

“I’m not a slave”: Created Female Techno-bodies in Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles*, *Wires and Nerve* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*

Anusha Hegde

Abstract

Any creation- be it artistic or literary- is inspired by, reflects, and embodies the motivations, ideologies, and aims of the creator. Through a careful study of the nature and dynamics of the existence of these creations, an understanding of the ideologies driving these creations can be obtained. In pursuit of analyzing the literary imagination of a futuristic persona in selected science fiction narratives of Marissa Meyer and Kazuo Ishiguro, this paper focuses on the anthropocentric/patriarchal ideology that drives the creation of artificial female bodies. The image, consciousness, and subjectivity of the female androids Iko and Klara in the selected texts are read from the perspective of techno-feminism. The paper aims to trace the objectified social image of female techno-bodies. The attempt here is to explore their journey of transcending this objectified state to reclaim their subjectivity as emoting and cognizant individuals in their society.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Desire; Female Techno-body; Humanoid Robots; Subjectivity.

Female Techno-Imagery: ‘Subjectification of the ‘Object’

Science and Technology are not just ‘advancing’; they are transforming every aspect of life that can be known to an individual in one’s lifetime. The instrumental and utilitarian value of all creations in this realm is the primary factor that drives the desirability of a product and determines the viability of this product in the long run. However, the very fact that all scientific creations and applications are assumed to be a ‘product’ and, hence, a utility becomes a generalized notion that locates everything technologically embedded as ‘objects.’ Even beings that are autopoietic, conscious,

aware, and autonomous in their expressions—such as cyborgs, androids, AI, or hybrids. In this crux of animate and inanimate aspects of scientific experimentations come the figurines that are made with the intention to be human-like and aid human beings in ways that are more familiar and intimate than those by machines that cannot mimic their creators. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is described as a simulation of the human processes of logical and rational thinking and reasoning processes in learning new knowledge, only with a speed and efficiency that is not erroneous like that of the human being (Burns; Copeland). But the root source of the behaviors AI is supposed to display is the human being, and hence, the source of all actions, decisions, ideas, and knowledge that the AI houses are that which the human creator and model instills as a code in this being. This simulation of human existence, when instilled in a human-like figure, becomes the literal personification of a technologically advanced humanoid robot, also termed an android, in specific cases. Descriptions of humanoid robots often revolve around the extent of similarity that they share in terms of expressions and behaviors with human beings and the wonder they generate in human beings because of this high degree of uncanny likeliness (Biba). However, the problem of *perceiving* these human-like yet non-human figurines as individual existences and conscious beings capable of living independently receives several contestations. Subjectivity is another aspect of understanding such figurines who exist in a fashion that makes their individuality and their “I”-consciousness of self-identification stand out. Subjectivity, as a philosophical concept, ideally revolves around a subject/self who is aware of one’s unique existence and is able to negotiate the different roles and subject positions performed in different contexts.

The point that this paper seeks to explore is that of the servile image of such artificial technological figures, these posthuman humanoid robots. Apart from the concerns of the safety of letting these ‘experiments’ on their own without any human controlling the functions, there also comes the problem of utilizing these service robots as tools to salvage visions and desires that could never be possible easily in human society with actual human beings. Specifically, the act of *servicing* an owner, especially when imagined as a female, unearths and lays bare several assumptions and roles, images, and attitudes about the female sex in the age of technological gendering of beings. More than anything, the question of representation and reconstruction of a female figure in technology brings into question the creator’s understanding of the ‘human’ that is seen to be favorable. Is it a human who is seen as an individual, or the *gendered* human whose sexual differences and social value of that sex play onto the creation of an

artificial 'servant'?

While objectification of the female techno-body has been a topic of feminist discussion over the years in terms of sexuality, desire, and gender stereotyping of behaviors, actions, emotions, attitudes, and professions, the scientific objectification of female bodies comes under scanner in the light of the male-domination in science and technology as a field. Feminist science studies, as a discipline, focuses on these issues in order to combat "the masculinist paradigms of participation and epistemology in the natural sciences" (Squier and Littlefield 312). The problem area is now imagined in the light of an increasing probability of the female or any gender entering a realm that is no longer purely human. In this regard, engendering a body and giving it meaning reveals a lot about the subjective ideas about femininity and that, too, in the context of a man-made techno-body.

