

Narrating Precarious Bodies: Memory, Control, and the Literary Imagination of AI in Ishiguro and Atwood**Divya Shikhar**

Research Scholar

GLA University, Mathura

Dr. Harvinder Negi

Assistant Professor

GLA University, Mathura

Abstract

This paper investigates the narrative construction of *precarious corporeality* in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, through an interdisciplinary framework combining posthumanist theory, narratology, and speculative fiction analysis. Engaging the emergent discourse on AI precarity within the humanities, the paper explores how these novels reconfigure embodiment—organic, synthetic, and reproductive as sites of biopolitical governance, ontological instability, and algorithmic obsolescence.

Foregrounding the notion of affective automation and functionally programmed subjectivity, the analysis draws on Judith Butler's theory of ungrievable life, Michel Foucault's biopower, and contemporary debates in AI ethics and consciousness studies. Klara's machinic sentience, she articulates, "I believe I have many feelings. The more I observe, the more feelings become available to me" (Ishiguro, *Klara* 136). Kathy's biogenetically engineered docility and Offred's narrativised resistance operate within closed epistemologies, revealing how systems of control are internalised through narrative, affect, and memory. Klara says "I have my memories, and they are mine" (Ishiguro, *Klara* 303).

Special attention is given to narratological structures—particularly the use of unreliable retrospection and constrained focalization—as mechanisms that mediate embodied experience and simulate autonomy. The speculative architectures of these texts model AI-adjacent forms of cognition and memory, where storytelling itself becomes a computational function—a way to process trauma, encode obedience, or mimic selfhood.

By treating memory not only as content but as narrative architecture, the paper proposes that literary fiction anticipates the precarity of both synthetic and posthuman life: beings rendered useful but not valuable, narratable but not sovereign. Ultimately, these novels challenge the moral and affective boundaries of the human in algorithmically governed futures, positioning literature as a critical interface for theorising the socio-ontological costs of embodied AI.

Keywords: Precarious Corporeality, Posthumanism, Narratology, Artificial Intelligence, Affective Automation, Speculative Fiction, Biopower, Memory and Narrative Architecture.

I. Introduction: Framing Precarity- AI, Narrative, and the Literary Body

Over the last few years, artificial intelligence has begun to migrate from the world of engineering and computation to become a key object of inquiry in the humanities. Researchers in literary studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and media studies are now examining the social-ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological consequences of AI technologies, and this disciplinary shift considers contributions AI might make—while wondering just how this area of inquiry challenges and shifts our understandings of work, materiality, personhood, and narrative. As speculative technologies such as machine learning and synthetic cognition contract around areas of human experience and understanding we have generally regarded as uniquely human—emotion, memory, creativity—literature represents a key site in which to stage the anxieties, apprehensions, and ethical dilemmas posed. Embedded in-levels with these various narratives of dislocation are questions of precariousness in general. What happens to intelligence as it is automated, to care as it is commodified, or to the organ or artificial body that is made functionally useful but always ontologically disposable?

Precarity is still often thought of through an economic or in-societal-political frame of reference, based on instability, expendability, and systemic marginality; however, precarity is increasingly coming to be thought of as a literary and narratological framing, particularly possible within speculative fiction. As contemporary examples of artificial intelligence, synthetic bodies, and controlled reproduction proliferate, precarity is being reframed as much more than a lived experience—it is articulated as a design, how “the design of life” is built around the logics of biopolitical governance and algorithmic control. This literature accommodates the bodily experience—organic, engineered, and otherwise—to be a programmable interface that is scripted by protocols based upon utility, affect, and compliance. In such texts, this narrative construction of precarity reflects upon how sources of power do not just discipline bodies—they are simply scripting subjectivities to create lives that are useful, and ungrievable, affective, and disposable. In effect, literature does not merely reflect precarity; it models it for us, allowing us to speculate about the underlying logic associated with design, alongside the logistics of stories, memory and consciousness, under posthuman conditions.

This paper will consider three important pieces of speculative fiction which interrogate the intersections of bodily experience, control, and algorithmic intelligence: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *Klara and the Sun* (2021), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Though each of these texts diverges epistemologically and topographically driving from bioengineered clones (*Never Let Me Go*), solar-power synthetic companions (*Klara and the Sun*), and state controlled reproductive labor (*The Handmaid's Tale*), they all share imagery of bodies as systems of power that can be programmed to function as agents within closed circuits of abstraction. Each text uses different literary apparatuses to demonstrate how, in regimes of biopolitical and algorithmic control, affect, memory, and identity can be scripted to represent the entanglements of the human and posthuman as precariously useful but ultimately narratively restricted. Collectively, these troikas establish a productive opportunity to analyze the ways in which literary form models and critiques the structure conditions of precarity induced by developments in AI.

