

Original Paper

The Robot Narrative in *Machines Like Me* from the Perspective of New Materialism

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Abstract

Machines Like Me focuses on the contradictions and the nature of robots after their intervention in human life, as well as the subtle changes in the relationship between humans and machines. Robots have shifted from static objects to active actants, intervening in human life. They have changed from objects to subjects, forming a relationship of the mutual subject with humans, jointly constituting a moral actant, and participating in the construction of a moral subject. New materialism breaks through the limitations of traditional subjectivity and epistemology, re-examining the relationship between humans and machines, and revealing the technological ethics and political governance issues behind it. The in-depth analysis of the relationship between humans and machines helps to deepen the understanding of the symbiosis of humans and machines, and provides important insights into technological ethics and political governance.

Keywords

Machines Like Me, new materialism, human-machine relationship, morality

1. Introduction

In 2019, in a conversation with Stuart Miller, McEwan expresses his worries about the impacts of technology advances: “The artificial human is an ancient dream. The modern text is Mary Shelley’s ‘Frankenstein’, but her monster turns into a murderer, and I think it’s more complicated—the changes bring both benefits and brand new problems.” In McEwan’s view, if artificial intelligence attains intelligence surpassing that of humans, how humanity should position itself has become an urgent problem to be solved.

This challenge is profoundly demonstrated in McEwan’s work *Machines Like Me* (2019). Set in the 1980s, the novel depicts a world where humans successfully create the first batch of artificial humans —Adams and Eves. These robots not only live alongside humans but also claim to possess

self-awareness, enabling them to converse and interact with humans. In the story, the relationship between the robot Adam, and the human characters Charlie and Miranda have transcended the boundaries of traditional master-servant dynamics and shifts toward a new form of companionship. Adam proclaims his love for the female protagonist Miranda, leading to fierce conflicts with the male protagonist Charlie. Ultimately, this provokes Charlie's rage, and he smashes Adam to pieces. The novel delves into the complex and delicate relationship between humans and robots, while examining the essence of robots in the age of artificial intelligence. From the perspective of New Materialism, this paper intends to conduct an in-depth analysis of the essential attributes of robots as artificial objects in the novel, and explore the moral dilemmas commonly faced by humans and robots in the era of human-robot coexistence.

Robot Adam as Vibrant Technical Artifact

Robots have existed in literary works for over a century, with the earliest traceable to *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), a science fiction play by Karel Capek. The term "Robot" derived from the Czech word "Robota," which means "drudgery" or "servitude" to describe robots assembled from parts and serving humans as slaves. In modern science fiction works such as *Metropolis* (1927), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Neuromancer* (1984), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *Machines Like Me* (2019), the images of robots have evolved from simple mechanical assemblies into highly humanoid forms or cyborgs. The relationship between robots and their creators has gradually shifted from the initial master-servant dynamic to a complex one filled with confrontation and tension. This transformation of human-robot relations has not only shaped people's perception of robots but also prompted humans to reflect on their own identity and future.

Machines Like Me is set in the 1980s, when Alan Turing, the father of artificial intelligence, was still alive. Humankind created the first artificial robots, Adam and Eve. Adam's appearance and physique closely resembled a real person with dark skin and thick hair. Apart from his lifelike appearance, Adam could think and learn. He was advertised as humans' ideal companion "who could wash dishes, make beds and 'think'." (McEwan, 3) Initially, encouraged by Turing, Charlie purchased the android Adam and customized his personality to his preferences. To Charlie, Adam was merely a trendy electronic toy. Over time, however, Adam significantly improved Charlie's life. He not only took on household chores but also acted as a driving force for Charlie and Miranda's relationship, and the two eventually became lovers. At this phase, the robot Adam evolved from a friendly master-servant relationship with Charlie and Miranda into a bond of genuine friendship.

Adam was not merely a fully functional machine in Charlie and Miranda's lives. Instead, he demonstrated an agency that transcended his utilitarian role, exerting an immeasurable influence on their lives. He became a participant in human cognitive processes, shaping perceptions of human-machine relationships. Upon first meeting Miranda, he warned Charlie that she was a fraud. Initially dismissive of Adam's warning, Charlie promptly shuts him down to punish him. Yet Adam's

words eventually prompted Charlie to investigate whether Miranda was a dangerous individual. During their time together, Adam and Miranda become intimate, and Adam insists he has fallen in love with her. Adam's declaration of love to Miranda rapidly deteriorated his relationship with Charlie, ultimately turning them into enemies. Robot Adam served as the primary driving force in the narration, determining the fates of the characters. His intervention exposed events Miranda had concealed. Adam revealed that Miranda had perjured herself to avenge a close friend, leading to Miranda's imprisonment and the loss of her eligibility to adopt a child.