What constitutes femininity for any person creating a female image or a model determines the sociological, political, economic, and aesthetic values attributed to this female body. Using Lester del Rey's story, "Helen O'Loy" (1938), Veronica Hollinger (2003) explores the male constructions of a 'perfect woman' and how her individuality and agency as a subject are eliminated in the male specifications for the techno-body of an "imitation woman" (126-127). Judy Wajcman, in her work *TechnoFeminism* (2004), explored the male-dominated technoscientific field of robotics and cybernetics. Using several real-time and fictional conceptualizations of artificial/posthuman beings, she asserts that "some men can effectively deploy their technical and bodily capital to control technology, and...male bodily capital can become embodied in technology" (Wajcman 116). The female techno-body literally becomes an assemblage of materials and knowledge that denote male-centered inspirations and motifs for the kind of image of a 'woman' they have in mind. Objectification happens at the level of machines created for human use since there is no subjective element to it. However, the double objectification faced by the *female* technological figurine unearths the deep-rooted male-centric worldviews.

In the analysis that follows, two humanoid AIs are compared in terms of the motivations of their creators (especially their understanding of the female sex and the codes of female behavior they thought to be desirable), the social/economic valuation of the two characters in the society they operate in, and their subjectivity as thinking and feeling beings. The question of the appropriation of desirable female behaviors, qualities, features, and motivations onto a female-looking body is closely analyzed. The two characters in question are Iko and Klara. Iko is an AI who, during the narrative

in *The Lunar Chronicles* series and more specifically in the graphic novel duology *Wires and Nerve*, evolves as a humanoid robot who identifies and fearlessly advocates for her individuality and her right to be treated as a being just like any other human being around her. Her advocacy brings to question the angle of how the artificiality of the processes leading to the creation of the being does not validate the objectification of an intelligible and emotional being. On the other hand, the figurine of Klara is an 'Artificial Friend' (AF) for teenagers and aids in their daily routine and becomes their friend in terms of seeking companionship at home. Josie, the human friend who buys Klara, is suffering from an illness. During the course of their companionship, Klara's ability to mimic and just *be* another version of Josie (for her mother and for Josie's love interest, Rick) comes across as a needed alternative for Josie in their life. Thus, Josie becomes Klara's assigned alter ego, which further prompts her to question her own identity and subjectivity. Klara's journey to realizing her individuality passes through the phase of trying to replace a human and later realizing the innate difference as two separate subjects.

Iko- Friend, Sister, and Android

In the tale that follows a cyborg protagonist called Cinder in *The Lunar Chronicles*, an Artificial Intelligence created by Cinder's late step-father, Linh Garan, emerges as a poignant character in the narrative. This AI, who is introduced and given a lot of impetus in the narrative of *The Lunar Chronicles* series, is called Iko. She is the sole friend of Cinder in a world where posthuman beings like cyborgs, robots, and androids are marginalized to be social baggage or are mistreated as servants meant to be seen as objects owing to the non-human component attached to their human-like lives. The primary parts of the overarching narrative clearly show Iko as a practically disembodied voice residing in a robot that is humanoid, yet there are no clear markers of a feminine body. However, through sparks and flashes and an emotive voice, Iko is able to convey her moods of happiness, sadness, shame, or anger in a comprehensible manner. In the first novel, *Cinder* (2012), Iko's body gets dismantled by Adri, Cinder's step-mother, who continually calls Iko a "junk" who is "worthless" (Meyer, *Cinder* 24-25). The personality chip of Iko determines her entire being, and her behaviors are all coded onto it, which Cinder treasures more than anything when she is officially shunned. Iko gets another body in the second novel, *Scarlet* (2013). She is inserted into a spaceship of an escaped convict called Thorne, who ultimately becomes Cinder's friend and aids in the rebellion she wages against the antagonist Queen Levana, ruler of the moon kingdom Luna. Thorne addresses his ship, the *Rampion*, as his

“darling” and has painted the outer portion of his ship with a “silhouette of a lounging naked lady” (Meyer, *Scarlet* 94). Cinder inserts Iko’s personality chip onto the ship in the hope that she will have a “person” who matters to her during a time when she knows no one and desperately needs moral support. Iko vehemently objects to the bulking size of the ship as her literal body and feels as though she is not a *being* as she was hoping to be always, and concludes that she looks “hideous” (Meyer, *Scarlet* 156). She is reassured only after Thorne equates her as a “fine lady” with a “gorgeous” ship-body (Meyer, *Scarlet* 157). It is clear that there is a masculine definition of beauty, appropriation of technological usage to female servility in this context of Thorne and his valuation of the *Rampion*, which is a stolen ship from his time as captain in the American army. Iko, as reiterated again and again in the series, is seen to be frivolous yet confident, loyal to Cinder as her friend, and more attuned to human emotions than other AIs in the vicinity.

