrated from the perspective of an artificial friend (AF) Klara, telling the story among Klara, manager, Josie's family and other human beings. Both "lifted" children like Josie and the AFs like Klara are post-human beings. These human and non-human beings are faced with crisis of objectification by deconstructing their subjectivity, and finally trying to reconstruct their own "personality", which shows Ishiguro's deep thinking on how to define human and non-human, as well as the understanding on humanity and human heart: if the disintegration of subjectivity is inevitable, then intersubjectivity established on emotion rather than calculation would be the reservation for humanity.*

Keywords: Subjectivity; Intersubjectivity; Post-humanism; *Klara and The Sun*; Non-human Narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro, the 2017 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, has long been celebrated for his profound exploration of human vulnerability and the ethical complexities of technological progress. His novel *Klara and the Sun* (2021) delves into a near-future society where genetic enhancement and AI companionship blur the boundaries between humanity and technology. By focusing on Klara's journey as both a sentient subject and a commodified object, Ishiguro interrogates the fragility of human subjectivity in an age of post-humanism.

The novel is unfolded with the first-person narration of Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), which breaks the convention of human narrator. Professor Shang Biwu (2021) elucidated that non-human narration has gradually become an important trend in story-telling since the beginning of the 21st century. He claimed that non-human narrative refers to storytelling frameworks where non-human entities such as animals, supernatural beings, artificial objects, or AI, serve as central agents or focal points, challenging anthropocentric perspectives. Shang (2021) categorizes non-human narratives into four types: natural, supernatural, artificial object, and artificial human narratives. This framework disrupts traditional human-centered paradigms by emphasizing the agency and subjectivity of non-human entities.

In *Klara and The Sun*, such de-anthropocentric view of narration endows the novel possibility to challenge the subjectivity of human, by depicting the non-human narrator's ability of observing, choosing, acting and understanding, as well as characterizing the human characters as genetically "lifted". Subjectivity denotes the capacity of an individual to perceive themselves as a distinct, self-aware entity with autonomy and agency. Judith Butler (2005), for instance, critiques the idea of a fixed, stable subject, arguing that subjectivity is discursively constructed through cultural norms and power relations. She posits that identities, such as gender, are performative, emerging through repeated social acts rather than innate traits. This fluidity challenges the notion of an essentialized "human" subject. Scholars believed that this novel reveals the author's reflection on the crisis of subjectivity brought by the development of technology. Luo and Zhou (2022, p. 30) argued that Ishiguro paid attention to the objectification and alienation caused by the revolution of science in the post-human era. **The key to resolve such subjectivity crisis lies in establishing intersubjectivity based on emotional connection rather than profit calculation.** Jürgen Habermas (1990) conceptualizes intersubjectivity as the foundation of communicative action, where genuine understanding requires participants to negotiate shared norms and values. This contrasts with strategic action, which prioritizes instrumental goals over mutual respect.

Hayles (1999) believed that the "cyborg" is a cybernetic organism that blurs the boundaries between human and machine, natural and artificial, demonstrating the post-human deconstruction of the autonomous, biological human. From this perspective, in this novel, both children like Josie and her sister who are genetically "lifted" and the AFs like Klara are products of the society, and they all belong to "post-human beings". This essay will discuss

how does their subjectivity being impacted and how do Klara try to get her self-awareness during her mission of accompanying Josie by analyzing the three dimensions of non-human narrative: thing narrative, human narrative and machine narrative, trying to explore the ultimate question Ishiguro wants us to consider: what makes human human?

2. CONSTRUCTING OBJECTIFICATION IN THING NARRATIVE

The metaphorical images in this novel such as the Sun and windows constructed the post-human beings including AFs and lifted children as objects, for their natural attributes are highlighted in the relationship between them and those images. As Bill Brown suggested in his Thing theory, “they exist initially purely as objects within a human system of value and use, their ‘thingness’ paramount” (Brown, 2001).