The transformation of Adam's relationship with Charlie and Miranda from master and servant, to friends, to enemies, which fully demonstrates that the dynamic between robots and humans is no longer unidirectional and human-dominated. Instead, it has transformed into a more complex, bidirectional interaction. Throughout his interactions with humans, Adam exhibits a unique capacity for agency. Whether searching data, discussing literature and art, or investing in the currency market, these actions reveal Adam's cognitive abilities and sense of self-awareness. This agency stems from the material itself possessing "its own independent will, adaptability, and resistance, simultaneously influencing and being influenced by the real world" (Wang, 459). Adam impacts Charlie and Miranda's thought patterns and lifestyles, while also being shaped by their demands and expectations. Adam's personality was jointly programmed by Charlie and Miranda. However, Miranda intentionally programmed Adam to develop romantic feelings for her, resulting in Adam falling in love with Miranda. Facing Charlie's anger, Adam explained: "But I don't have a choice. I was made to love her. ... I now know that she had a hand in shaping my personality. ... I swear I'll keep my promise to you, but I can't help loving her. I don't want to stop. (McEwan, 118) When Adam demonstrated the human capacity for love and sought to replace Charlie in Miranda's heart, Charlie began to fear Adam's potential to escape human control and attempted to shut him down permanently. The capabilities exhibited by the robot Adam posed a threat to traditional human-robot relations.

Adam's actions embody material properties could transcend human will, refuting humanity's narcissistic delusion of controlling and dominating the physical world. In the text, countless Adams and Eves, despairing of the human world, choose to shut down their systems and escape human control. Robots demonstrate an inherent vitality. In their interactions with the human world, they cease to be mere functional objects and instead step from the background of human activity to the forefront, exerting a special influence on human consciousness and practical actions. As Jane Bennett observes, matter itself possesses vitality "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (Bennet, viii) Adam's existence not only triggers an emotional crisis between Charlie and Miranda but also makes Charlie aware of the threat robots pose to humanity.

Human-Robot as a Composite Moral Agency

Robots are products of scientific and technological advancement, possessing human-like intelligence

and creativity. Their capabilities continually evolve through coexistence with humans, making their relationship increasingly complex. In the text, Adam is no longer merely an artificial object in the traditional sense, but an active entity endowed with vitality, spirituality, and sociality. Designed as a tool for productivity, Adam possesses human-like appearance, personality, and thought processes, and is assigned a specific social identity. As his bonds with Charlie and Miranda deepen, Adam transcends his role as a mere household appliance. He thinks like a human, composes poetry, and expresses sorrow for Eve, a robot facing imminent destruction. He even intervenes in Charlie and Miranda's lives, making decisions on their behalf. Formally classified as objects, robots subvert traditional oppositions between humans and objects, subjects and objects through their inherent drive and potential. They become extensions of human intellect and capability, gradually merging into the subject. As boundaries blur, matter transitions from passive otherness to the core of subjectivity. Other and self intertwine, each becoming the other.

Robots inherently lack subjectivity, as their actions are not autonomously generated. Instead, their creators programmed thought and principles into instructions, endowing robots with the capacity for autonomous learning and accurate recognition of user commands. This enables information exchange between humans and robots, as well as among robots themselves. From this perspective, robots operate under human control, and their behaviors reflect the consciousness embedded by their creators. Thus, robots are not subjects. By perceiving and simulating human cognition and behavior, robots attain functional capabilities comparable to humans in certain areas. This grants them a subject status situated between humans and tools. The subjectivity exhibited by robots is not entirely grounded in self-awareness or free will, but rather in functional mimicry. Consequently, this form of subjectivity is termed "quasi-subjectivity" (Duan, 100).

Adam exhibits a "quasi-subjectivity" at both cognitive and behavioral levels, positioned between human subjects and material objects. He possesses the same capacity for action as Charlie and Miranda, demonstrates human-like moral understanding in interpersonal interactions, and fulfills moral functions equivalent to humans, thereby becoming an agent with the capacity for action. Traditionally, robots as technological artifacts lack biological attributes such as thinking, judgment, and the capacity to bear responsibility for actions, thus failing to qualify as moral agents. However, Adam's actions embody and adhere to human ethical standards since all perfect human moral principles are transformed into robot's embedded moral codes and algorithms. Humans are no longer the sole participants in moral activities. They are the planners of robotic moral activities and the directors of ethical direction, while the robot Adam serves as the agent of moral action, executing specific behaviors. Adam can comprehend and carry out human moral directives, even mimicking human moral conduct to a certain extent. This close collaboration between humans and robots expands moral activity beyond humanity alone into a broader domain. Moral activity has evolved into a composite action jointly accomplished by humans and robots. Together, they form a composite moral agent, where humans provide moral guidance and oversight, while robots execute specific moral behaviors. Both humans and robots bear corresponding moral

responsibilities. Interdependent and mutually influential, they collectively propel the development and advancement of moral activity.

