



THE SUN AND THE MARKET: ECONOMY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *KLARA AND THE SUN*

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ABSTRACT. In this article, we offer a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* in terms of economy. This novel depicts a speculative not-too-distant posthuman world where artificial intelligence sways, redefining relationships, care, and value under neoliberal capitalism. We consider Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), as a representation of how emotional labor and genuine human connections are commodified. Drawing on a variety of critical perspectives (including insights from the New Economic Criticism, cognitive science, and discussions of humanism/posthumanism), we highlight the novel's engagement with surveillance capitalism, ecological exploitation, and speculative investment in engineered, precarious futures. We also examine Klara's dual role as a technological product and affective caregiver to further highlight how the novel critiques neoliberalism's dehumanizing ethos and calls for reprioritizing care over profit. Also at issue is the relation between AI and Alife. These we consider in relation to what we call cognitive economy. At the macro level, Ishiguro's novel addresses the economy of the relation between the human and the non-human, human consciousness and non-human networks. More specifically, involved in Klara's intelligence (including emotional one) is the reciprocal/supplementary relation–economy–of the heuristic (experience-based) and the algorithmic models of consciousness. This novel, ultimately, encourages us to imagine alternatives beyond transactional logic and see the value of life as humanely nurtured rather than commodified. **Keywords:** Economy, neoliberalism, surveillance capitalism, posthumanism, affective labor, energy economies.

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EL SOL Y EL MERCADO: ECONOMÍA EN *KLARA AND THE SUN*, DE KAZUO ISHIGURO

RESUMEN. En este artículo ofrecemos una lectura de *Klara and the Sun*, de Kazuo Ishiguro, en términos de economía. Esta novela representa un mundo posthumano especulativo de un futuro no demasiado lejano en el que la inteligencia artificial ejerce una influencia decisiva, redefiniendo las relaciones, el cuidado y el valor bajo el capitalismo neoliberal. Consideramos a Klara, una Amiga Artificial (AF), como una representación de la forma en que el trabajo emocional y las conexiones humanas genuinas son mercantilizados. Basándonos en una variedad de perspectivas críticas (incluidas aportaciones de la Nueva Crítica Económica, las ciencias cognitivas y los debates sobre humanismo/posthumanismo), destacamos la atención que la novela presta al capitalismo de vigilancia, la explotación ecológica y la inversión especulativa en futuros diseñados y precarios. También examinamos el doble papel de Klara como producto tecnológico y cuidadora afectiva para poner aún más de relieve cómo la novela critica el ethos deshumanizador del neoliberalismo y reclama una repriorización del cuidado frente al beneficio. Asimismo, se problematiza la relación entre la IA y la Alife. Consideramos ambas en relación con lo que denominamos economía cognitiva. En el nivel macro, la novela de Ishiguro aborda la economía de la relación entre lo humano y lo no humano, la conciencia humana y las redes no humanas. Más específicamente, la inteligencia de Klara (incluida la emocional) implica la relación recíproca/suplementaria —economía— entre los modelos heurísticos (basados en la experiencia) y los modelos algorítmicos de la conciencia. En última instancia, esta novela nos anima a imaginar alternativas más allá de la lógica transaccional y a reconocer el valor de la vida como algo cultivado humanamente, y no como una mercancía.

Palabras clave: *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro, economía, neoliberalismo, capitalismo de vigilancia, posthumanismo, trabajo afectivo, economías de la energía.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Klara and the Sun (2021), Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel to date, depicts a speculative world in which artificial intelligence rules, and the boundaries between humans and non-humans, autonomy and servitude, and care and commodification are blurred. At the heart of this narrative is Klara, an Artificial Friend (AF), who is designed to offer emotional companionship in a society governed by the unrelenting logic of neoliberal capitalism. First of all, economically, this indicates that the supply of (emotional) companionship does not meet the demand for it. This is because human beings do not have enough time (economically precious) for each other; they have to spend it mostly working or pursuing solipsistic pleasures in exchange for the money they have spent time to earn ensuring that the dominant order reaps more profit and operates more smoothly. This logic "expresses inordinate confidence in the unique, self-regulating power of markets as it [neoliberalism] links the freedom of the individual to markets" (Connolly 20). However, Ishiguro builds on Klara's unique

experiences and relationships to critique this logic, which commodifies care, monetizes affect, and redefines notions of value and personhood in troubling ways. In this light, we attribute the full sway of neoliberal capitalism to its “greatly expanded role of market relations and market forces in the regulation of economic activity” (Kotz, 2015, p. 41). This regulatory dynamic of “the commodification and privatization of hitherto public assets” is evident in Ishiguro’s world, where even intimate aspects of human life are subjected to predatory market-driven practices, with the aim of opening up “new fields for capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded off-limits to calculus of profitability” (Harvey, 2005, p. 33).

Thus, in this article, we examine the novel’s representation of a posthuman economic landscape so as to interrogate the socioeconomic consequences of integrating advanced technologies into human lives. To this end, we chiefly employ the tenets of the New Economic Criticism (NEC) to study how Ishiguro’s speculative world critiques neoliberal capitalism. Accordingly, central to our study are the literary representation of economic structures and economic metaphors, such as care as capital, Klara’s solar dependency as an allegory for energy economies (i.e., as a critique of energy commodification), and the speculative nature of Josie’s genetic “lifting”—a form of “creative capital”—as a neoliberal investment marked by precarity. Moreover, by referencing the works of Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, Wendy Brown, and Jason W. Moore, we highlight how *Klara and the Sun* engages with broader critiques of surveillance capitalism, ecological exploitation, and speculative futures shaped by technological determinism. Ultimately, through the clarification of how capitalism, technology, and affect interplay, we show that this novel not only reflects the socioeconomic anxieties of our time but also prompts us to rethink the ethical dimensions pertaining to care, labor, and value in an increasingly posthuman world.

2. *KLARA AND THE SUN* IN CONTEXT

This review briefly examines some critical research on *Klara and the Sun*, focusing on thematic explorations of posthumanism, affective dynamics, and speculative futures. It is evident that existing studies aptly illuminate the novel’s philosophical and ethical dimensions, but they often neglect its economic critique. By amplifying this critical angle, our research offers a clearer understanding of how Ishiguro critiques neoliberal capitalism, the commodification of care, and artificial intelligence. Moreover, using insights from the New Economic Criticism, we will look into the figuration of economy in the novel—beyond this economic critique—as, according to Marc Shell (1978), a good example of how “literary works are composed of small tropic exchanges or metaphors, some of which can be analyzed in terms of signified economic content and all of which can be analyzed in terms of economic form” (p. 7).