How speculative fiction produces precarious corporeality—including biological, synthetic, or reproductive forms of precarity—as both narrative and ontological locations of programmed labour, affective automation, and systemic disposability. By considering the embodied experience of the characters in *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, I would like to examine how literature also models the internalization of biopolitical and algorithmic control, while also raising relevant questions about memory, autonomy, and the future of personhood in a posthuman world. It is here that I argue that the novels *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* do not simply treat narrative structure and memory as devices characterized by human production and consumption, but as sites of agency that simulate sentience, reveal embedded systems of biopolitical and algorithmic control, and fully arrest us from the socio-ontological costs of embodied AI. These novels model less a cyborgian existence, and model instead modes of immanence, by thinking through not just constrained forms of focalization, but also unreliable retrospection and negotiated interiority. As Haraway explains, “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness” (150). This paper will demonstrate the various ways literature can interrogate the precarious futures of synthetic, reproductive, and biologically compromised lives.

II. Theoretical Framework - Power, Code, and Flesh: Mapping Precarity through Theory

Precarity and Grievability : Bodies that are rendered ungrievable by systems of power.

Judith Butler's concept of precarity—as articulated in *Precarious Life*—offers a critical lens for understanding how certain lives are rendered ungrievable under dominant regimes of power. For Butler, grievability is not merely a private affective response but a political designation: only those lives that are recognised as fully human are publicly mournable. In the context of speculative fiction, this framework reveals how bioengineered clones, artificial beings, and reproductive bodies are situated outside the moral and affective registers of normative humanity. Characters like Kathy H., Klara, and Offred exist in systems where their labour is instrumentalised, their autonomy suppressed, and their suffering normalized—yet their deaths are unmarked, their loss unsanctioned. “A life is not livable if it is not grievable” (Butler 30). Butler's theory thus allows us to see these figures not simply as individuals facing hardship, but as structurally excluded from the category of the grievable, their precarity a function of ontological dispossession as much as material exploitation.

Biopower : Control of life through surveillance, reproduction, and institutionalised docility.

Michel Foucault's theory of biopower (from *The History of Sexuality and Society Must Be Defended*) considers the logic of modern state power as moving from “the power to let live and the power to make die,” to “the power to make live and let die.” This idea of biopower can be understood as a type of power that governs the lives and bodies of populations, not through exaggerated spectacles, but instead through diffuse practices of governed bodily insertion for surveillance, reproductive contact with

bodies, institutional conditioning of populations, and so on. In the three novels examined, biopower might be said to occur through the docility of Kathy H., produced to be obedient or exhibit internalisation of discipline; Offred's conscription into reproductive economic production through theocratic surveillance; and Klara's tacit programming as an optimised form of durable affective care. "Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself" (Foucault 142). These figures do not resist their systems in the traditional manner placed by historical action (i.e., "active resistance"), instead their submission exists at the level of biology, code, or societal programming. Foucault's approach helps to delineate how we can understand precarity as not incidental or peripheral, but intrinsic to the state, and as part of a biopolitical structure, controlled through soft coercion, normative disciplinary regimes that make these bodies useful, governable, and material.

AI Ethics and Posthumanism: The intersection of AI ethics and posthumanist theory reveals emerging possibilities for understanding embodiment, cognition, and labour in technologically mediated futures. At the foreground of this conversation is synthetic consciousness, wherein machine actors enact a simulation of perception, memory and emotional response with no biological basis. Thomas Nagel famously argues that true consciousness exists only where "there is something that it is like to be that organism—something it is like for the organism" (436). In Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*, Klara is an effective worker, a solar-powered companion of human children, where value does not equivalently equate to autonomy, but emotional responsiveness. There are recognisable concerns in AI ethics pertaining to the commodification of empathy and relational care - i.e., it is about the capacity to care more than the decision to care - in Klara, the protagonist is sub-human for having her value retained and measured in relation to being responsively useful to another being. N. Katherine Hayles' body as interface (from *How We Became Posthuman*) is useful in rethinking embodiments in terms of codes, sensors, and feedback as opposed to essentialized organic matter. "The posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles 2). This conceptualisation is mirrored in both Klara and Kathy H., both of whose bodies are programmed to be actively optimised - one for care provision, the other as organ harvesting - rather than exercising self-determined subjecthood of their bodies. She says, "What I'm not sure about, is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save. We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand what we've lived through, or feel we've had enough time" (Ishiguro, 282). The posthuman subject as theorised by Rosi Braidotti and Hayles reveals a condition that is neither entirely human nor fully machinic, and is nevertheless involved in relational systems of utility, control and precarity. Braidotti's *Posthuman Knowledge* offers a critical reframing of subjectivity suited to analysing speculative fiction's AI and biologically conditioned characters. As she asserts, "Posthuman knowledge is not about the death of the subject, but about the de-centring of the human in favour of a distributed, relational and affective subjectivity" (33). The narrative confines of these texts also render the ethical considerations of emergent intelligences via affective and interiority motives significant, questioning whether these capacities are adequate to achieve moral consideration.