Iko’s time as a ship ends when Thorne finds her the body of an escort-droid named Darla in the third novel of the series, *Cress* (2014). In this narrative, escort-droids are android robots, female in appearance and having fleshy proportions resembling an attractive human woman, that are used in hospitality services. However, they are sexually connoted and designed to satiate male desires over the female body. The new body of the escort-droid chosen by Thorne for Iko is described by Cinder as follows: “...the girl was perhaps in her late teens and gorgeous, with light brown skin and braids dyed in shades of blue” (Meyer, *Cress* 353). She is readily approved by Iko, who truly believes in having an appearance that is according to her own taste of beauty and being in trend with the latest fashion. The attractiveness of Iko’s new humanoid body enables her to evolve as a more confident and assertive individual, whose presence is seen remarkably in the graphic novel series *Wires and Nerve* (2018). In these two novels, the body of Iko as a humanoid is always a sore point for her since she desperately wishes for human life, which comes with love, joy, and an acceptance that she does not entirely enjoy as a robot. In the first volume of *Wires and Nerve*, Iko describes her body as follows:

I know I’m not flesh and blood. No nerve endings. No heartbeat.
Just a robot with artificial emotions and a disposable body. I know
I’m not really human. But aces and stars, I wish I was (44).

The artificiality of her body renders her emotions and thoughts, dreams, desires, and ambitions to be viewed as programmed and non-human. Cinder’s guard, Liam Kinney, is the most vocal of all voices, and he ultimately

falls in love with the very “robot” he despises. Time and again, there is an assertion on the part of Kinney that Iko cannot feel and think entirely as a human being, owing to her artificial personality. He foregrounds his reasons for believing that she is capable of convincing everyone that her feelings of loyalty are real and concludes that “You. Are. A. Machine” who is pretending beneath a beautiful face (Meyer, *Wires and Nerve*, vol. 1, 226-227). He keeps pointing at the fact that she requires applications that tell her what a stimulus means to make human-like sounds such as heartbeat, popping of knuckles, or for her understanding of moods and emotions around her. The artificiality of the knowledge she gets of human emotions by copying them and acting them out makes Kinney convinced that Iko is manipulative in nature, contrary to the trustworthy role of a friend or a sister that Cinder views her in.

Iko’s confidence in being a master of her own personality falls apart when she comes across a memory log of her creator, Linh Garan. He reveals in the log that Iko was designed to be a friend for his youngest daughter, Peony, who had been Cinder’s step-sister and only friend apart from Iko. Iko’s personality, by and large, could be described as having a fondness for makeup, playing dress-up, and dreaming of a romance with the current Emperor of Commonwealth, Kai (Cinder’s fiancé), were all instilled in her personality chip as her innate and unchanging traits. Iko and Kinney come across this log together, and Iko expresses her anguish at finding out the motivation behind her creation as follows:

Every one of my emotions, my thoughts, all those traits I thought were so human and so advanced...They were nothing but programmed responses after all. I’m nothing but a fancy computer, just pretending to be human (Meyer, *Gone Rogue*, vol. 2, 99).

She is conflicted about whether all that she has been feeling for others and thinking about herself is actually true or whether artificial codes are working up based on the stimuli that she receives. Kinney consoles her with his argument that love and friendship are emotions that can grow naturally as time passes by and that everything is designed in the world- even the entity termed as part of the ‘nature’ of human bodies that humans claim is innate. This angle of linking the word ‘nature’ with the fact that everything is designed and what is natural to one’s body is only what the body is designed in one way or the other to be able to do based on its capability and unique physicality. In a way, Iko’s relationships receive validation from Kinney, who grows to understand that feelings, even if in the context of any ‘non-human’ body, are never artificial.

Iko's relationship with Cinder as her friend is one of mutual recognition of the other as an equal being, as evident in Iko's role of advisor and of a close aid of Cinder in all matters- from political to personal. In the graphic novel, it is seen that Cinder, who has taken over the role of the Lunar Queen after being discovered as a long-lost heir to the throne, is facing a rebellion of mutant soldiers created by Levana. These soldiers believe that their original human nature can be reversed through experiments and that Cinder is intentionally not trying to reverse the genetically engineered animality that has been instilled in the lunar bodies of the mutants. In this rebellion, Iko plays a major role as a negotiator for and guardian of Cinder, and asserts to the mutants that she is not Cinder's slave and has always been accorded the status of an actual friend by the cyborg Queen (Meyer, *Wires and Nerve*, vol.1, 183-184).