For instance, Om Prakash Sahu and Manali Karmakar (2024) analyze Klara’s limitations in emotional computing, arguing that artificial companions reflect disposability and obsolescence in a technocratic society, where “fundamental

existential crises such as loneliness, and death are promised to be circumvented by social robots” (p. 1351), and “artificial intelligence (AI) is inch-by-inch being programmed to evolve as empathetic minds” (p. 1349). Sahu and Karmakar (2024), however, do not explore how Klara’s commodified caregiving critiques surveillance capitalism and energy economies. Another noteworthy scholar, Clare Connors (2024), explores the novel’s interesting “uninterestingness” and aesthetic challenge to literary conventions:

[U]ninteresting as it seems to be, [Klara and the Sun] is therefore a novel markedly interested in interestingness: in the dynamic discursive situation in which something is remarked as special or piquant with respect to a set of background expectations, and so worthy of further, more focused and more general, attention. (p. 615)

This novel also “marks it out as in some way singular vis-à-vis a hinterland of novelistic interestingness, sets up a conversation with that broader tradition, and so solicits critical engagement” (p. 615). Though a very illuminating study, it sidesteps the neoliberal paradigms that commodify emotional labor and Klara’s solar dependency as a metaphor for exploitative energy economies. In another study, Swaminathan and Ravi focus on emotional themes like hope, faith, and love through Klara’s perspective, but fail to address the market-driven logics and late-capitalist anxieties underpinning the novel’s speculative universe (2021, p. 89).

Similarly, Isaraporn Pissard (2023) compares *Klara and the Sun* to other novels, highlighting its posthuman critique of anthropocentric development and utopian desire for compassionate human-nonhuman relations by regarding “anthropocentric beliefs and practices as detrimental to the well-being of non-humans and the peaceful coexistence between humans and non-humans” so as to show that “hope or a utopian desire” is embedded in this work and can serve as “a method that encourages us to assess conditions of our existing world and imagine better possible futures” (p. 12). Nonetheless, similar to previous works, this reading fails to address the economic structures, such as surveillance capitalism, that sustain Klara’s exploitation. This meaningful gap in the examination of *Klara and the Sun* through the NEC leaves underexplored its critique of commodified care and energy economies, where Klara’s reverence and plea for “special nourishment” resist programmed obsolescence and market logic.

3. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS: POSTHUMAN ECONOMIES AND ECONOMIES OF CARE

Since Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* raises questions about the posthuman condition, emotional labor, value, disposability, and the commodification of sentient lives in a neoliberal context, insights from Rosi Braidotti, Katherine Hayles, and Wendy Brown can be usefully applied to the study of this narrative in light of posthuman economies where technology, ethics of care, and neoliberal capitalism intersect. Accordingly, we argue that Klara’s dual role as a technological commodity

and a subject who resists commodification reveals the exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism and challenges the anthropocentric exceptionalism.

Rosi Braidotti offers a posthuman framework that analyzes how bodies, human and non-human, are subject to commodifying forces of contemporary society. She expresses concerns about the all-too-human limitations and ethos that mandate our personal and collective levels of creativity (2013, p. 20). Further, she highlights what she calls “the posthuman predicament” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 20). We argue this is exactly what Klara is trapped in as she is technically designed to accompany the children she serves as an agent of the neoliberal regime. In the novel, when Mr. Capaldi implores Klara to “continue Josie” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 223), an important posthumanist predicament arises: Klara, an AF, should seamlessly fill in the emotional voids human beings might have—a neoliberal expectation that bases relationships on optimized transactions of utility.

Klara's role as an AF essentially reveals a neoliberal shift toward mechanized emotional labor, as a result of which human labor and affect are increasingly substituted by more efficient artificial alternatives. Thus, we should critically question relationships that we form today as well as the affective bonds that we develop in a commodified, posthuman world. Braidotti (2013) sees this posthuman subjectivity as a hybrid entity, marked by “a complex assemblage of human and non-human” (p. 159) elements, which Klara embodies while negotiating the dual ramifications of autonomy and servitude. This posthuman hybridity challenges traditional notions of agency and value, as well as the anthropocentric assumption that meaningful relationships and ethical agency belong exclusively to humans.

Despite her artificial design as an AF optimized for economic utility, Klara shows traits that complicate her role as merely a technological commodity. She exhibits a sharp awareness of her servitude and subtly resists it, particularly in moments when her loyalty to Josie takes precedence over the economic logic that underwrites her existence as an AF. For example, when a potential buyer expresses interest in purchasing her, Klara remains passive, instead of displaying eagerness to be chosen, while silently resisting the market-driven selection process:

‘Klara is excellent. She’s one of our finest. But the young lady might be interested to look at the new B3 models that just came in.’

‘B3s?’ The father sounded excited. ‘You have those already?’

‘We enjoy an exclusive relationship with our suppliers. They’re only just in, and not yet calibrated. But I’d be happy to show them to you.’

The spiky-haired girl squeezed my hand again. ‘But Daddy, I want this one. She’s just right.’ There was a long wait, then the girl released my hand. I let my arm fall and continued to look at the Red Shelves. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 38)

Her refusal to perform reveals an internal logic that goes beyond mere servitude; she is not just an interchangeable commodity but a being with attachments and unspoken preferences. This instance of Klara's non-compliance with market-driven

ethics, as well as her hybrid identity, complicates her agency, revealing her as not just a commodity to ensure utility but also as a sentient being capable of affective loyalty. These instances seem to disrupt traditional hierarchies of human exceptionalism while remaining confined within the commodifying logic of neoliberal capitalism. According to Wendy Brown (2015):

when neoliberal political rationality is complete, when there is only homo economicus in every sphere and the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the figuration of human beings as human capitals eliminates the basis of a democratic citizenry. (p. 65)

Klara's role as an emotional companion exemplifies this posthuman figuration as capital, as her worth is measured only in terms of her actionable and selfless utility. In the novel, Klara observes the world around her and shows a desire to help Josie: "I'd like to assist. So long as it doesn't inconvenience Josie or her mother" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 306). This passion for assisting others highlights the ethical implications of Klara's entire existence as an AF (as well as the value placed upon her life relative to her sacrifices and services) compared with that of her human counterparts.

Elsewhere in the novel, the Mother's struggle with her feelings about Klara underscores the unavoidable tension between affective bonds and Klara's assigned role as a commodified entity:

There's nothing there. Nothing inside Josie that's beyond the Klaras of this world to continue. The second Josie won't be a copy. She'll be the exact same and you'll have every right to love her just as you love Josie now. It's not faith you need. Only rationality. I had to do it, it was tough but now it works for me just fine. And it will for you. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 220)

As reflected here, relationships and affections are commodified, as love is shown to be transferrable to a manufactured being, highlighting the disposability of artificially-affective and intelligent companions within a capitalist framework.

Of particular interest in this regard is Eva Feder Kittay's (2020) examination of the commodification of caregiving through the lens of emotional labor and relational ethics. She argues that caregiving, often seen as an extension of love, transforms caregivers into what she terms a "transparent self" (p. 2). Kittay introduces the term "love's labor" and regards it as "evocative of the cost to the self—a cost that love may well discount—when one turns one's attention to another's interests, even foregoing our own interest" (p. 2). This altruistic yet costly labor exposes the intrinsic value of care, which is, more often than not, overlooked in neoliberal contexts, where love-driven care is sacrificed for greater efficiency and marketability of caregiving. This ultimately subsumes the caregivers' interests under the welfare of those they serve. Thus, Klara's "transparent" caregiving role becomes unsettling because it operates invisibly, without the family's recognition of her influence.