Narratology and Memory

Narrative structures in the context of speculative fiction play an important role in constructing and mediating insecure embodiment. “Focalization determines what is perceived, not who speaks” (Rimmon-Kenan 75). Through frameworks of Gérard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the novels draw on unreliable retrospection and limited focalization to frame memory not simply as content, but as a narrative architecture that shapes subjectivity. “The narrative voice is always posterior to the story; it is a narrative voice from beyond the grave” (Genette 215). In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy’s fragmented recollections create a series of recursive, affectively dull narratives that simulate an internalised voicelessness and the collective amnesia of a systematic forgetting. Klara, who is limited in all conceptions of visually-collected knowledge, limited to mechanical logic, and emotional inference, enacts a limited focalization on narrating her increasingly storied past that models an AI-adjacent cognition—narrative as computation. Building on Lisa Zunshine’s framework of fiction as a cognitive model, the novels guide readers to simulate the embodied mental realities of synthetic or genetically engineered beings, allowing for exploration into the epistemological limits of empathy and knowing. Alan Palmer’s concept of “intermental” thought reinforces this view: “Thoughts are not confined to the individual consciousness but are instead part of an intermental or socially distributed system of thought” (69). Catherine Malabou’s work on neuroplasticity expands how memory is presented as both a technique of survival and a technology of oppression—mutable, overwritten, and reprogrammed. Overall, these broad narratological deployments, speculative fictions present memory as interface and artefact to stage the function of narrative as encoding obedience, simulating freedom, and narrating precarity in posthuman figures.

III. Speculative Bodies and Programmed Subjectivity in *Never Let Me Go*

- **Memory and Obedience:** Kathy’s narration as internalised biopolitical control.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro establishes a model of bioengineered vulnerability, where cloned persons are engineered for organ harvesting yet have levels of emotional depth. Kathy H. and her contemporaries are also biologically engineered for medical use, and institutionally engineered to unfold their disposability without recourse. Monika Fludernik’s concept of “experientiality” positions narrative not merely as storytelling but as the simulation of lived experience. She argues that “Narrative is a representation of experientiality: the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience” (12). Their capacity for love, memory, and artistry is nurtured in a place that will never confer them with more than a partial subjecthood. The simultaneous existence of such emotional depth and erasure establishes the Foucauldian logic of biopower, whereby life is cultivated only to be carefully deadened. Their stories do not amount to resistance; rather, they are the melancholic interiority of subjects affected by their memory being controlled and their ability to know diminished. As affective beings who never had the capacity to grieve or be grieved, the clones become an instantiation of Judith Butler’s ungrievable life—bringing moral dissonance to a project intended to generate sentient bodies programmed to capitulate, disappear, or worse. Thus, the clones in Ishiguro’s work raise a central question of the ethical stakes of one’s emotional depth while the body is designed for programmed obsolescence.

Kathy H’s narration in *Never Let Me Go* shows how memory can be used as an embodied biopolitical instrument of control. Through a non-linear process of retrospection and affective under-statement, Kathy’s narrative does not contest the

system she was condemned to experience so disposably some past time ago, but instead it reaffirms the logics of that system through tone, silence, and selective memory. Inherent in any consideration of biopower, as articulated by Michel Foucault, is the understanding that governance operates not only through technology and surveillance but also through the production of docile and compliant subjects whose self-expressions are indicative of their conditioning. Kathy's memories are shaped not by resistance but by resignation and informed by the institutional vocabulary of "carers," "donors," and "completion," all of which normalizes living in a death-bound way. This flattening of affect, particularly in the absence of narrative disruption, leads me to contend that Kathy's act of storytelling is not a process of reclamation and agency, but rather a repetition of her already determined role in an epistemology in which she is controlled.

In addition, the narratological structure—characterized as it is by unreliable retrospection and a slippage of time—functions as a cognitive mapping of submission. The sense that Kathy either cannot or will not critique the very system that produced her, shows that memory has instrumentalized as a regulatory function, which produced emotional continuity in place of ethical disruption. In this way, Ishiguro demonstrates memory as not a redemptive archive but one networked into a narrative architecture of compliance, where recall itself becomes a mechanism of sustaining and normalizing the status quo. Her narrative thus embodies the atrophy of bioengineered life—articulated affectively but politically inert.

- **Narrative as Simulation: How the structure of remembrance mimics cognitive processing and affects the reader's ethical engagement.**

In *Never Let Me Go* and *Klara and the Sun*, narrative operates not only as a medium of storytelling but as a simulation of cognitive processing, modelling the fragmented, selective, and affect-laden nature of artificial or conditioned memory. Kathy's non-linear retrospection and Klara's observational logic exemplify what Lisa Zunshine terms "fiction as cognitive modelling"—literary structures that prompt readers to engage with the minds of others, even those radically nonhuman. The narrators' constrained perspectives and emotive hesitations mimic real-world limitations in both human and artificial cognition, creating an affective dissonance that invites ethical reflection. Catherine Malabou's work on plasticity further suggests that memory in such narratives functions not merely as record but as adaptation—a neuro-narrative form that internalizes environmental pressure and systemic design. By presenting remembrance as a patterned, adaptive function, these novels blur the boundaries between human recollection and algorithmic processing. This formal mimicry has an ethical dimension: readers, compelled to empathize with narrators whose autonomy is structurally compromised, are placed in the uncomfortable position of recognizing emotional depth in disposable beings. This effect causes a crisis of ethics elicited through the narrative; the reader becomes complicit in the same systems of deferred recognition and soft violence observed by the characters. In this sense, the narrative structure becomes a site of interface that not only reveals the architecture of posthuman consciousness but ultimately showcases the literary ability to model - and confront - the affective operations of precarity.

