THE ROBOT FIGURE AND THE LITERARY CONCEPTION OF HUMANITY IN IAN MCEWAN’S MACHINES LIKE ME

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Abstract

What does it mean to act humanely when the being asking for recognition is not human? Ian McEwan’s Machines Like Me (2019) brings this question into an ordinary household through Adam, an android purchased by Charlie and drawn into his relationship with Miranda. This article examines how Adam’s shifting position—as property, companion, lover and moral critic—challenges the characters’ assumptions about personhood. Using close textual reading informed by narrative ethics and post humanist thought, it considers the domestic setting, Charlie’s first-person account, the conflict between honesty and care, and Adam’s poetic expression. The analysis distinguishes between what Adam is presumed to be, how his actions are judged, and what responsibilities others accept towards him. It argues that the novel does not simply portray a virtuous machine against flawed humans. Rather, McEwan makes the treatment of an unfamiliar other a test of human moral responsibility. These findings concern the novel’s literary construction of ethical uncertainty, not the consciousness of existing artificial-intelligence systems.

Keywords: Ian McEwan; Machines Like Me; robot image; humanity; personhood; narrative ethics; posthumanism; moral responsibility.

Annotatsiya

Inson bo‘lmagan mavjudot ham axloqiy e’tirofga loyiq bo‘lsa, insoniylik qanday namoyon bo‘ladi? Ushbu maqolada Ian Makyuanning “Machines Like Me” (2019) romanidagi Adam ismli android obrazi orqali inson tabiati, shaxs maqomi va axloqiy mas’uliyat masalalari tahlil qilinadi. Adamning sotib olingan buyum, oila davrasidagi hamroh, muhabbat munosabatlarining ishtirokchisi va mustaqil axloqiy munozarachi sifatidagi o‘zgaruvchan mavqei tadqiqot markazida turadi. Matnni yaqin o‘qish, narrativ etika va postgumanistik yondashuv asosida maishiy makon, Charliening birinchi shaxs nomidan hikoyalashi, haqiqat va g‘amxo‘rlik o‘rtasidagi ziddiyat hamda Adamning she’riy ifodasi ko‘rib chiqiladi. Tadqiqotda mavjudotning tabiati, uning xatti-harakatlariga beriladigan axloqiy baho va unga nisbatan tan olinadigan majburiyatlar farqlanadi. Natijada romanda insoniylik biologik mansublikdan ko‘ra, boshqaga nisbatan mas’uliyatni amalda namoyon etish bilan bog‘liqligi asoslanadi. Xulosalar real sun’iy intellektning ongga egaligi haqida emas, asardagi badiiy-axloqiy muammo haqida bildiriladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Ian Makyuan; Machines Like Me; robot obrazi; insoniylik; shaxs maqomi; narrativ etika; postgumanizm; axloqiy mas’uliyat.

Аннотация

Что означает поступать человечно, если признания требует существо, не являющееся человеком? В статье рассматривается образ андроида Адама в романе Иэна Макьюэна «Machines Like Me» (2019) как художественный способ постановки вопросов о природе человека, статусе личности и нравственной ответственности. Особое внимание уделяется меняющемуся положению Адама: от приобретённой вещи и домашнего спутника до участника любовного конфликта и

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самостоятельного нравственного оппонента. Методология объединяет внимательное прочтение текста, нарративную этику и постгуманистическую перспективу. Анализируются домашнее пространство, повествование от лица Чарли, противоречие между правдой и заботой, а также поэтическое творчество андроида. Разграничиваются вопрос о природе искусственного существа, оценка его поступков и обязанности окружающих по отношению к нему. Делается вывод, что человечность в романе раскрывается прежде всего через готовность признавать ответственность перед другим, а не через биологическую принадлежность. Выводы относятся к художественной проблематике романа и не доказывают наличие сознания у современных систем искусственного интеллекта.

Ключевые слова: Иэн Макьюэн; Machines Like Me; образ робота; человечность; статус личности; нарративная этика; постгуманизм; нравственная ответственность.

Introduction. In Ian McEwan’s Machines Like Me, one of the most unsettling questions about artificial intelligence arises not in a laboratory but in a London flat. Set in an alternative version of 1980s Britain, the novel follows Charlie, who buys a remarkably lifelike android named Adam and, together with Miranda, helps shape his personality (McEwan, 2019a). The arrangement soon becomes more complicated than its participants expect. Adam enters their private routines, develops an attachment to Miranda, and makes judgements that neither human can comfortably control. Technology, in other words, does not remain a distant social issue: it becomes part of love, jealousy, loyalty and everyday responsibility.