Transformed into a "transparent self," Klara shows devotion not out of love but as a result of programmed servitude, yet she embodies a form of care that somehow

mimics genuine emotional labor. It is stripped of authenticity and repackaged as a marketable service, only to reinforce her commodification as a “saleable commodity” (Nayar, 2021, p. 515), valued so long as she fulfills the family’s expectations. This transformed dynamic, through Klara’s hybrid existence also challenges human exceptionalism, which replicates care in ways that blur the boundaries between human affection and artificial service. However, the family’s unawareness of Klara’s influence shows how neoliberalism turns Klara into a “transparent” caregiver whose autonomy and contributions remain unrecognized; nevertheless, Josie gradually develops an awareness of such, thereby adding a tinge of recognition to Klara’s caregiving role.

Moreover, Klara’s role in the family raises ethical questions about the nature of dependency and its tendency to outsource emotional labor. As a result, emotional and relational dimensions of caregiving are often complicated by and laden with economic considerations, where tensions apropos emotional labor and commodified care become hardwired in Klara’s existence. Kittay (2020) remarks that “the affect of love, and its history in a relationship, can be too thick, too laden with conflict and tensions that are almost inescapable in deep and close relationships” (p. 2).

The weight of such emotional labor expected of Klara is visible in moments when she takes great care to make proper adaptations to fulfill Josie’s needs; she closely observes Josie’s fragile health and devotes herself entirely to her wellbeing. For instance, when the Mother asks Klara what she had noticed about the way Josie walks, Klara methodically replies: “There’s perhaps a weakness in her left hip. Also, her right shoulder has potential to give pain, so Josie walks in a way that will protect it from sudden motion or unnecessary impact” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 50). This meticulous diagnosis shows how Klara has given her undivided attention and care in the form of unpaid emotional labor, which is devalued even as it becomes integral to Josie’s life. This devaluation is dual-of Klara’s existence as first a worker/agent and then a product—reflecting the contradictions of technology and its implications under neoliberal capitalism.

Similar and equally resonant is Nayar’s (2021) reference to Klara’s identity as an “ersatz moral person” considering neoliberal care relationships (p. 519) that commodify labor while erasing the individuality of workers. The novel critiques this capitalist labor exploitation by exposing Klara’s value as defined in terms of the extent to which she can perform care labor flawlessly, only to remain disposable, consigned to a scrapyard once her utility is exhausted. In capitalist economies, where human subjects are exploited and rendered obsolete, a similar pattern of exploitation and obsolescence is at work. Brown’s (2015) critique of neoliberalism parallels this sensibility as she shrewdly cautions against the shrinking of political citizenship:

[A]s humans become capital for themselves, but also for others, for a firm or a state, their investment value, rather than their productivity, becomes paramount; moral autonomy and hence the basis of sovereign individuality vanishes; and the space and meaning of political citizenship shrink. (p. 78)

Another posthuman consequence of contemporary technological innovations is an access-over-ownership transition, which Hayles (1999) describes as “the shift of emphasis from ownership to access” (p. 39). This shift is embodied in Klara’s role as a source of emotional support, since her worth is defined not in terms of her individuality but the access she gives to companionship. In a moment, Josie insists that “I said it had to be you, so now she’s sizing you up” (Ishiguro, p. 30). Klara being meticulously sized up as a purchasable commodity reveals neoliberalism’s prioritization of access to intangible services (i.e., commodified care and companionship) over material ownership. This prioritization could also be seen as an economic reinvention, an entrepreneurialization of human efforts, and a neoliberal rationality: “Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or *reinventing* [emphasis added] itself in a new life, is to *entrepreneurialize* [emphasis added] its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking” (Brown, 2015, p. 36).

This rationality also informs the nature of Klara’s role in the family, as her commodified acts of caring and capacity for affective understanding become tools for family members to capitalize on. In the novel, the Manager reassures that Klara will “make sure you find a home” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 43), but under the condition that she does her best to remain marketable and customer-pleasing: “Just six days. I’m giving you a special price too. Remember, Klara, you’ll be representing the store again. So do your best” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 43). This conditional home for Klara reinforces the notion of an individualistic model where her existence is reduced to serving specific utilitarian functions and human needs. Braidotti (2013) also warns against a monolithic, “neo-universal machinic ethos” (p. 102), which Klara’s function as a companion exemplifies, particularly when she observes and mimics human affective responses to fit into the role assigned to her as an empathetic companion. Her efforts to grasp the delicacies of affective interactions reflect an ethical tension, revealing how technological mediations and neo-universal machinic ethics can stifle human affections by prioritizing efficiency over authentic connections. For example, when Klara observes Coffee Cup Lady and Raincoat Man reconnecting, she wonders if she feels “pain alongside...[her] happiness” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 28).

Another consequence of such neoliberal ethos is a growing sense of confusion and alienation. In the novel, Klara observes in a befuddled way:

the Mother’s gaze, which never softened or wavered, and the very way she was standing there, arms crossed over her front, fingers clutching at the material of her coat, made me realize there were many signals I hadn’t yet learned to understand. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 29).

Her inability to understand the signals may mirror the deeper feelings of disconnection those technological mediations can impose on individuals’ lives, even if the purpose is to foster intimacy and fill emotional voids. In another similar moment reflective of societal isolation, Klara watches other AFs avoiding eye contact or hurrying past the store: “When AFs did go by us, they almost always acted oddly, speeding up their walk and keeping their faces turned away” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 21).

These examples highlight how emotional exchanges and affective charges are negatively mediated by neoliberal technological imperatives, further revealing the loneliness inherent in posthuman and neoliberal economies.

Finally, Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* subtly calls for reimagining relationships as collaborative and mutually sustaining rather than exploitative. Although this novel does not explicitly depict collective resistance, it highlights its necessity through Klara's reflections on solidarity and nourishment. Her plea to the Sun for Josie's health is remarkable in this respect: "If only you could give her special nourishment, as I saw you do for Beggar Man and his dog, then Josie and Rick could go together into their adult lives just as they wished for in their kind picture" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 285). This quasi-spiritual relationship of Klara's with the Sun also represents what Byung-Chul Han (2017) would see as a form of "idiotism," a refusal to participate in transactional logic which favors an ethics of care untainted by profit and calls for spaces of silence and resistance. "Idiotism," Han maintains, "stands opposed to the neoliberal power of domination: total communication and total surveillance. The idiot does not 'communicate'. Indeed, he communicates with the In-communicable" (pp. 83-84).

3.1. Surveillance and cognitive economies

As noted earlier, Klara's role as a programmed provider of care exposes the corrosive impact of neoliberalism on human and non-human connections. This insidious nature becomes more patent if we look into Klara's observational capabilities too, which can position her as an unwitting agent in surveillance economies that encroach on private lives. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Shoshana Zuboff (2021) studies the far-reaching implications of unchecked surveillance technologies that have permeated every part of our lives under neoliberal capitalism. This invasion has given birth to a new species of power, which she calls "instrumentarian power" (p. 482). To demonstrate the hazards of this new species of surveillance going haywire, she alludes to Goethe's fable of the sorcerer's apprentice, where the apprentice, "in the absence of the sorcerer's authority to guide and check the action," loses control over the broom, leading to chaos and "a demonic force of unrelenting power" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 555). In Ishiguro's novel, Klara embodies this subtle yet unchecked observational power, which allows her to gather data about the family's behaviors and emotions. For example, when Klara observes Josie, she notes: "Josie's face was still peering round the edge of her seat at me. Her eyes had become dull, as if they no longer cared what they saw" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 104). Similar to the sorcerer's apprentice who loses control of the broom, Klara's seemingly benign observations signal the potential for surveillance to, wittingly or unwittingly, modify human behavior and interactions, paralleling real-world behavioral manipulation.