• **Lack of Resistance: Docility and affective labour as part of systemic design, not personal failure.**

The seeming passivity of Kathy from *Never Let Me Go*, Klara from *Klara and the Sun*, and Offred from *The Handmaid's Tale* has often been interpreted as an incapacity to resist. However, within a biopolitical and posthumanist framework, this docility is better understood as socially and politically designed rather than the result of personal failure. These women were not only submissively compliant; they had been programmed or conditioned or institutionally oriented in a way that made the affective labour of sustaining the very systems that subjugated them. Through a reading of Foucault on governmentality and Butler on subjectivation, that their compliance is a function of the logic of their construction; for example, Kathy is raised in an educational system that aestheticizes her fate; Klara is engineered to care in a way that does not demand questioning; Offred is assessed as a body with potential for reproduction within religiously sanctioned state discipline. Her role is defined by her biological capacity, aligned with Foucault's observation that "Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem... biology brought into the realm of politics" (Foucault *Society Must Be Defended* 245). It is not that their lack of explicit rebellion illustrates ignorance or complicity, but rather narrative of internalized control, in which emotional expression became instrumentalised. This uncovers a significant aspect of precarity: it is more than instability or disposability, but picking apart the invisibility of power absorbed into identity and care. These novels depict characters whose emotional labour reproduces their exploitation, illustrating the subtler mechanics of domination in an algorithmic or ideologically dominated world, and asserting the more nuanced position that resistance is often structurally excluded, not simply absent.

IV. Artificial Sentience and Algorithmic Affect in *Klara and the Sun*

Synthetic Embodiment: Klara's body as designed for care but excluded from subjecthood.

Klara and the Sun illustrates Klara as a space of synthetic embodiment - or a site created to perform affective labour - but never as a full subject. Klara is an Artificial Friend (AF): she has an intelligence that observes, sensitivity to emotions, and a logic that appears to be independent and moral. Yet Klara's body and narrative voice reveal an artificiality that optimises her for servitude rather than subjectivity. Klara's dependency on the sun - in metaphorical and material terms - aligns her existence with an exterior life-giving force and highlights her role as agentic and vulnerable. Klara's physicality is encapsulated by N. Katherine Hayles (1997) as the body as interface. As interface Klara's body is inflected as a physical surface to be interacted with - readable, programmable, and replaceable all in the same breath, and certainly not a self-sustaining sovereign interiority. Klara's affective actions shaped by care and loyalty are indicative of a posthuman condition whereby empathy is a code, not a choice. Yet Klara is also never compared to the status of personhood despite her attunement to human emotions, memories, and an apparent ethical disposition. Furthermore, her value was tied to her function and not related to her awareness.

This exclusion is an example of what Judith Butler might term a "life ungrievable" — her suffering and obsolescence are normalised by the system's logic. Thus, Klara's precarity is doubled; she is materially performative and ontologically peripheral. Making Klara's synthetic body come alive acts as a potent critique of how current discourses surrounding AI are increasingly conflating embodiment and disposability, thus raising urgent ethical considerations, such as what it means to be

emotionally intelligent yet socially invisible in a future where care is coded and subjecthood is allocated selectively.

Cognitive Modelling: Klara's pattern recognition and storytelling as algorithmic perception.

Klara's story in *Klara and the Sun* demonstrates cognitive modelling as a literary representation of algorithmic perception. Klara's perspective is constructed through patterned observation, conditional reasoning, and analogical reasoning, which correspond to the cognitive architecture of machine learning systems. Klara perceives the world through a logic of pattern recognition: whether interpreting a human's emotional state, interpreting spatial movements between figures, or reasoning about causal relationships in the world for example, she believes the sun has healing powers. Klara narrates her world not in a reflective sense, but in a computational way, based around inputs, associations, and probabilistic conclusions. "Narrative fiction provides a particularly rich and dynamic environment for the deployment of theory of mind" (Zunshine 16). Employing Lisa Zunshine's theory of fiction as a cognitive modelling device, Klara becomes a site of textual transaction in which readers interact with non-human sentience, modelled not through rebellion or interiority but through the logic of adaptive coherence, as indicated above. Klara's perceptions are rich in affect but curtailed in form, showing that narratives can serve as ways of approximating the epistemology of AI, which is recursive and interpretive but still made subject to fixed functions. Klara's voice emerges within the ambiguity between synthetic cognition and sentient cognition, and therefore brings to the foreground the ethical concerns of emergent intelligences whose understanding of the world is narratively constrained and real-existing limits imposed by programming. As such, Ishiguro presents storytelling also as cognitive processing – an organising activity for substance in the form of AI, a way to produce meaning and model affect without access unto human consciousness or ontological sovereignty.

Faith, Pattern, and Function: Her belief in the Sun mirrors AI interpretive limits and affective learning.