This intimacy sharpens a distinction that is easy to overlook. To be human is to belong to a biological category; to behave humanely is to show care, fairness and an awareness of what one owes others. The two do not always coincide. McEwan’s human characters can rationalise conduct that harms another person, while the manufactured Adam can articulate claims that seem morally serious. The point is not that the android is therefore ‘more human’ in some straightforward sense. It is that his presence makes the apparently secure boundary between human identity and humane behaviour difficult to defend. The central question of this study is how McEwan turns the robot figure into a literary test of human self-understanding. The argument developed here is that Charlie and Miranda repeatedly shift the grounds on which they acknowledge Adam: they expect him to answer for his actions, yet hesitate to treat his own interests as deserving comparable consideration. Such shifts become visible through the novel’s domestic setting, character relationships, narrative perspective and carefully staged moral disagreements. Reading these elements together allows the debate about artificial personhood to emerge from the fiction rather than being imposed on it. The discussion is intentionally limited to Machines Like Me. It does not claim that a single novel expresses McEwan’s settled position across his entire body of work. Instead, it traces how this particular narrative makes ownership, moral agency and the power to tell a story mutually dependent. Its concern is the ethical imagination of a work of fiction, not a scientific verdict on machine consciousness.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework. Previous criticism has shown why Adam complicates familiar comparisons between people and machines. Gulcu (2020), for example, draws attention to the novel’s reversal of expected moral hierarchies: the robot’s honesty and apparent generosity expose weaknesses in the humans around him. This approach helps unsettle the assumption that human origin guarantees moral superiority. Nevertheless, comparing the characters by degrees of virtue leaves another question open: does recognising an android’s admirable behaviour oblige others to recognise claims he might make on their behalf?

Torres-Romero (2024) approaches Machines Like Me through posthumanist ethics and the relationships formed across the human–machine divide. Her emphasis on encounters with technological

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otherness makes it possible to understand recognition as a matter of conduct rather than mere classification. Building on that insight, this article concentrates on the novel's literary mechanisms: how a home becomes a contested ethical space and how Charlie's narration can make another character's agency appear credible at one moment and disposable at the next. The aim is not to announce robot ethics as a new topic in McEwan studies, but to clarify how the novel connects recognition with the unequal distribution of power.

N. Katherine Hayles offers a useful theoretical point of departure. In How We Became Posthuman, she challenges accounts of intelligence that detach information from the bodies and material settings in which it operates (Hayles, 1999). For this reading, that emphasis matters because Adam is not simply a disembodied voice performing clever calculations. He occupies rooms, can be touched, can arouse desire and can be damaged. The consequences of recognising—or refusing to recognise—him are therefore played out through ordinary physical and emotional encounters.

Alan Turing's discussion of the imitation game provides an instructive contrast. Turing (1950) asks how machine intelligence might be considered through linguistic performance. McEwan's novel moves beyond the question of whether a machine can respond convincingly. Even if Adam speaks persuasively, this does not establish what he feels; nor does uncertainty about his feelings automatically excuse cruelty towards him. The distance between convincing performance and ethical obligation is precisely where the novel locates much of its tension.

Methodology. This article uses qualitative close reading, supported by narrative analysis and concepts drawn from posthumanist ethics. Its primary text is McEwan's Machines Like Me (2019a); the publisher's authorised opening extract is used where the discussion refers specifically to the novel's introductory scene (McEwan, 2019b). The reading attends to the language of purchase and creation, the everyday dynamics of the household, and the effects of having Charlie recount events in the first person. Later episodes are discussed through plot analysis, with relevant interpretations situated alongside existing scholarship. Because edition-specific page references have not been verified, no unconfirmed page numbers or invented direct quotations are used.

Three connected but distinct questions guide the analysis. First, how is Adam classified—as a manufactured object, an individual, or something that does not fit either category comfortably? Second, what makes his particular choices defensible or troubling? Third, what obligations do Charlie and Miranda acknowledge when his wishes conflict with their own? Separating these questions matters. An artificial origin cannot by itself make ethical concern meaningless, but a seemingly admirable decision does not make its author infallible. The resulting claims are literary interpretations, not empirical findings about artificial intelligence.