Although Iko undergoes several kinds of physical and personal transitions that give her new identities and codes to understand and appropriate as part of her existence, her character operates in a society where boundaries of several kinds of technological othering and human supremacy over anything built for their benefit is being broken with an intention to bring pan-species equality and provide space for all kinds of human, non-human, and post-human subjectivities to evolve independently. Her subjectivity and her individuality receive validation in the form of her recognition as one's own by the people around her. Most importantly, she herself reconciles her artificial origins with her experiences as a personality and subject acting according to her own will.

Klara- Artificial Friend/ Replacement

Klara's body and build resemble a cute French girl, especially her hair, which is described as an appealing "neat and short...cute" (Ishiguro 14) style for Josie, the human girl who ultimately buys Klara to be her AF. Josie again describes Klara using the same words as before when she is buying her and says that Klara's clothes are all dark (Ishiguro 47). What strikes Josie differently is that from her eyes and smile, Klara has revealed her empathetic abilities and her intelligence to observe every detail around her. The body of Klara is little focused on in the initial parts of the story since the narrative was focused on building the relationship between the human master and the non-human/artificial 'friend.' The repeated descriptions of Klara as a cute yet smart-looking figure present an image of a female version of humanoid robots that boasted advanced capacities of intelligent thinking in a human-like body and tended to combine the aesthetic preference for girls to look cute and adorable. This body, however,

did not *compromise* on the appearance of smartness that set these android figures apart, implying that women are generally not smart. This desire for smart assistance from these AFs, combined with the desire to own a beautiful and attractive girl as one's own, resided in all the teenage individuals visible here.

At a house party, Klara is subjected to physically being viewed as an automated machine designed to answer every call of the human beings around her (Ishiguro 86-92). In this mode of 'testing' her, two boys, Danny and Scrub, manhandle Klara and almost throw her in the air to see if she lands back perfectly on her toes. Scrub boasts about the way he uses this 'trick' to test his own female AF. Thus, the bodies of female AFs, ultimately, are seen to be subjected to physical tests more than that of the male AFs. Violence as an action is again associated with the image of the female body, with the perpetrators being male. But this incident comes with the twist of Klara's unusually resilient behavior, where she refuses to *act* as the other human beings want. Klara is only willing to listen to Josie's direct wishes and orders since she is her 'friend.' Hence, when Josie's friends give Klara tasks to perform in order to test her, she refuses to obey them; for her, Josie's friends are not *her own* friends. In this way, Klara is seen asserting her individuality by refusing to be subject to others' will and becoming a servant to others. However, even though their relationship is seen to be that of friendship, one cannot help but conclude that it was a master/slave relationship from Klara's willingness to act as Josie wishes and Josie's public affirmation that other AFs would be better than the disobedient Klara.

Josie's mother, who is named throughout the narrative as 'Mother,' views Klara's insertion into their lives differently. Josie's illness prevents her from moving about or being there with her loved ones in the ways they want her to be. Hence, the diseased body of Josie is replaced by the figure of Klara as an ideal copy of the desired form of Josie in the space of the Mother's household. This is seen in the fact that Mother requests Klara to be a replacement for Josie in order to reveal her actual fear that, like her older daughter Sal, who died of an illness before, Josie will also die. Mother's feelings of sadness and fear for the uncertain yet bleak future of Josie can only be expressed outside the household. Hence, while buying Klara, Mother asks her to walk like Josie (Ishiguro 49-51). While witnessing a waterfall (that Mother had wished to see with Josie initially), Mother asks Klara to momentarily talk, act, walk, and smile like Josie and holds a conversation with her (Ishiguro 117-119). In this sense, the body of Klara, seemingly perfect because of the lack of the human illness that overpow-

ers Josie, becomes an outlet for the Mother to let go of her suppressed fear and anger over Josie's condition. The emotional and rational intelligence abilities that Klara embodied in her system make her very desirable and create the illusion that she can be human in every manner.