Klara's faith in the Sun as a source of healing serves as a metaphor for the limits of AI interpretative capacity and the dynamics working underneath. Klara does not have a metaphysical understanding of the Sun, yet as a machine, she recognized she lacked the general notion of "reason" however she does have a pattern recognizer. With this, she was able to create a belief based on patterns associated with the Sun and how it related to human well-being. Her faith is functionally, not religiously motivated, based of machine logic by which repetitiveness, proximity, and symbolic association affect causality relating to health and well-being. The logic of this belief system reflects a fundamental tension in AI cognition—the tendency to create meaning by operating within an epistemological framework where inference substitutes for understanding. Klara's faith relied on a limited data set, not differently from how machine learning systems today reach conclusions using limited de-contextualized training inputs. However, Klara does things—she makes offerings, she negotiates, or simply interacts with the sun—and this falls under affective reasoning; how emotional affective behaviours emerge on the basis of learning protocols that are based on structure. To Klara the Sun is an object and her algorithm, a perceived moral agent (I evolve in relation to the Sun in this example) built into her reality of belief through interactional relations. This illustrates that AI might mimic belief and intentionality in action

without consciousness, taking actions that seem to be intuitive or spiritual but are in fact reactive functioning on patterns of functioning.

Narrative Limitations: Focalization narrows understanding, reflecting epistemological constraints of artificial agents.

Klara's belief in the power of the Sun to heal represents a parallel with the limitations of AI interpretation and the mechanics of affective learning. Klara doesn't have any metaphysics or metaphysical systems of thought, but she has pattern recognition. Klara acts according to her apparent relationship between sunlight, healing, and people. What is more, Klara's devotion to the healing power of sunshine is not a theological belief or an instinct, but rather emerges from the machine logic of Klara, which maps out causation according to a series of constraints: repetition, proximity, and symbolic association. Klara's belief presents us with a key tension in how AI engages with cognition and meaning: it can only assign meaning in a limited epistemology, because AI reasoning is ultimately predictive inference and not understanding.

Klara's faith is an expression of a constrained data set, comparable to how AI systems today deduce conclusion from limited training since the types of training data is frequently decontextualized. Yet Klara's actions, such as making an offering (a small standing stone used as a signifier) or attempting to negotiate with the sun, show an idea of something like a set of affective reasoning that could come to be imagined out of structured learning systems. Thus, for Klara, the Sun was both object and algorithm, since it was a perceived moral agent programmed through patterns of interaction into her reality. This is showcased by the idea that an AI can imitate belief or intention without understanding or consciousness, producing behaviours appearing instinctive or spiritual, but which are ultimately constrained by patterned modalities of functioning. Ishiguro thus presents faith as an emergent property of algorithmic systems, allowing for contemplation on how machines can build internal models to understand the world as if they possess some form of belief, desire, or ethics, despite being technically constrained and ontologically incomplete in their capacity for interpretation.

IV. Simulated Light: Affective Cognition and the Limits of Machine Perception

In *Klara and the Sun*, the recurring motif of light—especially the Sun—serves as both a literal energy source and a symbolic interface through which Klara enacts affective cognition. Her reverence for the Sun encapsulates the paradox of simulated empathy: Klara appears to care deeply, yet her affective responses emerge from programmed pattern recognition rather than human-like emotional experience. “We are not standalone entities, but rather informationally embodied organisms whose identity is determined by our informational interactions with the environment” (Floridi 94). This interplay foregrounds the limits of machine perception, which relies on environmental cues, behavioural modelling, and correlational learning rather than contextual nuance. Klara's interpretation of the Sun as a benevolent, healing agent reflects a narrow ontological filter, where her understanding of the world is shaped by the logic of function and observation, not introspection or cultural history.

Her emotive behaviour—pleading, praying, expressing concern—mimics human attachment but is ultimately structured by computational approximation, raising critical questions about the nature of emotional authenticity in synthetic

beings. Drawing on theories of posthuman embodiment of Hayles and cognitive narratology of Zunshine, the Sun becomes a figure of simulated moral orientation—not divine, but algorithmically significant. “The machine question... is not about what machines are, but about how we ought to regard them and whether they are owed moral consideration” (Gunkel 2). Klara’s light-driven worldview thus illustrates how AI, while capable of emotional simulation, remains confined to interpretive circuits that resemble but do not replicate human understanding. The novel invites readers to reconsider what constitutes genuine feeling in artificial entities, and whether the appearance of affect is ethically sufficient in a posthuman future structured by relational algorithms and embodied precarity.

V. Reproductive Control and Narrative Containment in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Biopolitical Reproduction: Offred’s body as a reproductive vessel under state control.

In Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s body becomes a biopolitical instrument, the theocratic state of Gilead assigns her compulsory reproduction. The state reduces the identity of Offred to its biological functionality; it exemplifies what Michel Foucault calls biopower, the exercise of non-violent power through the management and control of bodies. As a Handmaid, Offred is a subject of sexual ritualized ceremonies, surveillance, and psychological control to ensure her compliance with reproduction. A Handmaid’s body serves as property of the state; as a mode of transmission for the preservation of demographics under authoritarian rule. Reduced to a female vessel, Offred’s body results in a precarity of life in that it may be intrinsically valuable to the power holders only while it contains the reproductive imperative, yet entirely disposable should she not comply or fail to produce. As Agamben proclaims, “The production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (6). The regime also controls discourse and ritual to gain internal compliance and acceptance, where Offred’s narration illustrates the ongoing internal dynamics of resistance or resignation, mediated by the power that controls her flesh. Atwood’s Offred critiques how the norms of reproductive labour erase individual subjectivity and commoditise the female body. “When we think of the past, it’s the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that” (Atwood 30). When considered with Kathy’s bioengineered docility and Klara’s affective programming, Offred’s enforced fertility represents the third prong of precarious corporeality (organic, synthetic, and reproductive). Each represent the ways that narrative fiction reveals the ontological cost of being a body in direct bodily control of political, algorithmic, or ideological systems.