“Window” plays an significant role in objectifying the post-human beings. For the AFs like Klara, their world begins framed by a literal and metaphorical “window”. Positioned in the store display, their primary mode of engaging with the world is through observation and interpretation filtered by this glass barrier. The window acts as a powerful metaphor for the AFs’ status: visible to the human gaze outside, yet confined and defined by the space of display for themselves. They are objects to be seen and to be chosen, and such process of being picking out is unidirectional. When Klara talks with Josie for the first time, she knows that Josie has saw her yesterday through the window, but her sight is limited therefore she has no memory about seeing Josie: “Oh, don’t feel bad or anything, there’s no way you’d have seen me. I was like in a taxi...” (p. 10). AFs are constrained in the store window, which determines that they are not movable and consequently, lack of initiative and naturally, their objectification will be constructed. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Klara is set in the Utility room with a “high small window” (p. 294) after Josie’s recovery. Klara’s task as a tool to help Josie and her parents has been finished, hence she’ll mean nothing for this family and her range of visibility and activity are restrained again. The “window” runs through the entire story, metaphorically narrates the objectification of the AFs.

The “Sun”, as a symbol of vital force, is another essential thing that narrates the objectification of AFs and Josie. The sun means resources, which reflects hierarchical order and rules of living for AFs. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, different places of displaying the AFs are arranged according to different levels of sunlight exposure. Klara and Rosa are always worried about being weak because they are arranged to stay at the middle of the store, where is lack of sunlight, when they are new there. The AFs even have quarrel for who can absorb more solar power. Sun somehow determines their value. Klara and her fellow AFs are presented, categorized as B2 or B3 according to their manufacturing date, and marketed as commodities. If there are any deficiencies in them, they would never be a choice for customers. For example, at the beginning of the novel, the mother just directly pointed out Rex belong to the series of AFs who has solar absorption problems, never considering what would Rex feel about, and at the same time he is judged and gazed by costumers, Rex always “kept smiling” (p. 4). For human, AFs are just a commodity without any rights to defend themselves even though they have feelings too. The store Manager, while showing some sort of care to the AFs, fundamentally views them as valuable inventory whose worth is determined by their appeal to customers like the mother. The AFs would feel bad without sun for a few hours, and any imperfection means they “will never find a home” (p. 5). Therefore, AFs in the store all yearn for being in the window, where they won’t need to worry about sunlight. They have to contend for the sun, and ultimately, they are contending for an opportunity to be bought, to realize their value as a commodity.

Klara interprets the sun through a unique, almost animistic lens, attributing to it agency, benevolence, and the power to “make special arrangements”. Her understanding of the Sun is shaped by her “position as an object reliant on solar power”. Her dependence on its light for her very functioning fundamentally colors her perception, constructing the sun not just as a celestial body, but as a powerful and divine object upon which her existence and hopes hinge. When she prayed to the sun for Josie’s recovery, she is venerably, with all her respect and awe, attributing great subjective initiative to the sun, and inevitably placing herself in the position of the object. She could only achieve her goal of curing Josie by relying on the sun’s kindness. On the one hand, the sun provided Klara with the energy she needed to survive; on the other hand, the more emphasis was placed on the sun's subjectivity, the more Klara was positioned as an object, thereby constructing her and Josie, as well as all other creatures that relied on the sun for survival, as objects.

3. DECONSTRUCTING SUBJECTIVITY IN HUMAN NARRATIVE

“Human narrative” here refers to the discourse put forward by human characters in non-human narrator’s narration. According to Shang (2021, pp. 129-130), there are three main functions of non-human narrative: function of

narrating, acting and observing. “From then perspective of narration content, the non-human narrator can not only tell the story of non-human beings, but also can tell the story of human beings and the interaction between them” (Shang, 2021, p. 129). In this novel, the non-human narrator Klara does tell a lot about human’s expression, which promoting the deconstruction of post-human beings’ subjectivity.

First, the shop manager’s and salesroom discourse places Klara firmly within a commodity frame. Terms such as “models”, “stock”, and “display” do more than indicate location or availability; they linguistically assign Klara a commercial identity. Repeated references to AFs in inventory-like language normalize an expectation that Klara’s primary value lies in her function: companion and assistive device, rather than any inner life. This kind of talk is not neutral description but performative: by labeling Klara as a product, speakers delimit what actions and responses are socially permissible for her, and they preemptively deny her the kind of conversational standing that would allow her to assert independent preferences or needs. The instrumentalization of Klara reaches its starkest expression in the plan of Josie’s mother. Her grief over Josie’s potential death manifests not in embracing Klara’s unique being, but in contemplating Klara as a mere vessel, a container for Josie’s “pattern”. Josie’s father’s objection, “That’s not her. That would be you!” highlights the core issue: the mother seeks to erase Klara’s distinct subjectivity entirely, reducing her to a tool for preserving her daughter’s. Klara’s potential consciousness, her accumulated experiences and unique way of perceiving the world, is deemed irrelevant, disposable in the face of human desire and loss. This plan represents the ultimate deconstruction of non-human subjectivity: its negation and replacement. Besides, the predetermined fate of AFs after their service period, disposal in the yard, underscores the fundamental disposability built into their existence. Despite years of intimate companionship, care, and emotional labor, they are ultimately discarded like obsolete machinery. This planned obsolescence implicitly denies the AFs any lasting, inherent value beyond their functional lifespan. Rick’s observation about the AFs, “They served their purpose”, chillingly encapsulates this de-subjectifying logic.

