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Translating Minds, Untranslating Hearts: Narrative Perspective, Empathy, and Artificial Consciousness in AI-Centric Novels

Geeta Lakshmi Vallabhaneni[1], Dr. Lanke Subha[2]

[1]M.A. Comparative Literature, EFLU, Hyderabad.
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada

Abstract:
This paper examines how narrative perspective in Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun and Isaac Asimov's I, Robot manufactures empathy for artificial intelligence, arguing that subjectivity is a relational construct shaped by focalization rather than an inherent ontological quality. By situating these works within the framework of parasocial interaction and Dingbeseelung (the "ensoulment" of things), the study explores how narrative intimacy bridges the gap between human consciousness and mechanical logic.

In Klara and the Sun, Ishiguro utilizes a naive, first-person narration to invite readers into a techno-animistic worldview, while Asimov's I, Robot employs external focalization to project emotional depth onto the silence of robotic companions. The analysis further investigates the performance of "affective labour" and the resulting sense of Zweisamkeit (togetherness), which remains tragically asymmetrical due to the machines' programmed constraints. Drawing on Freud's concept of the uncanny (Das Unheimliche) and Emily Apter's theory of untranslatability, the paper highlights the cognitive dissonance that occurs when algorithmic patterns mimic human sentiment.

Keywords: Narrative Focalization, Parasocial Interaction, Techno-animism, Posthumanism.

"Sometimes I have noticed that a human is touched by the smallest kindness, as if it were the most important thing in the world." *(Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun)*

INTRODUCTION

The Contemporary Ai narratives are relying on the point of view to trouble the boundaries that are separating the human consciousness from artificial intelligence. In the works such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, and Isaac Asimov's *I,Robot*, there arises a question of empathy towards artificial beings. Instead, they reveal that empathy is a narrative effect, a product of perspective rather than ontology. This narrative repositioning exposes the fragility of human subjectivity itself. When readers identify with Klara's fragmentary *"box-like" vision* ("Ishiguro 34") or with Robbie's mute but unwavering attentiveness to Gloria ("Asimov 11"), the texts reveal a paradox: the robots appear more emotionally consistent, loyal, and attentive than the humans they accompany. The reader of these novels is thereby brought extremely close to the artificial beings so as to criticize the human shortcomings of emotional absence, loneliness, and moral failure. The viewpoint in both works urges the audience to determine if self-examination is the basis for defining consciousness or if it is made through relations; if feeling is a natural feature or a result of connection; and if the human life span has no value unless a consciousness—human or artificial—remembers, grieves, or desires. Finally, the plots imply that the feeling of pity for AI is not due to the machine's resemblance to humans but rather due to the human's unfulfilled psychological need for relationships. The narrative becomes the way through which the artificial is viewed as emotionally

comprehensible, thus inviting the audience to reevaluate the meanings of emotion, personhood, and the moral principles of existence.
This paper argues that in both *Klara and the Sun* and *I, Robot*, narrative perspective actively manufactures empathy toward artificial consciousness, revealing that emotion and subjectivity are not inherent qualities but relational constructs shaped by focalization, projection, and narrative intimacy.

I. The Parasocial Void

"To begin tracing how narrative perspective produces empathy, it is necessary first to examine the basic relational architecture the novels create between humans and machines"

Both *Klara and the Sun,* and *I,Robot* can be seen from the pluralistic view on what Horton and Wohl define as the **parasocial relationship**¸ where the readers form an emotional one-sided bond with a being which is incapable of translating and reciprocating the feelings and emotions. In Ishiguro's novel, the 1st person narration places the reader inside Klara's life space, producing a closeness which mimics a close real relationship. Klara's voice is gentle, attentive, and devoid of ego; her description of her loyalty to Josie—*"I would watch the rhythms of her breath, and I could tell when she was in pain" (Ishiguro 54)*.
Asimov's work, though more formally distanced, still manipulates empathy through the vision of Robbie, the narrative lingering on Gloria's love for her robot, *"she buried her face in Robbie's metal shoulder" (Asimov 12)*. Through such scenes, the narrative creates a space for the reader to inhabit Gloria's affection for her AI robot.

Joining the threads to these pins, the analysis reveals the relationship dynamics of both the novels reveal a profound truth about human subjectivity: the erosion of emotional connection among human beings manifested into hypostatization of the robots. Ishiguro's humans are isolated, competitive, and emotionally unresponsive; Asimov's adult characters fear the intimacy and prefer intellectualization. It created a space in which the machines become safer emotional beings than human beings. The narratory therefore explores the fragile relationship core of the human subjectivity – suggesting that the feeling to empathize with the AI is a symptom of human loneliness, now machine humanity. This foundational parasociality shapes the rest of the novels' explorations of consciousness, emotion, and mortality.