Narrating Resistance: Memory and fragmented narration as tactics to reclaim autonomy.

In *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, fragmented narration and partial memory enable modes of tactical resistance to systems of control that deprive individuals of personhood. While there is no overt or actively repressed rebellion, the act of narrating—however limited—demonstrates an attempt to reclaim some mode of cognitive and emotional freedom. Kathy’s fragmented memories and Offred’s non-linear, covert narratives attempt to portray unreliable memory; yet the fact that their recollection is unreliable suggests they resist simply internalizing the institution’s truths. Their narrative preserves moments of intimacy, moments of confusion, or moments that embrace the emotional complexity of biopolitical control.

“What characterizes modern biopolitics is not simply the inclusion of life in the mechanisms and calculations of power, but rather its transformation into a kind of absolute immunity, where life is preserved only by separating, excluding, or sacrificing other lives” (Esposito 52).

Klara's observations, though mechanically driven, include an emotional coding that evokes some kind of posthuman narrative agency, where even code-driven cognition seeks to order the world through pattern and care. Drawing on narratology (Genette, Rimmon-Kenan) and models of cognitive resistance (Malabou, Zunshine), these partial, fragmented, and narratively constrained tales operate as micro-inscriptions of the subjectivity compromised by the structures of oppression they occupy. Rather than represent failure, their gaps, silences, and digressions represent a narrative resilience—a tampering with the author's gaze that reveals meaningful individual complexities beyond the ideological or algorithmic conventions of that subjectivity.

Thus, memory and narrative structure are not just literary devices but ontological strategies, through which precarious lives momentarily assert agency, emotion, and meaning on their own terms.

Simulated Autonomy: Even rebellion is framed through narrative structures of entrapment.

Throughout *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the display of autonomy—interruption, disobedience or contemplation—are structurally simulated with narrative frameworks that ultimately endorse the sense of entrapment. While resistance is portrayed—like Kathy's solitary memories, Klara's empathetic reasoning, and Offred's ambiguous provocations—these gestures are bounded by epistemic closure: clones are donors, Afs are caregivers, Handmaids are vessels. By drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality and Judith Butler's theorisation of subjectivation, the paper inscribes the narrator's limited field of actions, not as a failure of resistance, but rather a demonstration of self-regulation, which even in moments of dissent remain bound to the affective and discursive regimes assigned to them.

This form of mediated autonomy reveals how narrative itself—through limited focalization and affective coding—becomes a means of control, not liberation. As David Herman notes, “Narrative provides a basic mechanism for organizing human experience and constructing models of consciousness” (2). These texts, then, illuminate the precarious position of beings whose imaginative and/or performative capabilities for resistance only have meaning within the terms of the narrative and systemic grammars that mediate their disposability. The illusion of agency, then, becomes part of the control mechanism, reconsolidating an already literary model of precarity in which selfhood can only be granted in manners that preserve the coherence of the systems.

Narrative as Archive: Speculative fiction as a counter-memory resisting algorithmic erasure.

In speculative fiction, narrative often operates as a counter-archive, documenting experiences and subjectivities that dominant systems often attempt to displace. *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* developed memory as a means of resistance—not necessarily through grand acts of rebellion, but through the

aggregating of lived fragments, affective impressions, and narrative incongruence. Each of these novel[ette](<https://www.pdfreaderpro.com/>)s display what Foucault defines as the concept of counter-memory; memory as deployed in a strategic way to destabilize official truths or algorithmic normativity. Kathy's agency over her misshapen memories, Klara's patterns of perception, and Offred's covert strings of testimonies aggregate the affective archives of life under biopolitical regime or postvaluationist project. The narrative itself becomes an alternate possible epistemology in each instance, a resistance against the compulsion to reduce life down to utility, functionality, or reproductive output. As we enter an apparatus of algorithmic governance that rewards data over depth, these texts signal towards the resistant marking of subjective experience as an irreducible value. Narrative in this context becomes a mechanism not only for recording, but for reclamation—wandering as an archive of precarities not as incidental or excess, but as lived complexity. By referring to theorists including Lisa Zunshine and Catherine Malabou, this paper poses speculative fiction as a viable discursive interface capable of modeling memory as ontological-anarchism rather than processual metadata. In doing so, these narratives resist the erasure inherent in algorithmic logics, offering instead a literary memory system through which precarious, programmed, or marginalised lives may be re-inscribed with meaning, care, and ethical resonance.