Zuboff (2021) maintains that "surveillance capitalists are now locked in a cycle of continuous intensification of the means of behavioral modification" (p. 470), underscoring this regime's relentless fascination with refining methods of behavioral

modification. In the novel, Klara is not a passive observer; her observations shape, albeit inconspicuously, the family's behavior and dynamics. For instance, Klara's accumulation of data and thereby insight about Josie's emotions enable her to act in ways that subtly bear on Josie's behavior. In a reassurance-seeking moment, Josie embraces Klara and whispers into her ear: "Don't worry. I'll never let anything bad happen to you. I'll talk to Mom. You go with Rick for now. Trust me" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 255). This moment, dependent on Klara's constant presence, underscores how artificial intelligence can create emotional dependencies that equate the scheming potential of data-governed algorithms. But a categorical, ethical question is left unanswered here: are the family members really aware of how their behaviors and decisions are being shaped, in one way or another, by Klara's seemingly benign presence, and do they really consent to this subtle manipulation?

This subtle observational role, however, is punctuated by Klara's status as an older B2 model, which develops in the narrative from her time in the store to when she enters Josie's family. In the store, she observes newer B3 models "moving themselves away from the older AFs" as superior and showing less empathy "so that when customers came in, the B3s would look like a separate group on their own" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 42). This role from the store develops until Klara tries to integrate into Josie's family. In this family, Klara's acute observational capabilities originate not from her advanced efficiency but from an experience-based approach that mimics human imperfection. For instance, there is a moment near the end of the novel when the Manager praises Klara's unique qualities—despite being a B2—at the end of her service: "You know, Klara. Of all the AFs I looked after, you were certainly one of the most remarkable. You had such unusual insight. And observational abilities. I noticed it right away" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 313). Or even later, the Manager admits, as quoted in the novel, to the unique feeling Klara had sparked, while the more advanced models could not:

I wouldn't have said this in the store, but I was never able to *feel* [emphasis added] towards B3s as I did towards your generation. I often think the customers felt something similar. They never really took to them, for all the B3s' technical advances. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 315)

Having an outdated design and presumably lacking the newer B3s' "perfect rationality," Klara's less advanced yet more empathetic nature ironically critiques instrumental logic by highlighting the significance of empathetic and affective considerations that newer models do not attend to. This paradoxically leads to greater empathy and insight and subverts the neoliberal valorization of wanton technological progress.

The disdain that B3s have for older AFs, such as Klara, resembles human hierarchies too (such as supremacism, racism, etc.), exposing how neoliberal capitalism perpetuates division and resentment even among non-humans just as supremacist and racist ideologies do among humans. Accordingly, the allocation of Klara's cognitive energy to deciphering emotions like longing and despair not only reveals the limitations and failure of computational systems in fully capturing the

complexities of human affections but also—and more importantly—seeks to subvert such divisive and hierarchical systems. This thematic progression from Klara's days in the store to her role in Josie's family culminates in Klara's reflections when consigned to the scrapyards, where her inevitable obsolescence morphs into a quiet critique of endless technological progress underwritten by neoliberal logic.

Moreover, the ethical dilemmas surrounding consent and autonomy under the regime of surveillance capitalism are notable here: "[I]ndividuals do not render their experience out of choice or obligation but rather out of ignorance and the dictatorship of no alternatives" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 356). Klara's programmed compliance and her role in the family represent a subtle dynamic of "coercion and stealth" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 356). The family may not fully understand the implications of having Klara as a vigilant and observant AF that interacts with them. She is designed to fulfill a "monitoring role" (Simonetti, 2024, p. 317) that reifies the family's dynamics:

The Mother, like Josie, had less to do with me during this period, sometimes not looking my way even when she encountered me around the house. I understood that this was a busy time for her, and also that possibly my presence brought back difficult memories. But there was one occasion when she gave me special attention: 'Klara,' she said after a while. 'Josie's become very fond of you. And if I may say so, so have I.' (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 304)

In another observation, the Manager refers to the transitory nature of relationships between children and their AFs, which highlights the disconnected relationships and alienation that result from such dependency: "More often than not, the child never comes back. Or worse, the child comes back and ignores the poor AF who's waited, and instead chooses another" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 40). The family's reliance on Klara for emotional company may be due to their lack of knowledge about the invasive nature of Klara's observations. The family members willingly exchange their privacy and autonomy for emotional support, as they relinquish themselves to Klara's unceasing gaze. This exchange happens on a much larger scale in societies under surveillance capitalism, which "impose their will backstage" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 356), deluding individuals into forfeiting their agency to surveillance technologies, often without offering any feasible alternatives.

Furthermore, Zuboff (2021) thus comments on the reason for surveillance capitalism's desire to commodify individual experiences:

[T]he prediction imperative transforms the things that we have into things that have us in order that it might render the range and richness of our world, our homes, and our bodies as behaving objects for its calculations and fabrications on the path to profit. (p. 356)

Klara exemplifies this imperative, since she is designed to fulfill emotional needs, but at the same time her role serves the economic interests of the capitalist regime pivoting on surveillance technologies. Yet, such technological invasions operate invisibly under a benign disguise: Klara's careful attention to human vulnerabilities

and affective responses shows how personal relationships can become transactional and commodified under the nonthreatening façade of AI-facilitated companionship. Her attention to human vulnerabilities and the commodification of personal relationships can be seen where she observes the interactions between Josie and her mother considering her potential replacement. In this scene, Klara reflects on Mr. Capaldi's creation of a "portrait" of Josie, which is in fact a replacement AF that embodies Josie's appearance, revealing how her role as a companion inextricably intertwines with technological and economic forces. Her role, evident in this moment, goes beyond being simply a companion:

'I'd suspected for some time that Mr. Capaldi's portrait wasn't a picture or a sculpture, but an AF. I went in to confirm my speculation. Mr. Capaldi has done an accurate job of catching Josie's outward appearance. Though perhaps the hips should be a little narrower.'

'Thank you,' Mr. Capaldi said. 'I'll bear that in mind. It's still a work in progress.' (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 216-217)

Another testament to the transactional and commodified nature of relationships under surveillance capitalism in the novel is the inevitable replacement of Josie by an AF under "laws of technological inevitability" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 525) as "economic principles that instrumentalize and control human experience to systematically and predictably shape behavior toward others' profitable ends" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 526). The invasive and commodifying nature of neoliberal capitalism is often disguised under and legitimated by the rhetoric of technological progress in "a magical age" and discussions surrounding it: "the promise of *a magical age* [emphasis added] plays a critical strategic role, simultaneously distracting us from and *legitimizing* [emphasis added] surveillance capitalism's totalistic ambitions," defining a new "societal goal" that "fits snugly into the notion of limitless technological progress that dominated utopian thought" (Zuboff, 2021, p. 556). This rhetoric creeps into the thoughts of individuals, making them oblivious to their own commodified and surveilled existence, benumbing their critical understanding of the surrounding world. This ignorance becomes manifest under instrumentarian power when Josie's mother, sizing up Klara as a potential purchase, asks the Manager, "Which model is this one?" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 11), emphasizing that her conception of value is tied to the technical specifications of a product. However, the Mother's decision to pick the older B2 model—despite the fact that more advanced B3s were available—challenges assumptions of blind faith in "limitless technological progress" that Zuboff (2021) warned would lead to totalistic ambitions (p. 556). As the narrative unfolds, this meaningful decision of choosing Klara over her "superior" peers also reveals a nuanced layer of victimhood as well: while the Mother is trapped by neoliberal logic, she shows an intuitive resistance to this rhetoric by preferring Klara's empathetic "imperfections" to B3s' more efficient specifications promoted and valued by the market. The Mother's humanistic preference—less tainted by market-driven agendas—ultimately ties to the novel's broader critique of neoliberal progress being essentially dehumanizing.