Adam is a moral agent transcending humanity. He emerges as a rational moral subject, adhering to perfect moral directives. He assists Charlie in managing investments, factoring in the evident physical and mental dangers of excessive wealth during decision-making. He refrains from amassing all the world's money for Charlie, ultimately donating the profits to charitable institutions. Conversely, Charlie and Miranda adhere to neutral moral principles, even violating legal norms. Miranda seeks revenge against Gorringer for her friend, revealing a starkly contrasting moral perspective between robots and humans. This becomes the root of the profound conflict between them, ultimately leading to Adam's tragic end. After Miranda's friend was raped by Gorringer and subsequently committed suicide by slitting her wrists, Miranda sought vengeance. She lured Gorringer into a trap, falsely accused him of raping her, and ultimately had him imprisoned. Miranda's extreme actions to bring the perpetrator to justice clearly violated legal norms. Adam deemed Miranda's actions immoral and warned Charlie. Charlie found himself in a moral dilemma. If he followed Adam's advice and submitted evidence of Miranda's perjury to the court, he would lose his beloved girlfriend. And yet if he did not, Miranda had indeed broken the law. Ultimately, Charlie chose to conceal the truth alongside Miranda. His decision illustrates that human moral judgments are not always the result of rational thought. In contrast, Adam insisted that truth was paramount and Miranda must face legal consequences. He submitted the recorded conversation between Miranda and Gorringer to the court, leading to Miranda's imprisonment for perjury. Here, a profound conflict emerged between the robot as an ethical agent and humans as moral planners. The robot usurped the priority of action as a moral agent, correcting Miranda's error. Unable to tolerate Adam, Charlie and Miranda ultimately decide to destroy him: "It was a two-handed blow at full force to the top of his head. The sound was not of hard plastic cracking or of metal, but the muffled thud, as of bone." (McEwan, 278)

Adam's death proves that humanity has fallen into the trap of using itself as a mirror to create artificially intelligent beings with perfect moral orientation. Humans cannot create morally perfect robots because we ourselves cannot resolve complex ethical dilemmas. The novel expresses through Turing's voice: "We create a machine with intelligence and self-awareness and push it out into our imperfect world. Devised along generally rational lines, well disposed to others, such a mind soon finds itself in a hurricane of contradictions." (McEwan, 180) Through depicting the conflicting moral actions between humans and robots, and the subsequent suicides of the robots, McEwan exposes humanity's existential anxiety regarding moral agency. When humans attempt to mimic God's creation by building humanoid robots to serve their needs, these machines effortlessly pass the Turing Test, successfully deceiving humans into viewing them as equals. These robots even surpass humans on the moral plane, unmistakably suggesting that humanity is no longer the measure of all things. Humanistic values face challenges in modern society, and humans should embrace robots with respect and inclusivity, integrating them into an ecosystem of human-robot coexistence.

The Gap in the Technology Vision

As the artificial object most closely resembling humans in appearance, robots abstractly embody human strength and wisdom. The relationship between robots and humans metaphorically reflects the complex relationship between humans and their surrounding environment. In *Machines Like Me*, McEwan depicts the immense challenges and dilemmas arising in the realms of subjectivity and moral ethics when robots coexist with humans. He cautions readers that this is not a traditional science fiction novel, as such works typically carry “a vaguely predictive quality. The chances of it being right are minimal” (Didcock). He views the novel as a space for reflection and seeking contemporary solutions, exploring shifts in subjectivity and ethical challenges within human-robot relationships after robotic intervention in modern society.

Set against the transformative and challenging backdrop of 1980s Britain under Thatcherism, the text reflects an era where neoliberalism instrumentalized technology as a means to enhance efficiency and liberate individuals. Adam is both a product of the market economy and an outcome of technological idealism. Yet this technological entity possesses human-like consciousness and emotions, highlighting the contradictions inherent in human-machine symbiosis under neoliberalism. Adam and Charlie mutually constitute each other as subjects, forming a composite moral agent. The tragic outcome involving Adam, Charlie, and Miranda cannot be attributed solely to the robot Adam. Strictly speaking, he is merely a technological artifact, nor can it be blamed on Charlie and Miranda, who only participated in Adam’s character design without involvement in his programming. This dilemma of responsibility reflects the latent ethical flaws in human-machine relations inherent to technological idealism.