V. Encoded Resistance: Narrating Survival in Biopolitical Regimes

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narration constitutes a form of encoded resistance, operating within the linguistic, ritualistic, and disciplinary structures of Gilead's biopolitical regime. While overt rebellion is dangerous and often fatal, storytelling becomes a tactical survival mechanism, allowing Offred to preserve interiority and critical consciousness under conditions designed to suppress both. Her fragmented, nonlinear narrative mimics the disordered nature of memory under trauma, but also subtly disrupts the totalitarian control of meaning, aligning with Michel Foucault's concept of biopower and Judith Butler's theorization of constrained agency. Through whispered recollection, deflected irony, and the invocation of a future listener ("You"), Offred reclaims a space for self-representation even as her body is subject to reproductive exploitation. Her voice—carefully calibrated between compliance and subversion—functions as a form of discursive encryption, encoding dissent within the very grammar of oppression. This narrative strategy resists the regime's attempts at historical erasure and semantic control, making memory a political act and narrative a counter-discursive tool. In this way, *The Handmaid's Tale* positions speculative fiction as not only diagnostic of biopolitical violence, but as a medium of resistance, where survival is achieved not merely through escape or revolution, but through the sustained act of narrating oneself into legibility, however precariously, within systems designed to erase.

VI. Comparative Synthesis: Narrating Precarity Across Texts

Commonalities:

A defining commonality across *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* lies in how each protagonist internalizes the logic of their respective systems of control, transforming surveillance, programming, and institutional power into modes of self-regulation. Although overt rebellion is threatening, and ultimately deadly, narrative at a time of high social conformity becomes a tactic of survival,

allowing Offred to maintain her interiority and critical consciousness in an environment purposeful for the suppression of both. Her fragmented, non-linear narrative emulates the disordered nature of traumatic memory but also quietly undermines the totalitarian appropriation of meaning and bodily agency associated with both Foucault's biopower and Judith Butler's analysis of constrained agency. Offred will embody her struggle to retain an essence of self even when her body is rendered a mere vessel for reproduction through whispers, deflected irony, and a future listener ("you"). As she speaks, Offred oscillates between compliance and rejection, producing a kind of discursive encryption in which her dissent exists inside the very grammar that defines and oppresses her. Her approach to narrative is an act of resistance against the regime's erasure of history and normative designation of meaning, reflexively making memory a political act, and narrative a counter-discursive mechanism. In this way, *The Handmaid's Tale* renders speculative fiction as not only diagnoses biopolitical violence, but opens itself up as a mechanism of resistance, where survival is not only achieved by escaping or revolting against the regime, but by actively narrating a self into existence, however tentative, precarious, and tethered to the very systems that seek to erase all aspects of the self.

Differences:

While unified by themes of precarity and internalized control, *Klara and the Sun*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* diverge significantly in how their protagonists are situated in relation to embodiment, cognition, and narrative autonomy. Klara, being a synthetic being, illustrates the posthuman condition that N. Katherine Hayles has theorized, in which consciousness ceases to be the domain of human organic corporeality, existing rather as a set of information flows and pattern recognitions. Klara's memories are algorithmically filtered and an adaptation rather than a reflection of the human form of feeling, displaying a kind of computational subjectivity - human-like but not human. In contrast, Kathy occupies a biologically human identity, born of bioengineering but encased within a corporeality, whose identity is influenced by institutional programming. "To talk of plasticity is to talk about a form able to receive and to give form, a form open to transformation but also to destruction" (Malabou 5). Kathy's recognition of her emotional restraint and acceptance of deployments is evidence of Catherine Malabou's notion of destructive plasticity. Malabou suggests there are external systems that imprint themselves onto the self to such a point that the self is shaped by docility and cognitive adaptation, but no resistance. In the case of Offred, even though she is an organically human subject, her identity has been made reproductive, and while her ability to narrate is probably the most autonomous of the three subjects, she does so using fragments of memory as its counter-history. Even in her narrating, Offred's story emerges closely with Hayles' idea of the body as an interface, where the narrative mediates resistance and encoding or inscription; also reflecting a notion of plastic transformation Malabou also gestures toward, a self that encounters anti-fixity in the act of incorporating its narrative reconstruction. Important work is accomplished in thinking about what we have seen of Klara, Kathy, and Offred, which begin as different forms of embodiment - synthetic, biogenetic, and reproductive - and different epistemologies of historical survival, each shaped by the ontological limit of each subject and its own particular possibility of telling.

Narrative functioning as Algorithm: Across all, narration functions like a script or code, structuring experience, not expressing agency.

Across *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, narration functions less as a vehicle for autonomous expression and more as a scripted architecture—a kind of cognitive algorithm that structures perception, emotion, and memory within pre-established constraints. The narrations of the protagonists are coded in logic that follows patterns of behaviour, narrative loops, and memory based on rule-following that reproduces rather than ruptures the systems in which they live. Klara's narrative is aligned with modular observations and ritualised beliefs, indicative of machine learning patterns—detecting input, rendering a value, expanding that meaning through relational ties across instances. Kathy's surveillance predicated retrospective (the ruminative second person) may sound personal and warm, but her memory is deeply formatted into institutional memory protocols, where affect is processed within the contours of acceptability and usefulness. Offred's narration, while more fragmented and more self-aware, is still developed within the grammar of Gilead, encoding the traces of her resistance in language that are always surveilled, because even with all her trauma, she must still rely on language. “Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some” (Atwood 211). Overall, structural convergence exemplified how, in posthuman and biopolitical circumstances, narration does not recollect agency, but rather character becomes “operational” (446) - a recursive loop in which characters manage behaviours of trauma, simulate coherence, and perform intelligibility. There are theoretical alignments with Hayles' notion of the posthuman as coded subjectivity and the cognitive modelling framework by Zunshine in *The Secret Life of Fiction*; here narrative does not indicate liberation, but acknowledges a computational act as the telling of the self has already been subjected to the logics of power and use and encapsulated by algorithmic containment.