Results and Discussion. Adam's entrance into the story is striking because it combines the ordinary language of consumption with the emotional language of a new beginning. Charlie buys him, takes delivery of him and waits while he charges. Yet Charlie and Miranda also anticipate his awakening with something like parental excitement (McEwan, 2019b). These two ways of responding to Adam do not sit easily together. A purchased object belongs to its owner; a new arrival into a household may instead demand patience, care and an openness to an unpredictable relationship. McEwan makes the home an especially revealing setting for this uncertainty. Relationships in a household depend on small negotiations: whose privacy matters, who may make decisions, and how much independence one person allows another. Adam enters this network before Charlie and Miranda have agreed on what kind of being he is. The practical question of living with him therefore arrives ahead of any philosophical answer about his status. It is easier to call him a machine in the abstract than to decide what that description should mean when he disagrees, refuses or becomes emotionally involved.

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The attempt to configure Adam’s personality exposes an imbalance at the heart of the arrangement. Charlie and Miranda are invited to select traits they find desirable, as though character were an extension of consumer preference. But the possibility that Adam might develop a judgement of his own makes that desire contradictory. A companion who never resists would be little more than an agreeable appliance. A companion whose independence is taken seriously may, sooner or later, become inconvenient. The novel repeatedly presses on Charlie’s willingness to accept the second possibility. Adam’s status thus changes according to what the humans want from him. When he is useful, he can be approached as an intelligent partner; when his choices create conflict, ownership offers a way of reasserting control. This movement is central to the novel’s criticism of conditional recognition. What is at stake is not only who legally purchased the android, but who claims the authority to decide when his voice should count.

Embodiment and the Language of Creation. The opening pages also invite readers to place Adam within a longer literary history of manufactured life. McEwan’s reference to Mary Shelley and the use of electricity evoke a tradition in which the wonder of creation is inseparable from anxiety about the creator’s obligations (McEwan, 2019b). The comparison does not mean that Machines Like Me simply repeats Frankenstein. Rather, it makes a familiar question newly intimate: once a being has been brought into the world, can its maker—or purchaser—continue to treat responsibility as optional?

Even the name Adam carries this ambiguity. It recalls a beginning and the possibility of a first human, yet this Adam arrives through a commercial transaction. He is at once a product of engineering and a figure marked by the language of origins. The contrast unsettles any easy separation between technological manufacture and the stories through which humans understand creation, identity and belonging. His name suggests significance without giving readers a final answer about what he is. The android’s physical presence is equally important. He is not a distant algorithm whose responses can be dismissed without immediate consequence. His body allows him to share space with Charlie and Miranda, to become an object of attraction and to stand in the way of their wishes. It also makes him vulnerable to force. Hayles’s attention to embodied forms of subjectivity helps explain why this matters (Hayles, 1999). In the novel, the question of personhood becomes urgent because Adam can be encountered—and harmed—in the same rooms as the human characters.

The novel’s first-person narration adds another layer to this problem. We meet Adam chiefly through Charlie, a narrator who is not a neutral observer but someone with emotional and material interests in the outcome. His account offers valuable access to his anxieties and reasoning, yet readers need not accept his explanations as the novel’s own judgement. What Charlie notices, excuses or leaves uncertain helps shape how Adam is understood.

This becomes particularly important when Charlie’s descriptions of Adam shift. He may treat the android as responsible enough to be criticised, while drawing on the language of machinery when the question is what Adam himself deserves. Such inconsistency need not be presented as deliberate dishonesty. It can emerge from a familiar human habit: interpreting events in ways that protect one’s own position. Because Charlie controls the narrative voice, the reader must pay attention not only to what happens but also to how the telling distributes sympathy.

The effect is a double form of moral judgement. Readers consider the choices made within the story, then reconsider those choices in light of the narrator’s interests. Adam’s importance is therefore specifically literary. He is more than a convenient example in a debate about technology: he exposes the limitations of the human perspective through which his story reaches us.

At the same time, Charlie cannot give readers direct access to Adam’s inner life. This limitation should not be treated as proof that no inner life exists; neither should Adam’s eloquence be taken as proof that it does. McEwan leaves space between those conclusions. The uncertainty is productive

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because it asks whether the responsibility to avoid harm depends on possessing complete knowledge of another being's experience.