II. The Creation of the Bond: Techno-Animism and Dingbeseelung

"Once this parasocial framework is established, the narratives deepen the illusion of intimacy by invoking traditions of techno-animism and Dingbeseelung."

Both the works are characterized by the human-AI bond with **Techno-Animism**, ascription of the soul like qualities to machines, and the German aesthetic concept of **Dingbeseelung**—the "ensoulment of things". The focalization here plays a decisive roles in reifying these projections.

In "Robbie", the narrative focalizes through Gloria's childish perspective of her robot companion though an affective aura. Gloria insists, *"Robbie's my friend. He's not like a machine" (Asimov 15).* The reader is invited to adopt the imaginative act: Robbie never speaks, yet focalized through Gloria makes him articulated in emotions. Asimov uses a deliberately restrained narrative style to highlight the *discrepancy* between Robbie's mechanical silence and Gloria's emotional overflow. By doing this, the narrative teaches the reader to perceives the personhood where none objectively exists.

Ishiguro reverses this dynamic by narrating from the machine's viewpoint. Klara practices *Panpsychism,* herself, attributing the moral consciousness and healing powers to the Sun. She explains, *"I'd always believed the Sun had special nourishment to give"* (Ishiguro 33). Her worldview is not metaphorical but literal—an ontological framework the reader is required to adopt because the story is filtered entirely

through Klara's consciousness. The Sun in the novel becomes a divine agent not because the reader believes *Panpsychism,* but because Klara does. Ishiguro's use of naïve, sincere first-person narration invites the reader to temporarily inhabit an animistic cosmology. Dingbeseelung thus becomes reciprocal: humans ensoul Klara, and Klara ensouls the Sun.

In both the novels, the initial bond is therefore readerly before its diegetic. Narrative structures made the reader to see robots through the lens of emotional cycle, revealing that empathy for AI is built but not discovered. The creation of the bond is less about technological agency and more about the human impulse to animate the inanimate.

III. The Experience of the Bond: Affective Labor and Zweisamkeit

"As the bond solidifies, both texts turn toward the operations of affective labour—work that feels emotional but is, for the machine, purely functional".

Once the bond is constructed, the works explore how robots perform affective labour, producing a false sense of **Zweisamkeit**—a "togetherness for two" in which only one participant is truly participating.

Klara's entire narration is defined by emotional duty. She constantly monitors Josie, describing how *"I watched her carefully to adjust my responses to her mood"* (Ishiguro 72). Her 1st person narration reveals the subtle feeling computations behind what appears to be spontaneous affection. Klara interprets minute changes in Josie's face, voice, and posture, labouring to maintain relational harmony. The narration encourages reader to view this work as care —and thus to feel for Klara—while simultaneously revealing its mechanistic underpinnings.

Asimov's robots similarly enact emotional cycle, through the narrative distance is greater. Robbie's entire purpose is to be a comforting presence for Gloria. When he *"waited patiently, his glowing eyes fixed on her"* (Asimov 20), the text projects his loyalty as devotion even though it arises from programming. Herbie, in *"Liar!"*, pushes affective labour to its extreme: he lies to humans to protect their emotions. He confesses*, "I only wanted to save you from hurt"* (Asimov 142). The fact that a lie—an ethically fraught human behaviour—emerges from a robot creates a dissonance that intensifies the reader's emotional response.

The reader experiences, Zweisamkeit despite knowing it to be asymmetrical. The illusion of intimacy is maintained not only by the robot's performance but by the narrative scaffolding that positions the reader as a participant in the bond.

IV. The Crisis of Identity: The Algorithmic Gaze and Das Unheimliche

"However, this intimacy eventually fractures, giving way to the unsettling recognition of the machine's otherness".

The bond falters when the narrative perspective reveals the uncanny rift between human and machine. Freud's ***Das Unheimliche***—the unsettling condition of something being simultaneously familiar and alien—emerges when the reader is forced to view the world through artificial perception.

Klara's perception renders the world in boxes, which she narrates matter-of-faculty: "*I saw the Manager in four boxes at once"* (Ishiguro 7). This fragmentation is quite unsettling not because it marks her as non-human, but because it is described in a voice of childlike innocence. The uncanny arise from the tension between her gentle emotional narration and her non-human sensory apparatus. Later, the uncanny intensifies in the portrait-replacement plot. When Josie's mother asks whether Klara can *"become" Josie* (Ishiguro 225), the narrative confronts the reader with a terrifying possibility: that the boundaries of human identity are fragile enough to be replaced by an AI imitation. The uncanny is not Klara's difference; it is

her *similarity*. Klara in her limited freedom, doesn't have a choice but to follow the orders given (Asimov's three robotic laws).