Klara's emotional acuity is unparalleled, which makes her different from other Afs-as noticed by the Manager of the store from which Klara is bought. This emotional understanding, as well as her ability to make concrete and practical decisions, makes both the Mother and the scientist Capaldi offer Klara to become Josie herself in case the latter dies of the illness. Klara was bought in not as a "friend" to the ill Josie but as her potential replacement in order to fill in the emotional, psychological, and social gap of a daughter that Josie would leave behind for her divorced mother and her distraught father, Paul. This idea of assigning a subjective identity of Josie to Klara is so potent that Capaldi addresses Klara by her name when they first meet and immediately calls Josie an "animal" (Ishiguro 220). This proves that the durability of the human-like apparition of any personality determines what is human and what is animal/non-human/ undesirable for the scientifically advanced community that forms the society in which Klara lives. Her identity as an individual and the respect, love, and awe she briefly receives depends on the fact that she can *permanently become* Josie in almost all senses for the family. However, when Josie slowly recovers from her illness, the true purpose of Klara's body becomes irrelevant. Capaldi visits Klara to propose that Klara volunteer for studies on the black box of Afs so as to understand further how independent thinking and decision-making have developed within these humanoid robots. However, owing to the attachment over the years with Klara and her renewed identity as a member of their family, the Mother objects to totally dismantling the body of Klara as though she has no feelings of her own. In the description of this scene, Klara codifies the behaviors of the Mother to be that of being protective and loving as any mother towards Klara as her own being, not as Klara-who-can-act-like-Josie. Capaldi's "relaxed posture" of masculine arrogance and control over the female body alludes to the similar stance Danny had adopted previously at the party, where he physically manhandles Klara's body.

The body of Klara thus acquires several meanings meant to be emotionally filling to some humans while satisfying the emptiness of a sibling for Josie herself, whose bond with Klara is strong till the end. However, the utilitarian purpose and its fulfillment led to Klara being discarded into a Yard of rubble on her own. The irony of her status in the human community at this point is emphasized by the contrasting visions Klara has,

where she compares the Yard to the fields in which she roamed with Rick and the waterfall incident with the Mother. The emotions she feels even till the end denote a resigned nostalgia, and she misses the warmth of family and friendship that she received in Josie's household.

Conclusion

Iko and Klara undergo different kinds of lifestyles, with one getting a chance to act according to her own will while the other is literally used and thrown as an object to be used for a purpose. The viability of Iko grew from being a mere AI installed in a plastic body to actually getting a body of her own, which satisfied her mostly and gave her the sense of having an identity of her own, which was never physically or psychologically dependent on another. Klara, as an artificial friend who was programmed and instructed throughout the narrative, is never given a chance to be able to learn the new emotions of love and affection she starts experiencing and is cut off from the familiar environment before her identity of her own formulates. While Iko has a clear sense of emotions and is assertive in declaring her right over herself, Klara keeps identifying herself as Josie's friend and is unable to make any decision without the shadow of her identity as an artificial friend to Josie behind her.

The decisions she does make of her own accord by disregarding others around her again revolve around Josie- be it deciding on Josie as her human friend or keeping Josie under the sun when the latter is on her deathbed. Iko decides to impersonate Cinder with an artificial robot designed like Cinder in the face of a possible assassination attempt. Again, there is a negation of the worth of her life and body. However, the fact that her personality chip can be replaced into bodies gives the reader a sense that her personality and being are conserved in one way or another. Comparing both the techno-bodies introduced as characters in the texts selected for analysis, it is clearly seen that the objectification of female technological figurines undergoes a double-oppression based on the patriarchal and anthropocentric othering of the female/non-human. However, the advancements introduced by technology, at least in the case of Iko, and more importantly in a society that was politically and socially evolving to be more inclusive of all beings, enables the boundaries of different kinds of persons to be blurred and/or dissolved.

Works Cited:

- Biba, Jacob. "Top 20 Humanoid Robots in Use Right Now". *builtin*, 25 Aug. 2022, <https://builtin.com/robotics/humanoid-robots>. Accessed 11 March 2023.
- Burns, Ed. "What is artificial intelligence (AI)?" *TechTarget*, <https://www.techtarget.com/searchenterpriseai/definition/AI-Artificial-Intelligence>. Accessed 11 March 2023.
- Copeland, B.J. "artificial intelligence". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 Feb. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence>. Accessed 11 March 2023.
- Hollinger, Veronica. "Feminist theory and science fiction". *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 125-36.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Klara And The Sun*. Faber, 2021.
- Meyer, Marissa. *Cinder*. Square Fish, 2012.
- . *Scarlet*. Square Fish, 2013.
- . *Cress*. Square Fish, 2014.
- . *Wires and Nerve*. Illustrated by Doug Holgate and Stephen Gilpin, Square Fish, 2017. Vol. 1 of *Wires and Nerve*.
- . *Wires and Nerve, Volume 2: Gone Rogue*. Illustrated by Doug Holgate and Stephen Gilpin, Square Fish, 2018. Vol. 2 of *Wires and Nerve*.
- Squier, Susan M., and Melissa M. Littlefield. "Feminist Science Studies". *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*. Edited by Bruce Clarke with Manuela Rossini. Routledge, 2011, pp. 312-22.
- Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminism*. Polity, 2004.