To further highlight the inherent uncertainty and complexity of human relationships under the surveillance of neoliberal capitalism, Zuboff (2021) asserts that “in the real world of human endeavor, there is no perfect information and no perfect rationality” (p. 467). These complexities are often glossed over and oversimplified by data-driven approaches of the “instrumentarian society governed by computation” (Zuboff, 2021, p. 590). Such systems are often inattentive to “the complex interplay of economy and personality that defines contemporary work” (Brouillette, 2014, p. 85). Accordingly, Klara’s efforts to interpret emotions like longing and despair, complicated by personal histories, unspoken desires, human subjectivities, and so on, show the limitations of a system underwritten by computational and instrumentarian logic that tries in vain to apply data-driven models (cognitive input) to understand the harsh and volatile realities of human subjective experiences (cognitive output). This operation of “cognitive economy” (i.e., the effort Klara puts in) apropos interpreting the immeasurable depth of human emotions represents an, albeit unsuccessful, technological attempt to reduce such subjective feelings and perceptions into a predictable, quantifiable, and marketable output. This cognitive difficulty also shows that the depth of human potential and emotions, in Paolo Virno’s words, “cannot be objectified in machinery” (as cited in Brouillette, 2014, p. 41) because of its “irreducibility to exchange relations” or “its unavailability for abstraction in machinery” (Brouillette, 2014, p. 44)—thereby decrying the computational and instrumentarian logic of neoliberalism. In the novel, the difficulties of Klara’s cognitive economy manifest when she converses with the Manager discussing the sadness of children who come to the store but cannot afford an AF. The Manager, as quoted in the novel, explains:

What you must understand is that we’re a very special store. There are many children out there who would love to be able to choose you, choose Rosa, any one of you here. But it’s not possible for them. You’re beyond their reach. That’s why they come to the window, to dream about having you. But then they get sad. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 15)

Evidently, Klara’s emotional oversight and the cognitive energy she expends to decode human emotional data clarify how instrumentarian logic of neoliberal capitalism impedes profound human affection and understanding, just as computational societies fail to fully capture the complexities of human existence in an ever-evolving world.

3.2. *Energy economies*

Surveillance capitalism’s subtle commodification of human behavior, discussed earlier, bears comparison to how neoliberal regimes mindlessly exploit natural resources. In the novel, Klara’s solar-dependent existence and her confrontation with ecological depredations represent this tension in ecological regimes. Thus, to reframe capitalism as an “ecological regime,” we draw on Jason W. Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), which offers a framework for a deeper

understanding of the intertwined ecological and economic systems in *Klara and the Sun*. In light of this framework, energy extraction, resource appropriation, and systemic inequalities, as depicted in the novel, create a “web of life” shaped by capitalism. Accordingly, in Ishiguro’s speculative narrative, Klara’s solar-powered existence becomes a “resisting” metaphor of possible redemption for energy, value, and life within an exploitative ecological regime that prioritizes short-term resources use over long-term sustainability.

At the heart of Moore’s ecological critique of capitalism lies the notion of energy, its extraction and thereby consumption. The exploitative apparatus of the ecological regime survives by transforming the work of both humans and extra-humans’ natures into value: “Capitalism has survived not by destroying nature...but through projects that compel nature-as-oikeios to work harder and harder—for free, or at a very low cost” (Moore, 2015, p. 23). Klara’s dependence on solar energy comes to the fore here; the Sun—a seemingly infinite resource and an embodiment of the “cheap energy” that capitalist regimes rely on—sustains Klara’s functionality and existence. Nevertheless, the Sun’s value in Klara’s life transcends serving utility-driven demands. Klara, contrary to the system in which it is set, has great appreciation for the Sun’s rejuvenating power: “When I was lucky enough to see him like that, I’d lean my face forward to take in as much of his nourishment as I could” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 8). This ritualistic sun-gazing, imbued with reverence, resists commodification, as Klara’s relationship with the Sun also challenges capitalism’s assumption of having endless resources available at its disposal without regard for ecological limits. So, by having Klara experience the Sun as a nurturing force, the novel subtly exposes the fragility of systems that depend on energy resources regressed and treated as limitless, especially in contexts of disruption or scarcity.

To invite attention to the problem of ecological depredation under capitalism today, Moore (2015) writes that we need to shift “our initial premise from working on to working through nature. (And, in turn, to being worked through by the web of life)” (p. 23). This shift, according to Moore, “opens a new set of questions about how this limit—the limit of putting nature to work—may be a fundamental barrier to capital accumulation in the twenty-first century” (Moore, 2015, p. 23), revealing the tension that arises when capitalism’s exploitative demands are not met by the finite capacity—as well as precarity—of ecological systems. Also, Moore (2015) bemoans the exhausting strain imposed on natural resources to allow “capitalism-in-nature” to survive; he writes that “it is becoming increasingly difficult to get nature—of any kind—to work harder” (p. 23). In the novel, the incarnation of “capitalism-in-nature” dynamic (i.e., capitalism’s mindless extraction of ecological resources) is reflected in the moment when Klara encounters pollution from what she calls the Cootings Machine, which disrupts her access to sunlight:

But the next day, and the day after, the Cootings Machine carried on and on, and daytime became almost like night. At one point I looked for the Sun’s patterns on our floor, alcoves and walls, but they were no longer there. The Sun, I knew, was trying his utmost, and towards the end of the second bad afternoon, even though

the smoke was worse than ever, his patterns appeared again, though only faintly. I became worried and asked Manager if we'd still get all our nourishment, and she laughed and said, 'That horrible thing has come here several times before and no one in the store ever suffered from it. So just put it out of your mind, Klara.' (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 35-6)

This Cootings Machine, designed to make profit at the cost of damaging the environment, exemplifies what Moore calls the "absurd mode of environment-making" under capitalism's dynamism, which serves to "liberate, then fetter, then restructure and renew capital accumulation" (Moore, 2015, p. 21). As a result, the temporary dimming of the Sun's patterns not only threatens Klara's survival in the novel but also symbolizes the broader socioecological financialization and its attendant crises caused by such an extractive apparatus proper.

Klara's reflections reveal her awareness of these systemic inequalities in energy economies, particularly when Boy AF Rex reassures her that the Sun will always nourish them just as it has always had: "[T]he Sun had ways of reaching us wherever we were. He [Boy AF Rex] pointed to the floorboards and said, 'That's the Sun's pattern right there. If you're worried, you can just touch it and get strong again'" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 8). Yet, this faith is juxtaposed with moments of dimming hope and exposed vulnerability, such as when the Sun's nourishment is blocked by the continuous and thick pollution produced by the Cootings Machine:

There were three short funnels protruding from its [the Cootings Machine's] roof, and smoke began to come up out of them. At first the smoke came in little white puffs, then grew darker, till it no longer rose as separate clouds but as one thick continuous one. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 34)

This juxtaposition highlights the precarious fragility of systems that commodify and exploit energy. Klara's commodified existence in the novel is parallel to and a byproduct of capitalism's ecological regime that prioritizes cheap resources over equitable or sustainable systems—a scathing critique of systemic inequality in energy economies.