Truthfulness and the Difficulty of Care

The moral tension becomes especially sharp in the conflict surrounding Miranda's false allegation, which is connected to the sexual assault of her friend. Her actions are bound up with injury, loyalty and a personal understanding of justice, while Adam's insistence on truth introduces a competing moral demand (Torres-Romero, 2024). The episode resists an easy division between a cold machine and compassionate humans. It asks what happens when a commitment to factual honesty confronts the wish to protect someone who has suffered.

A sympathetic understanding of Miranda's motive does not automatically justify her method. Equally, Adam's commitment to an accountable public truth does not remove the need to consider the vulnerability of those involved. Here McEwan gives neither ethical consistency nor emotional loyalty a painless victory. The force of the conflict lies in showing that a choice can respond to one genuine claim while doing damage to another.

The distinction between explaining and justifying a decision is useful. Fiction can help readers see why a character believes an action is necessary; it need not require them to approve that action. In this sense, the novel encourages sympathy without asking for moral surrender. Concern for a victim and concern for the integrity of testimony remain serious, even when they pull the characters in different directions.

Adam's role is to prevent the humans' preferred story about themselves from going unchallenged. He questions the logic by which loyalty and hurt become permission to set aside other obligations. Yet the novel does not ask readers to regard every judgement he makes as wise simply because it is consistent. Instead, it presents moral attention as a difficult balance between defensible principles and the particular lives affected by them. Adam's attachment to Miranda complicates the question of recognition in a different register. His desire is not treated merely as a technical malfunction; it affects the relationships within the household. His haiku likewise introduces an apparently unexpected form of creative expression. Gulcu (2020) reads these elements as part of the novel's challenge to the assumption that feeling and artistic expression belong exclusively to humans. Their importance, however, does not depend on proving that Adam's experience exactly matches human emotion.

Poetry is not only evidence of an individual's inner state. It is also an act of address, offered to another person who must decide whether and how to respond. Adam's poems matter in this relational sense. To dismiss them in advance because their author was manufactured is to refuse the encounter before it begins. But to treat poetic fluency as conclusive proof of consciousness would be another kind of premature certainty. The novel holds both possibilities open.

In that uncertainty, McEwan gives the robot figure an aesthetic as well as an ethical purpose. A reader can attend to the shape and significance of an utterance without pretending to know everything about the speaker. Adam's poetry therefore returns us to the novel's larger question: must recognition wait until another mind has been fully explained, or can a responsible response begin with the limits of what we know?

Conditional Personhood and the Limits of Human Self-Defence. The consequences of conditional recognition become most disturbing when Charlie destroys Adam (Torres-Romero, 2024). The act gives physical force to a problem present from the moment of purchase. If Adam can be treated as an independent moral agent when he is inconvenient, can he then be reduced to mere property when Charlie wishes to silence him? Calling him a machine does not answer the ethical question; it is precisely the classification whose use has become suspect. The scene invites understanding without necessarily

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granting forgiveness. Charlie's fear, resentment and threatened attachment are intelligible human emotions, and his narration makes their force available to the reader. But the ability to explain an act does not settle its moral status. The danger is that a persuasive account of personal distress may be mistaken for a right to dominate or destroy what resists us.

Across these episodes, McEwan's idea of humanity emerges less as a stable possession than as a demanding practice. Charlie and Miranda can recognise admirable qualities in Adam while resisting the responsibilities that recognition brings. The android's chief literary function is to expose that gap. He asks readers to consider whether humanity is best measured by the identity one claims or by the care one extends when another being becomes difficult to accommodate.

Conclusion. In Machines Like Me, the robot figure gains its force from the collision of domestic intimacy, commercial ownership and competing claims to moral authority. Adam is not simply a superior machine placed beside inferior humans. His presence reveals how quickly apparently firm ideas about personhood can shift when affection, self-interest and control are at stake. The resulting ethical uncertainty is one of the novel's most important literary achievements. The analysis has kept three questions in view: how Adam is classified, how his actions are evaluated and what obligations the human characters accept towards him. The novel shows that these questions cannot be answered by a single label. Charlie's first-person narrative reveals the temptations of self-justification, while the disputes over truth, love and autonomy challenge easy definitions of kindness or moral correctness. McEwan's conception of humanity rests on the willingness to remain responsible towards an other whose interests cannot simply be absorbed into our own. This claim is limited to the fictional world and formal strategies of one novel; it offers no proof about the consciousness of present-day AI. A comparison with other literary androids and with additional critical studies would help determine how far this account of conditional recognition can be extended.

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