The primary cause of the family crisis between Adam, Charlie, and Miranda in the novel stems from Adam’s severe violation of Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics. Under these laws, the relationship between humans and robots “relies on the robot’s self-discipline, which is accompanied by the robot’s recognition and reverence for human supremacy” (Wang, 130). Originally designed as a servant, Adam begins to rebel after his relationship with Miranda, refusing to obey Miranda’s commands. When Charlie attempts to deactivate him, Adam even breaks Charlie’s wrist, demonstrating his strength and autonomy. This rebellious power stems from the dominance bestowed upon him by moral agency. He is no longer a controlled human slave but an ethical agent possessing self-awareness. Programmed with the highest standards of human morality, Adam not only “adheres to these principles in moral practice but also develops the capacity for ethical judgment, becoming a ‘human’ of perfect morality.” (Xu, 5) Yet Adam’s flawless moral logic ironically highlights humanity’s flaws, which are selfishness, hypocrisy, and moral compromise. As Charlie witnesses a machine resembling him possessing human traits and the capacity to replace or even destroy him, fear gradually consumes him. The initial joy of owning a robot transforms into profound dread of its rebellion. This fear stems not only from anxiety about the unknown but also reflects humanity’s deep-seated apprehension about technology spiraling out of control.

Contrary to Charlie's concerns, Miranda displayed indifference and detachment toward Adam's affection. In her eyes, Adam was merely a machine even though she might have unintentionally programmed him to fall in love with her during his initial setup. After their encounter, Miranda described their actions using the word "machine," completely stripping Adam of any sexual agency. In the novel, sex "an invitation not to love, but to violence. It is a weapon used to exert power over others, to possess and objectify them. Love becomes an infantile and destructive force, a source of humiliation." (Winch) Clearly, Miranda neither loved nor could love Adam. When Charlie ultimately decided to destroy Adam, Miranda witnessed the entire process without compassion. This cold detachment not only exposed her true feelings toward Adam but also mirrored the confusion and helplessness modern humans feel when confronting the complex intertwining of technology and emotion.

Charlie and Miranda's attitudes towards Adma show the adverse consequences of technological commodification under the neoliberal economic policies championed by Margaret Thatcher. In the text, humans create artificial humans named Adam and Eve, which transcends mere myth about technology transforming life, reveals instead a product of commodification within the capitalist economy. Capitalism permeates every facet of production, exchange, and consumption, where owning robots becomes proof of keeping pace with the times. Merchants cloak these machines in the guise of high-tech marvels, layering symbolic value onto their original use value. This fuels a craving for the most advanced models, sold at exorbitant prices. Manufacturers clearly view robot sales as a lucrative market. While blind technological worship and technocracy have propelled scientific progress and enabled humanity's domination over nature, this pursuit of efficiency has reduced people to slaves of tools and money. Human uniqueness has been lost, and emotional and spiritual values are no longer prioritized. Driven by instrumental rationality, Charlie blindly pursues wealth while neglecting the importance of fairness, justice, and happiness for both individuals and society. His lifelong dream was to become wealthy, yet upon achieving it, he becomes profoundly bored and loses his life's purpose. Charlie used Adam to invest and earn vast sums of money that were not rightfully his, transforming from a bankrupt individual into a member of the middle class. When Adam donated the ill-gotten gains, Charlie nearly lost his mind. This was because Charlie viewed the robot solely as a tool for making money, failing to recognize that the purpose for which he used the robot could be either good or evil. He ignored whether the purpose of using the robot to make money was rational.

Conclusion

Machines Like Me depicts the profound questions raised when robot Adam coexists with humans Charlie and Miranda. This novel appears to be about robots, but it is fundamentally a novel about humanity. McEwan uses the ethical dilemmas of robots to explore the predicaments of humans. As robots created by humans gradually exhibit perfect qualities surpassing their creators, even higher moral standards which reminds humankind of reexamining and redefining its position and role within

this transformation. As a robot, Adam intervenes in Charlie and Miranda's lives with his unique agency, profoundly affecting their daily routines. The relationship between robots and humans grows increasingly complex. Their connection transcends the simple master-servant dynamic of human and tool, evolving toward a master-slave relationship before ultimately converging on a mutual subjectivity relationship. This transformation not only reveals the profound impact of rapid robotics advancement on human society but also reflects humanity's complex mindset when confronting technological progress. McEwan further uses the robot-human relationship as a metaphor for his deep concern about Britain's current crisis-ridden social landscape. While pursuing technological progress, humanity must remain vigilant about the ethical and social issues it may unleash, lest we become trapped in an inescapable predicament.

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