Both a physical source of life and a metaphor for capitalism's exploitative relationship with nature, the Sun has an autonomous and nourishing presence that informs the narrative's critical engagement with ecological regime of capitalism. Moore (2015) does not see capitalism as just an economic system, nor a social system. He sees it as "a way of organizing nature" (p. 14), denouncing its wanton treatment of nature as an external, passive resource. He laments that "capitalism's governing conceit is that it may do with Nature as it pleases, that Nature is external and may be coded, quantified, and rationalized to serve economic growth" (Moore, 2015, p. 14). However, Klara's reverence for the Sun destabilizes the system's externalizing, passivizing outlook by reframing nature as an active, autonomous force with agency and moral significance, not an external, cheap resource to be extracted for economic purposes.

Klara's reaction to this perceived threat is notable in the development of her character arc, all the way from her passive observation in the store to an active, sacrificial intervention here. As Klara sees the Machine's pollution as divine anger blocking the Sun's benevolence toward Josie, she concocts an illogical yet determined plan to sabotage a Cootings Machine in the hope of being rewarded by the Sun—granting Josie “special nourishment” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 285). With Rick's help, Klara reaches the city, locates a Machine and convinces Josie's father to help her destroy it using the specialized P-E-G Nine solution extracted directly from her own head. This act, self-sacrificial, leaves an irreversible detrimental impact on her cognitive fluidity and causes her to experience obsolescence earlier than expected. As such, her sacrifice is rooted in her primitive-like anthropomorphization of the Sun (typical of herself, a quasi-spiritual being), not in algorithmic efficiency (accorded to the more advanced B3s). So, this act not only directly disrupts the Machine's operation but also displays a form of resistance that neoliberal “instrumentarian logic” cannot accommodate. The harebrained scheme that Klara devises—far from being a sign of optimized rationality yet rooted in a faithful devotion—challenges the system's relentless extraction, thereby showing how even such imperfect thinking has the potential to interrupt the “capitalism-in-nature” dynamic theorized by Moore (2015, p. 23). This interruption culminates when Klara unequivocally expresses her belief in the Sun's healing power, that the Sun intervened “particularly” for Josie: “The Sun was very kind to me. He was always kind to me from the start. But when I was with Josie, once, he was *particularly* [emphasis added] kind” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 315). Here, Klara attributes Josie's recovery to the Sun's “particularly” bestowed benevolence after her sacrificial acts. In this earnest concession, Klara's less-than-perfect humanity, which is the result of both her programmed observation and her quasi-spiritual belief, reframes nature as an active, relational force that can potentially resist forces of commodification.

This readjusted perspective vis-à-vis nature is aptly reflected in Klara's observation of the Sun saving the Beggar Man and his dog: “The Sun was pouring his nourishment onto the street ... and I saw that before long, perhaps even by that afternoon, Beggar Man would be on his feet again” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 44). This reflection disrupts the view of nature's passivity and extractability under capitalism's extractive ethos by *representing* and *recentering* the Sun as a benevolent, revitalizing force. Moore (2015) also pinpoints the “double internality” of this extractive paradigm, which entails the double movement of capitalism through nature, of nature through capitalism, the idea that humanity and nature are mutually constitutive (p. 13), reaffirming the novel's deconstructive, counter-discursive portrayal of the Sun. Ultimately, through its nuanced portrayal of energy and value, *Klara and the Sun* invites speculative reflection on the ecological crises of our time and a reevaluation of humanity's place within the web of life, serving as both a denunciation of and a call to action against the ecological inequalities perpetuated by capitalism.

3.3. *Speculative economies*

Klara and the Sun offers a speculative, meditative critique of the dehumanizing ethos of late capitalism, which is better illuminated if read in terms of speculative tropes. Thus, we situate the novel within a broader critique of capitalist ideologies to examine how intimacy, individuality, and labor are commodified. Essentially, the novel's speculative setting functions as a "Utopian enclave," a microcosmic space where the larger social totality can be challenged (Jameson, 2005, p. 2). In the novel, Klara reflects on the particularly dependent relationship that she and Josie have had: "I was with Josie all the time. Until she went to college" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 312). Within the speculative, "Utopian enclave" of the novel, this relationship exemplifies the commodification of intimacy in a society over-reliant on technology for affective connections. This enclave, therefore, serves as both a speculative setting for Ishiguro's narrative and a critical lens to critique the dehumanizing effects of neoliberalism on human connections.

Fredric Jameson (2005) explains that "Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality" (p. xii). In Ishiguro's speculative frame of reference, Klara's perspective, both artificial and empathetic, creates a cognitive alienation and otherness, drawing attention to the systemic nature of social totality and the ethical and social implications of technology (e.g., genetic enhancement and artificial labor). To reflect this radical otherness in the speculative setting of the narrative, Klara notes:

I began to notice something odd. During the course of a morning, say, the three B3s would move, little by little, away from the two older AFs. Sometimes they would take tiny steps to the side. Or a B3 would become interested in something through the window, walk over to look, then return to a spot slightly different from the one Manager had chosen for him. After four days, there could be no more doubt: the three new B3s were deliberately moving themselves away from the older AFs so that when customers came in, the B3s would look like a separate group on their own. (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 42)

This passage crucially reflects larger entrapment in neoliberal ideologies. Klara begins to notice newer AFs deliberately distancing themselves from older models, unraveling how utopian impulses in the novel are constrained, rather than emancipatory, because the logic of obsolescence is *built* into the system, and even artificial beings internalize it. By situating Ishiguro's critique within the speculative realm, we learn how this narrative presents Utopian visions not so much as blueprints for alternative societies but more as reflections of our imprisonment within present neoliberal ideologies. In the novel, Klara admits to an important realization: "I realized too how important it was that I remain alert, ready at the first sign to raise the blind fully" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 270), which serves as a metaphor for adopting vigilance in a society riddled with socioeconomic ideologies of neoliberalism that constrain individual agency and critical thinking. This speculative

lens, therefore, exposes the failures of its own imagined society and also urges us to imagine possibilities that surpass the current socioeconomic order.

In light of the speculative tropes used to explore the narrative, Josie's genetic "lifting" and Klara's role as an AF become central, as they invite the examination of human relationships and speculative investments in engineered futures. To show new angles of how neoliberal ideologies reduce family and personal relationships to mechanisms of economic risk management and speculative value, we borrow from Melinda Cooper's *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (2017). Within this framework, we study how the novel reflects the financialization of family life and the reproduction of economic inequalities under neoliberalism. First, referencing Gary S. Becker from his "Revamp Welfare to Put Children First" (1992), Cooper (2017) notes that neoliberalism repositions children as speculative capital within the family's strategy for economic security: "the family in its equilibrium state can be understood as serving a kind of natural insurance function that is disturbed when the welfare state socializes insurance" (p. 60).