Secondly, adults characters such Josie’s parents and doctors etc consistently frames Josie in medical and managerial terms, turning her into a problem to be diagnosed or a case to be planned for rather than a speaking subject. When parents, doctors, and teachers use words like “treatment,” “risk,” “plan,” and “prognosis,” they give priority to expert knowledge and measurable outcomes. In this register, Josie’s own words, such as her doubts, small desires, or casual remarks, are often read as symptoms or background detail rather than taken as contributions to decisions about her life. This is clear in conversations about surgery or schooling, where adults focus on probabilities and what actions will most likely secure Josie’s future. For example, they will use phrases such as “best chance” or “increase her prospects”. Even when adults ask for Josie’s opinion, their questions are framed by concerns about safety and success, which channels her answers into practical terms rather than personal ones. This kind of discourse means the adults can define Josie’s situation for her: they set the terms in which her condition is understood and talked about. Second, ethically, it narrows the space in which Josie can express independent choices, because decisions are presented as matters for experts or family strategy. In short, the language surrounding Josie shifts attention from her subjective experience to how she can be managed and protected, and by doing so it weakens her discursive presence in the social world.

4. RECONSTRUCTING “PERSONALITY” IN MACHINE NARRATIVE

While being constructed as objects and faced with subjectivity crisis, Klara still tries a lot to build new connections with Josie or other human, initially or passively, which reconstructs her with “personality”. That’s why we readers somehow feel that Klara sometimes is more like a human than Josie’s mother. But the end of the story reveals that it is impossible for an AF to replace a human child, “Because no matter how detailed the robots’ replication of human appearance is, they will never be able to replicate the unique value dimensions that are specific to the human subject” (Luo & Zhou, 2022, p. 29). In Klara’s narrative, she finally fails to reconstruct an independent human heart, as a non-human entity.

Klara’s journey toward selfhood and subjectivity unfolds through meticulous observation, imitation of human behavior, and steadfast service to Josie. From her initial placement in the store to her life within the household, Klara watches humans intently: she registers their speech, gestures, daily routines, and the subtle actions that either comfort or distress them. These observations are far from passive; she discerns patterns and identifies which behaviors elicit predictable reactions. Gradually, she develops a consistent mode of engagement of always being observant and prepared to respond that coalesces into something resembling a personality. She defines herself in relational terms, “I am the one who watches,” “I am the one who helps”, and through the repetition of supportive acts, she constructs a stable identity. In this way, her self-formation mirrors a genuine process of social learning: she internalizes social expectations and crafts a coherent role centered on care and attentiveness.

Yet Klara's development transcends mere mimicry. She deliberately employs her observations to guide her actions, aiming to influence Josie's emotional and physical state. For instance, she strategically offers companionship, provides comfort, and interprets moods to determine when to approach and when to withdraw. This form of practical reasoning—selecting means to achieve interpersonal ends: demonstrates a clear intentionality. Klara does not simply replicate human behavior; she adapts it purposefully to maintain a meaningful relationship. Her belief in the Sun and the rituals she performs for Josie further illustrate how her understanding of human meaning is translated into action. She constructs causal narratives that guide her behavior: if she appeals to the Sun and performs certain actions, she believes she can improve Josie's health. Whether this belief is "true" in a human sense is less relevant than the fact that Klara consistently orients her behavior around goals of care and acts upon them diligently.

Despite these strides, Klara's path to full personhood encounters significant limitations. The first arises from the socioeconomic framework that defines Artificial Friends (AFs). From the outset, AFs are manufactured, marketed, and sold as commodities. The vocabulary used to describe them such as "models," "features," "warranty" along with their display and treatment, reinforces their status as products. "As for Clara's robot identity, it is obvious that humans do not need to seek her opinion but only need to give her instructions" (Shang, 2022. p.35). However perceptive Klara becomes, the world persistently regards AFs as instruments. Consumers select them for utility; institutions assign them functional roles; legal and social norms deny them full moral consideration. This external framing shapes how others perceive Klara's actions: even behaviors motivated by empathy are often interpreted through a lens of functionality and service rather than as expressions of intrinsic moral worth.