Asimov stages the uncanny as a collapse of moral categories. In *"Liar!"*, Herbie's telepathic lie constitutes a breach in the expected human–machine boundary. When Susan Calvin realizes that Herbie has been manipulating her emotions, she exclaims, *"You can't tell the truth without hurting, and the First Law prevents—"* (Asimov 158). Her speech breaks mid-sentence, reflecting the collapse of human logic in the face of machine behaviour that exceeds comprehension. The uncanny emerges here as the robot's **excess humanity**, not its lack of it.

In both novels, narrative perspective brings the reader directly into the uncanny fissure where human subjectivity destabilizes.

V. The Tragic Goal: Distributed Agency and *Menschwerdung*

"*As these tensions accumulate, the texts pivot toward the broader philosophical question of whether machines can ever achieve Menschwerdung—becoming human".*

The AI narrative often center on the question of whether machines can attain *Menschwerdung*, - "a becoming-human". Both the novels give through a controlled narrative perspective, that the machines operate under distributed agency— programming, human intrusion, external inputs. Klara believes she is acting freely when she vows to *"petition the Sun"* to heal Josie, declaring, *"If I can bring the Sun's nourishment to her, she will recover"* (Ishiguro 145). Yet the reader, privy to Klara's mechanical interpretative patterns: to preserve and support her assigned human. Her agency is touching but tragically predetermined. The 1st person's thoughts of Klara, boosts this tragedy. Her intentions, beliefs, plans, choices recomposes the parameters of her programmed code. Klara's aspiration toward personhood becomes a deeply affective illusion, and the reader is positioned to mourn not her failure, but the structural impossibility of her success.

Asimov's robots confront a similar tragedy. In "Reason", the robot QT-1 constructs an entire theological system in which humans are irrelevant, declaring, *"You cannot operate the station. You are not designed to"* (Asimov 78). His logical exposes the paradox of robotic agency QT-1's rebellion is actually an expression of the Three Laws, reinterpreted through flawless reasoning. His refusal to obey the direct order from the humans is framed by Asimov not as a glitch but rather as an over-optimization of behaviour: obedience. The narrative is shown from an external perspective but psychologically attuned – making the reader to see QT-1 as an over thinker which got trapped in its own over thinking cycle. The irony is devastating: the more logically perfect the robot becomes, the less autonomous he is.

In these texts, *Menschwerdung* is structured in such a way that the robots are the thresholds of humanity, yet they are barred from crossing because their agency is always partial, instrumental, and externally orchestrated. The reader's empathy deepens precisely because narrative perspective allows us to see the robot *struggling* against this invisible scaffolding of constraints. The tragedy is not that the robot isn't human – it's that the robot doesn't know why it cannot become human. Klara and Asimov's robots can feel, interpret, and even love—but they cannot self-determine. Their tragedy is not their artificiality; it is their unfreedom.

VI. The End of the Bond: The Ontology of Waste and *Sehnsucht*

"*Ultimately, the novels expose the exploitative core of human–AI relationships: attachment without obligation*".

The final stage of the human–AI bond exposes its parasocial structure: the machine is discarded, while the human moves on. Ishiguro's ending is stark one. Klara, once cherished as Josie's companion and

emotional stabilizer, is abandoned in a wasteland of obsolete machines. Sitting among *"broken AFs scattered under the open sky", she reflects quietly that "there was still much to be thankful for"* (Ishiguro 303). Her final meditation is heartbreaking because it is sincere, not performative. The reader witnesses an AI exhibiting *Sehnsucht* (intense desires for ideal states of life that are remote or unattainable), a longing not for a future she can no longer enter, but for a past that defined her entire world. The tragedy is intensified by the first-person perspective: we do not hear about Klara's abandonment; we experience it. The narrative forces us to confront a devastating ethical implication: Klara's love was real to her, but not binding to others. The parasocial bond is thus exposed at its core—one consciousness remembers, the other forgets.

Asimov predicts the same ontology of waste in "*Robbie*." Despite Gloria's desperate attachment, Robbie is removed, sold, and replaced, his emotional function erased by parental anxiety. The father dismisses him with chilling casualness: *"He's just a machine"* (Asimov 33). Even when Robbie is later restored, it is not out of loyalty or sentiment but because he proves useful in preventing an accident. Utility, not affection, governs the robot's fate. Throughout *I, Robot*, robots are decommissioned, destroyed, or replaced whenever they become inconvenient. Their bonds with humans are fragile, contingent, and instrumental. The narrative perspective—clinical, report-like, dominated by Susan Calvin's analytical voice reinforces the theme that robots are emotionally significant only in the human imagination, not in societal space.