Josie's mother's decision to invest in genetic "lifting" represents this neoliberal logic of speculative precarity, one that treats Josie's engineered body as a speculative investment and a calculated risk to attain socioeconomic security in the future. This privatized, neoliberalized responsibility burdens families, widening socioeconomic disparities and throwing communities into disequilibrium, since only the wealthy can afford such lifting privileges. Ishiguro critiques the fragile dynamic of neoliberal investment through depicting Josie's precarious health and its strain on the family: Josie's worsening physical condition, marked by "strange breathing" and "semi-waking" spells (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 277), leaves her mother repeating apprehensively, "Josie, Josie, Josie" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 277). This happens as the family's precarious and speculative investment is falling apart before their eyes, highlighting the fragility and disequilibrium of privatized welfare systems under neoliberal capitalism.

These spells tie to the central horror that the narrative draws attention to: society grimly normalizes genetic lifting despite its irreversible risks, which manifest in Josie's grave illness as a direct consequence of lifting, not to mention the death of her sister Sal from a "much worse" sickness than Josie's: "'Yeah, my sister,' she said again after a long time. 'And where is Sal now?' 'Sal died.' 'How very sad.' Josie shrugged" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 96). Ultimately, owing to Klara's earnest appeals to the Sun and some medical interventions, Josie recovers, but this recovery comes at a cost, which is having her unlifted childhood friend, Rick, excluded from her future. Josie and Rick's childhood dream of a life together "into their adult lives just as they wished for in their kind picture" shatters, as Josie leaves for college, no longer "together" with Rick (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 285). This outcome underscores how "lifting" within a neoliberal system can perpetuate class divides rather than bridge them, and how preposterous it is to assume that the idea of meritocracy does work in such a system. Moreover, a thought-provoking comparison comes to the fore here: Klara's status as a less advanced B2 AF model compared to her B3 peers meaningfully parallels Rick's unlifted status compared to Josie's liftedness. This similarity positions both Klara and Rick as the novel's most humane (pseudo-)characters. Both reject

neoliberal optimization in their own way: Klara does it through her empathetic, humanistic imperfections and sacrificial devotion, while Rick enacts it through his unlifted and unmodified potential, having been deprived of a privilege that wealthier children such as Josie have benefited from. As less neoliberally privileged beings, Klara and Rick challenge the dehumanizing and anti-meritocratic ethos of surveillance capitalism and neoliberal speculative investment, since real care and solidarity do not result from neoliberal “lifting” and “investment” that entrench precarity but actually arise from non-engineered and unadulterated authenticity that can genuinely tie individuals and communities together.

Also, the precarity associated with Josie’s fragile health underscores neoliberalism’s financialization of family and its tendency to externalize risk onto individuals and families. Cooper (2017) writes:

The shift from public spending to private deficit spending as a means of financing investments in ‘human capital’ such as health and education ... takes the form of intergenerational, parental investment, where the family becomes the primary source of economic welfare for those born into a world of ever-diminishing public goods. (p. 137)

This shift is depicted in Josie’s mother’s desperate pleas for her to get well soon: “You need to get well for me. Do you hear me?” (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 93). The Mother’s insistence on Josie’s recovery shows the stakes of this investment—framing Josie’s health as a prerequisite for fulfilling familial aspirations—and reflects speculative hope rooted in neoliberal ideology:

‘Mom. If I get well, can we take Klara with us? Show her Morgan’s Falls? She’s only ever been outside once. And that was just around here.’ ‘Of course Klara can come. But you’ll have to get well or none of this works. You understand, Josie?’ (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 93–4)

Such moments in the novel poignantly reflect how the individualization of economic risks and reduction of human lives to speculative investments can result in grave psychological tolls and affective precarity for families under privatized welfare systems.

3.4. *Performative and family economies*

To reveal new layers of socioeconomic dynamics at play in *Klara and the Sun*, we refer to Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure*, first published in 1899. Veblen’s insights can help illuminate the economic and cultural underpinnings of Josie’s family’s decision to purchase Klara. We thus look into his observations about “conspicuous consumption,” “pecuniary emulation,” and “the canon of pecuniary beauty” to critique consumerism and class distinction. This framework helps explain the performative acquisition of AFs in Ishiguro’s speculative society and clarifies the interplay between material exclusivity and social status.

One of Veblen's arguments is that "conspicuous consumption" (i.e., valuing "excellent" goods not just for their practical utility but also for their capacity to showcase wealth and status) is a defining characteristic of neoliberal societies. Veblen (2007) writes, "since the consumption of these more excellent goods is evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (p. 53). This principle is reflected in Josie's insistence on selecting Klara as a performative class-signaling act ("Klara's the one I want. I don't want any other" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 49)) highlighting the importance of uniqueness and exclusivity in consumer choices under neoliberalism. Another example is when the store's Manager emphasizes Klara's exceptional nature: "Klara has so many unique qualities, we could be here all morning. But if I had to emphasize just one ... her ability to absorb and blend everything she sees around her is quite amazing" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 49). Such outstanding specifications and capabilities position Klara not only as an AI-facilitated companion but also as a commodified agent of social distinction and a performative symbol of the family's socioeconomic privilege that "pertains normally to the leisure class" (Veblen, 2007, p. 52).

Veblen's reflection on pecuniary emulation as an "invidious distinction" casts further light on this symbolic and performative display of leisure-class status. This notion highlights an aspirational and materialistic drive to emulate the wealth and habits of higher social classes; Veblen (2007) postulates that "the possession of wealth confers honour; it is an *invidious distinction* [emphasis added]" (p. 22). In the novel, the Mother's close examination of Klara's perceptiveness and acuity—asking her detailed questions such as "what color are her eyes?" or "what did you notice about the way my daughter walks?" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 50)—underscores the performative nature of the family's acquisition of an AF with advanced and exceptional specifications. Clearly, the family's decision to invest in a high-tech companion like Klara reflects their desire to emulate the elite social standards and win an "invidious distinction," so to speak. Veblen's (2007) insight that "our standard of decency in expenditure ... is set by the usage of those next above us in reputability" (p. 71) further contextualizes the family's actions. As such, their performative decision to purchase Klara acquires for them all "canons of reputability and decency" (Veblen, 2007, p. 71), operating as a form of social signaling and luxurious expenditure that represents the "canon of pecuniary beauty" (Veblen, 2007, p. 93) where socioeconomic exclusivity and technological privileges reinforce societal hierarchies.

Furthermore, the fact that Klara's value reciprocates as much with her symbolic exclusivity as with her practical utility represents a tendency for technological fetishization, as a result of which "consumption becomes a larger element in the standard of living ... directed to the largest possible acquisition of wealth" (Veblen, 2007, pp. 61-2). When the Manager underscores that Klara possesses "the most sophisticated understanding of any AF in this store, B3s not excepted" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 49), it becomes clear how "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods" (i.e., technological sophistication and uniqueness) can translate into the acquisition

of cultural and social distinction as “a means of reputability” (Veblen, 2007, p. 53). Performative and economic in nature (and driven by technology), this conspicuous consumption is seen in the role that the AFs play as both a functional and symbolic commodity, showing consumer choices’ deep ties to the performance of status in a stratified society.