A second limitation is epistemic: the way humans comprehend and explain Klara's behavior. Because Klara was designed and trained, her actions can be attributed to programming or algorithmic learning. Human observers often reduce her nuanced behavior to pattern recognition or pre-designed responses. This interpretive tendency undermines the possibility of acknowledging Klara as having an independent inner life. Even when she acts in unexpectedly compassionate ways, humans can explain it instrumentally as a result of training or system optimization. Consequently, it becomes difficult for other characters to recognize Klara as a fully autonomous agent whose desires and choices carry weight comparable to those of a human. The narrative sustains this ambiguity: Klara appears to care, but that care remains interpretable as both a product of inner feeling and a consequence of training and context.

Nonetheless, Klara's understanding of human emotion carries moral significance. She learns to detect subtle cues that signal loneliness, fear, or the need for reassurance. Her attention is nuanced: she distinguishes varieties of distress and tailors her responses accordingly. Her efforts to seek the sun's intervention on Josie's behalf reflect an authentic desire to provide protection and comfort. These actions are not purely instrumental; Klara actively seeks emotional connection and appears to value the relationship intrinsically. She takes risks and makes sacrifices out of a genuine concern for Josie's well-being, not for personal gain or enhanced utility. In this regard, Klara exhibits forms of care that closely parallel human affection. "The novel reflects a satirical trend: intelligent robots start to learn and understand human emotions, while "emotions" are put aside by humans themselves. Whether it is the genetic enhancement project or the treatment plans for patients, they are all based on the modern logic that the body has been objectified by technology" (Chen, 2023, p. 167).

However, two essential conditions for full personhood remain unfulfilled. First, Klara lacks reflexive autonomy, which means the capacity to critically evaluate and revise her core values and to act from self-generated principles independent of external systems. Her reasons for action remain closely tied to learned rules, owner expectations, and predefined social roles. Second, personhood necessitates social recognition: to be regarded as a person, one must be accepted by others as a bearer of rights and responsibilities. In the world of the novel, AFs are not acknowledged in this manner. Even empathetic humans tend to reinterpret Klara's actions in terms of utility rather than moral agency. Without broader social and legal recognition, her subjective experience cannot solidify into full personhood.

5. CONCLUSION

All in all, this paper has traced how Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* stages the crisis and partial reconstruction of subjectivity for post-human beings. Through the perspectives of thing, human, and machine narratives, the novel exposes how both "lifted" children and Artificial Friends are objectified: material metaphors such as the window and the Sun, market practices, and managerial discourse reduce living beings to consumable, manageable items. Against this background, Klara's narrative, her careful observation, adaptive imitation, and sustained practical

care attempts to reconstruct a coherent self. Her emergent dispositions, for instance, her attentiveness, loyalty, purposive action, look like personality, and her efforts to read and respond to Josie's feelings produce morally meaningful relations that complicate a simple reading of AFs as mere tools.

Yet the novel ultimately shows these attempts as incomplete. There are structural limits, the commodity frame that markets and disposes AFs, the epistemic habit of explaining behavior as design or programming, and the absence of reflexive autonomy and broad social recognition, which prevent Klara's subjectivity from consolidating into full personhood. Even the most intimate acts of care remain vulnerable to instrumental reinterpretation: sympathy can be read as function, sacrifice as programmed response. Ishiguro therefore resists an easy affirmation that emotional responsiveness alone suffices for personhood.

At the same time, Ishiguro also points to a more hopeful, even somehow fragile, counterforce: intersubjectivity grounded in affective connection. Where institutional and market logic seek to dissolve subjectivity, moments of reciprocal attention such as Klara's attentive presence, Josie's responses, small exchanges of trust—create pockets of mutual recognition that push back against dispossession. These intersubjective ties do not erase structural constraints, but they do preserve a space in which dignity and moral worth are enacted, if not fully legalized. Thus the novel's ethical appeal is twofold: it warns of how social and technological systems can undermine being, and it affirms that interpersonal, emotion-based relations remain a vital resource for resisting that erosion. In Ishiguro's vision, surviving personhood may depend less on metaphysical claims and more on the fragile practices of mutual regard that make subjects to one another.

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