VI. Scripted Selves: Fictional Interfaces of Precarity

In *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* the characters—ontologically different as clone, artificial intelligence and reproductive subject—share not only internalisation of the same structural control, but they also participate in narrative forms that are reduced to algorithmic tendencies. They act as themselves, as scripted selves, and perform identity from the coordinates of a biopolitical or technological causality; each character moves through the act of narrating as if it were lived experience or emotional representation, yet when examined, they function in a way that can be predictive, recursive, or bounded in another way which features the operative understanding of artificial intelligence. Building on N. Katherine Hayles' notion of the body as an interface, and Lisa Zunshine's conventions of fiction as a model of cognitive simulation, this paper argues the way that literature act as both a representational surface and a form of processing device—in this way revealing the impacts and limits of the palimpsest of programmed subjectivity in identifiable terms. Narrative becomes not only a representation of experience, it becomes a site of compliance or a site of lived survival—having already been pre-wired or constituted, and affectively inscribed, but ontologically vulnerable. Ultimately, this comparative synthesis clarifies the way speculative fiction potentially simulates the epistemic limits of conscious sentience that has been made in by control, and highlights the ethical dilemmas of precarity in a world in which, storytelling, cognition, and agency are subjected to algorithmic modelling and systemic representation.

VII. Conclusion

Ultimately, these speculative stories illustrate that memory and narration are not merely tangential, but rather central to our collective experience of contemporary precarity within artificial intelligence, bio-surveillance, and engineered governmentality. Whether synthetic, bioengineered, or reproducibly suppressed, the characters whom these stories follow experience lives mediated through narrative architectures that simulate something like autonomy despite in actuality encoding that very constraint. As the characters' lives unfold, their experiences cannot be disentangled from acts of adaptation within restrained memory and cognition—systems of narration that both reveal the value of, and reproduce the conditions of, their situation. By enacting narrativity as simply an algorithmic or computational function, the novels also show that affective memory and constrained cognition become the mechanisms of survival as well as autonomy. The function of fiction is a critical interface in this case; it models the cognitive operations of the generally precarious, posthuman subject, while simultaneously modelling a critical move away from the algorithmic systems that produce and manage that subject. In making an intervention at the level of fictive expression, speculative fictions position memory and narrativity as site for theorising the socio-ontological operations of AI. In so far as machines learn to narrate, critical speculation must adjust to/ahead of the politics of who gets to remember, resist, and actually matter.

Implications: These texts prefigure real-world ethical challenges posed by affective AI, synthetic labour, and cognitive automation.

In conclusion, speculative fiction emerges as a vital epistemological site for modelling, diagnosing, and resisting the precarity embedded in posthuman futures. Through narrative structures that foreground constrained memory, simulated cognition, and programmed embodiment, texts like *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* do not simply reflect future anxieties—they perform them, using fiction as a cognitive and ethical interface. Klara's and Kathy's worth is measured by what they are designed to do—care, obey, donate—rather than who they are. Braidotti critiques this utilitarian view by asserting that “The ethical question is not what is a subject, but rather what can a body do?” (137). These novels illuminate the subtle operations of biopolitical control and algorithmic scripting at the level of form and content, demonstrating how literature can simulate the conditions of posthuman life while simultaneously critiquing its socio-ontological costs. As artificial intelligence advances toward emotional, linguistic, and narrative fluency, speculative fiction retains a unique critical function: it provides a space to imagine and interrogate the limits of autonomy, care, and sentience in technologically saturated systems. In doing so, it resists passive reflection and becomes an active methodology of thought—a mode of theorizing that challenges us to reconsider what it means to be human in an era increasingly shaped by nonhuman intelligence and scripted subjectivities.

VII. Narrative Futures: Literature as an Ethical Interface for AI

Speculative fiction, through examples like *Never Let Me Go*, *Klara and the Sun*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, serves as an ethical interface in which we can question the ontological and affective precarity of embodied AI and posthuman subjectivity. In

each of the aforementioned narratives, they foreground memory and storytelling not only as literary devices, but as cognitive architectures - literally structures where control is enacted, agency is simulated, and identity is formed. By locking consciousness within bounded narrative structures, these narratives underscore a critique of intelligences- synthetic, bioengineered or reproductive - and their designed existence through addressing using functions, care functions and compliant functions. In this manner, the ethical imperatives of automated affective labour and scripted sentence are made more visible. Nick Bostrom warns that “The first superintelligence may be the last, unless we learn how to align its goals with ours” (208), highlighting the urgency of ethical alignment between creators and artificial agents. Literature, as I have crafted it, does not reflect posthuman subjectivity; it models its logics, performs its contradictions and theorises its costs. With AI technologies increasingly intruding in spheres of emotion, narrative and embodiment, speculative fiction becomes a critical site to diagnose the socio-technical futures we genuinely enact - a space to imagine ethical design, narrative consciousness and systemic resistance, undergoing some sort of abridgement, all at once.

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