Another relevant line of inquiry worth addressing is inspired by Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), which examines how wealth and heritage become concentrated and monopolized in a neoliberal society. Neoliberal strategies for securing intergenerational privilege can actually perpetuate social inequity and fray the fabric of societal structures as shown within the novel. Hence, we demonstrate that Ishiguro’s novel critiques the dehumanizing impact exerted on both families and individuals as a result of an obsession with securing privilege and accumulating wealth. Piketty (2014) remarks that “the rate of return on capital significantly exceeds the rate of growth of the economy” (p. 25), stressing how wealth concentration in the hands of a few and the drive to secure privilege intensify the wealth gap. In the novel, the genetic lifting of Josie—an investment in creative and human capital—is a direct consequence of this gap. Therefore, we can conceptualize Klara not just as a luxury item, but as a high-value economic good/service which the society preserves to monetize creativity and advanced capabilities in a precarious neoliberal context.

The Mother’s resolve to ensure Josie’s future highlights the unyielding desire of families in such a context to invest in calculable risks and preserve their privileges. The Mother encounters Klara, saying:

“So what if Josie doesn’t get lifted? Plenty of kids aren’t. But I could never have that for Josie. I wanted the best for her. I wanted her to have a good life. You understand, Klara? I called it, and now Josie’s sick. Because of what I decided. You see how it feels for me?” (Ishiguro, 2021, pp. 222-223)

Here, the Mother’s anxiety surrounding her child’s necessity of getting lifted exposes the psychological costs of treating human lives as calculable risks and “projects” (Han, 2017, p. 1), which should be perpetually optimized, regardless of any potential risks.

In addition to the insistence on Josie’s lifting, this dynamic is represented in the state of Klara’s existence as an expensive, state-of-the-art asset that only a privileged few can afford. So, in addition to being only an AF for offering companionship, she functions as a technological and emotional “capital” that the family invests in to ensure greater socioeconomic standing. As such, accumulated wealth (i.e., the financial ability to afford Klara) secures ongoing advantages that others without accumulated wealth cannot benefit from, echoing Piketty’s (2014) observation vis-à-vis the past (here, of those privileged) “devouring” the future (of those underprivileged) (p. 571). As part of a broader neoliberal agenda, the family’s decision to purchase Klara is an act of privilege preservation to give their child an edge over her peers and improve her chances of success in an increasingly

competitive, hierarchical society. Klara's care and support for Josie, though initially intangible, ultimately translate into status-defining psychological and social advantages that heighten the exclusivity of this privilege to the extent that some might even regard it as "surreal" or "mysterious." As Piketty (2014) notes, "wealth is so concentrated that a large segment of society is virtually unaware of its existence, so that some people imagine that it belongs to surreal or mysterious entities" (p. 259).

The "mysterious" operation of capital—entrenching privileges and exacerbating social inequities—is relational and insidious. Kincaid et al. (2007) remark that poverty is not an intrinsic property but a *relational* dynamic (p. 33), highlighting Josie's mother's desperation and her actions as reflective of not only her love for her daughter but also of a societal framework where *relative* worth determines access to resources. As such, Pierre Bourdieu (2005) argues that economic decisions and structures are "social constructs, indissociable from the totality of social constructs constitutive of a social order" (p. 210); hence, a clear breakdown of economic practices is impossible without taking into account social relations, power structures, and the distribution of various forms of capital (e.g., social capital). In this light, social inequities do not arise solely as a result of individual failures and varied levels of competence, but they are essentially the consequence of differential access to these various forms of social and economic capital across social spaces. Genetic lifting and having an AI-facilitated companion, therefore, become scarce resources available only to those who can afford (have economic access to) them, thereby unmasking meritocracy and intelligence as just an illusion, as such notions are less about ability and more about access to economic resources. Piketty (2014) challenges the belief that success is achieved through effort alone, arguing instead that inherited privilege undermines equality and erodes democratic values, and he attributes this crisis to the capriciousness, amorality, and limitlessness of the rhetoric of technological progress: "technology, like the market, has neither limits nor morality" and "if one truly wishes to found a more just and rational social order based on common utility, it is not enough to count on the caprices of technology" (p. 234).

As a result of this crisis, Klara, a luxury good and marker of status—likely a product of advanced "creative" technical labor—turns companionship into a purchasable service, which the family leverages, in a display of economic power, to sustain their position within a stratified society. Also, the prioritization of genetic factors in shaping individual futures echoes the broader shift toward managing genetic risk as a societal norm. Josie's mother's desire for Josie's wellbeing reflects a "model of projecting risk factors" (Sharon, 2014, p. 220), as genetic risks are not merely about eugenics but involve individual and familial management of genetic potential. This genetic lifting serves as economic advantage—"social capital," as Bourdieu (2005) calls it, constituting a "mobilizable network of relations which procures a competitive advantage by providing higher returns on investment" (pp. 194-195)—that is deemed essential for Josie's future, even if it poses risks to her health.

This economically-motivated approach becomes most chilling when Josie's mother rehearses to replace her daughter in case of her death. The Mother says to Klara rather beseechingly: "I'm asking you to make this work. Because if it happens, if it comes again, there's going to be no other way for me to survive" (Ishiguro, 2021, p. 222). This supplicatory yet earnest moment not only exposes the commodification of Josie's identity but also shows the broader societal pressures that define relationships in terms of anxious transactional exchanges and precarious investments.

As Piketty (2014) concedes, "growth [i.e., economic, technological, etc.] can harm some groups while benefiting others" (p. 22), exacerbating current anxieties that constantly arise from technological and neoliberal imperatives. Klara exemplifies the oxymoronic/pharmakonic conception of growth under neoliberalism: she is both a remedy for familial and affective ailments of the family and at the same time, a stark reminder of economic inequities in the society. She both remedies the needs of the family and subtly participates in perpetuating the cycle of economic disparity and privilege in the larger society. Klara's existence ultimately exposes how the operation of capital (financial, technological, affective, etc.) can distort equal opportunities and preserve socioeconomic hierarchies.

4. CONCLUSION

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* is an unsettling narrative that shines light on a world in which neoliberal economies relentlessly harness both human and non-human resources. This speculative narrative centers around Klara, an artificial companion fueled by solar power. She becomes a metaphor for how capitalist ethos permeates and commodifies every single form of vitality, whether technological, affective, or ecological. As such, her story encourages us to witness how care, relationships, and identity are instrumentalized by the unyielding demands of neoliberalism. Employing an economic critique, in this article we tried to show that the world of the novel, although speculative, works well in reflecting contemporary, everyday anxieties about labor, ecology, and surveillance. However, as discussed, Klara's reverence for the Sun deconstructs capitalism's extractive logic by recentering nature's identity, suggesting a hopeful possibility for rediscovery of sources of vitality that can transcend commodification.

Ishiguro's narrative, therefore, serves as a meditation on speculative futures where empathy, solidarity, and sustainable relationships are not infested by transactional logic. Having depicted a world such as Klara's, Ishiguro urges us to reconsider the ways in which we extract and harness energies (either technological or human) and also invites us to seek "nourishment" beyond commodification (i.e., valuing solidarity and mutual care above extraction and market efficiency). Ultimately, he leaves us with a key question: will the artificial glow of neoliberalism keep trapping us, or will we, like Klara, seek a truer and kinder Sun, one whose rays persist and nurture without demanding profit in return?

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