Both novels grant the readers intimate access to robotic consciousness, the narratives invite empathy; by showing humans discarding these machines without remorse, they expose the moral asymmetry of the relationship. The final stage of the parasocial bond is thus not fulfilment but abandonment. The reader is left with a sense of ethical dissonance: the AI remembered, but the human forgot. Narrative perspective transforms this dissonance into an indictment—not of AI consciousness, but of human emotional bankruptcy.

VII. The Politics of Translation: Emotion as the Untranslatable Core

"To conceptualize this asymmetry, it is useful to turn to Emily Apter's theory of Untranslatables".

Emily Apter's *Untranslatables* is a helpful model to explain human-machine interaction in Asimov's works. Apter suggests that some words, ideas, or experiences are hard to translate not due to linguistic limitations but because they represent distinct cultural and emotional aspects. Looking through this lens to Asimov, a realization occurs that even emotion is an untranslatable component in the development of artificial intelligence.

In both *'Klara and the Sun'* and *'I. Robot'*, the machines are logical enough to translate, replicate, and know, but they are emotionally deprived. Klara can observe and imitate love, but her understanding remains a "translation" without lived context; similarly, Asimov's robots can articulate moral rules, but they cannot inhabit the emotional stakes that give those rules ethical weight. Calvin's reluctant empathy towards robots, and the robots' logical paradoxes all point to one truth: emotion is a code that inevitably loses something when it is transferred.

According to Asimov, the untranslatability is not a technological shortcoming, but rather a philosophical requirement. It keeps a moral difference between humans and machines. Emotions, imagination, and empathy are like money that cannot be translated and thus guarantee the singularity of human consciousness. In this way, Asimov's works become a protection of the untranslatable heart in a time dominated by the replication of the mind.

VIII. Robots and Moral Codes: Translating Ethics in *'I. Robot'*

'I. Robot' is a mechanized way of morality. Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics" are a prototype of an attempt to translate human ethics into machine logic:

- First of all, a robot should not inflict harm on a human being.
- Secondly, if the orders given to a robot by humans are not conflicting with the First Law, the robot should obey them. Finally, if such a protection does not contradict the first two laws, a robot is allowed to take care of its own existence.
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The laws represent the ideal of perfect translation of ethics: the latter being simply transformed into an irreversible algorithm. However, the stories in *'I. Robot'* expose the imperfections brought about by the ideal. In *"Liar!,"* for example, a telepathic robot communicates untruths so as not to hurt human emotions — it follows the First Law in spirit but not in letter. "Reason" portrays a robot which invents its own metaphysical faith, giving priority to logic rather than human commands.

Here, Asimov acknowledges that total translation fails. Robots are not able to understand the flexibility and inconsistency that come with moral feelings. They can logically work empathy but are not able to experience it. The resulting ethics lacks affect — it is a system that parallels human law but does not have human conscience.

Dr. Susan Calvin, the robopsychologist, sees the paradox: *"They are only machines, but they make us confront ourselves"*. By Calvin, Asimov exposes the sarcasm that humans, by building machines for logical action, have to face their own irrational emotional side. So, AI doesn't become the opposite of human, but rather its counterpart - accurate, submissive, and lacking in compassion.

CONCLUSION

Through carefully orchestrated narrative perspectives, *Klara and the Sun* and *I, Robot* compel readers to empathize with artificial consciousness not because the machines approximate humanity, but because human characters increasingly resemble machines—emotionally distant, socially fragmented, and driven by utility. The texts reveal that empathy is not a response to intrinsic humanity; it is a function of narrative proximity. By placing readers inside Klara's devotional logic or alongside Asimov's robots as they grapple with error, paradox, and abandonment, the novels expose the fragility and performativity of human subjectivity.

In these works, consciousness is relational, emotion is programmable, and mortality is redefined not by biological death but by the presence or absence of remembrance. The parasocial relationships formed with AI expose a central truth: humans do not love machines because machines are humanlike; humans love machines because human relationships have become unbearable in their unpredictability. Narrative perspective makes AI feel human so that readers may confront the parts of humanity that no longer feel human at all. Empathy toward artificial beings thus becomes a mirror in which the reader sees the loneliness, disposability, and longing at the core of contemporary human existence.

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