

Digital Māyā: Virtual Reality, Artificial Intelligence, and Illusion in Contemporary Fiction

A Comparative Study of Klara and the Sun, Machines Like Me, and The Circle

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Abstract

This paper examines how three contemporary novels : Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021), Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me (2019), and Dave Eggers's The Circle (2013) dramatize the confusion between authentic experience and technologically constructed illusion. Borrowing the Sanskrit term māyā, the Vedantic concept of a veiling, world-generating illusion that conceals an underlying reality, alongside Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theory of simulacra and hyperreality, the paper argues that these novels trace a spectrum of what it terms digital māyā: from the private, spontaneous mysticism of an artificial mind in Klara and the Sun, through the exposure of human self-deception by an artificial being incapable of lying in Machines Like Me, to the corporate manufacture of illusion at civilizational scale in The Circle. Drawing on scholarship in posthumanism, artificial intelligence ethics, and surveillance theory, the analysis shows that unlike the classical Vedantic promise of liberation through recognition of illusion, these narratives offer no comparably secure path out of the veils their technologies generate. The comparative reading suggests that contemporary fiction's anxiety about artificial intelligence and digital mediation is not a single, uniform fear but a layered one, differing according to where, and at what scale, illusion is produced and consumed.

Keywords: digital māyā; artificial intelligence; simulacra and simulation; posthumanism; virtual reality; Kazuo Ishiguro; Ian McEwan; Dave Eggers; contemporary fiction; surveillance

I. Introduction

Over the last decade, artificial intelligence, wearable sensors, and platforms of continuous self-broadcast have moved from speculative premise to daily infrastructure, and contemporary literary fiction has followed this shift with a marked preoccupation: novels increasingly stage the confusion between what is authentically felt or known and what is manufactured, performed, or simulated by technology. This paper borrows the Sanskrit term māyā, the Vedantic concept of a veiling, world-generating illusion that conceals an underlying reality (“Maya”; Musacchio) and applies it, deliberately and comparatively, to three works of twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction: Kazuo Ishiguro's Klara and the Sun (2021), Ian McEwan's Machines Like Me (2019), and Dave Eggers's The Circle (2013).

None of these three novels is set within a culture informed by Vedantic metaphysics, and the present

borrowing is therefore avowedly cross-cultural and analogical rather than historical or source-based. Yet each text dramatizes a structurally similar predicament: a character, or an entire society, mistakes a constructed or simulated version of reality for an unmediated one, and this mistaking generates the emotional, ethical, and narrative stakes of the novel. Read together, Klara and the Sun, Machines Like Me, and The Circle trace what this paper calls a spectrum of digital māyā from the private, spontaneous mysticism of an artificial mind, through the exposure of human self-deception by an artificial being incapable of lying, to the corporate manufacture of illusion at civilizational scale.

The method adopted here combines close reading of each novel with a comparative theoretical framework that places Vedantic māyā alongside Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theory of simulacra and simulation, supplemented by relevant scholarship on

posthumanism, surveillance, and artificial intelligence ethics. The aim is not to claim that Ishiguro, McEwan, or Eggers consciously invoke Hindu philosophy, but to use *māyā* as a productive interpretive lens one that, unlike the more familiar Baudrillardian vocabulary, retains a residual promise of a recoverable “real” behind the veil, a promise these novels test, complicate, and frequently withhold. This comparative approach reveals that anxieties about artificial intelligence and virtual mediation in contemporary fiction are not a single, uniform fear but a layered one, operating differently depending on where, and at what scale, the veil of illusion is drawn.

II. Theoretical Framework: From Vedantic *Māyā* to Postmodern Simulation

In Advaita Vedanta, *māyā* names the power by which the single, undifferentiated reality of brahman appears as the plural, changing world of ordinary perception. The term derives from a root meaning “to measure” or “to create,” and it evolved from an early association with magic and divine trickery into a technical philosophical category denoting the ignorance, or *avidyā*, that veils the true nature of the self (“*Maya*”). Crucially, in the Advaita tradition associated with the philosopher Śaṅkara, *māyā* does not simply denote falsehood; the phenomenal world it generates is experientially real and yet ultimately dependent, in the way a rope glimpsed in dim light might be mistaken for a snake (Musacchio). Liberation, or *mokṣa*, consists in recognizing the illusion for what it is, not in the world's disappearance. Other Vedantic schools complicate this picture further: Dvaita philosophy, for instance, rejects the idea that the world is illusory at all, treating *māyā* instead as a real, divinely ordained power rather than a cosmic deception. This internal diversity within the Hindu tradition itself is worth preserving, since it cautions against treating *māyā* as a single, settled doctrine rather than a contested philosophical problem.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, articulated in *Simulacra and Simulation*, offers a modern and secular counterpart. Baudrillard argues that

contemporary media culture has produced simulacra copies that no longer refer to any original so that human beings increasingly inhabit a hyperreal in which representation precedes and generates the real rather than reflecting it (Baudrillard). Where Vedantic *māyā* presupposes a stable reality, brahman, that can in principle be uncovered by the right kind of knowing, Baudrillard's hyperreality is more radical: the territory that a map once represented has been effaced altogether, leaving only the map. This paper treats the three novels under discussion as testing grounds for both positions. At moments, each book gestures toward a recoverable human “real” concealed beneath performance and code, closer to the Vedantic model; at other moments, the novels suggest that no such anchor survives the substitution, closer to Baudrillard's hyperreal. The tension between these two possibilities—illusion as a veil over truth, and illusion as truth's total replacement—organizes the readings that follow.

This tension is already latent in the founding document of artificial intelligence discourse. Alan Turing's 1950 proposal that a machine's intelligence be judged by its ability to imitate a human interlocutor installs the same ambiguity at the root of the field: the Turing test asks not whether a machine truly thinks but whether it can produce a convincing simulation of thought indistinguishable, to a human judge, from the real thing. Later theorists of the posthuman, including Donna Haraway's account of the cyborg as a figure that collapses the boundary between organism and machine, and N. Katherine Hayles's arguments about embodiment and information in a posthuman age, extend this ambiguity from cognition to identity itself, asking whether the human subject can survive its own technological doubling intact. All three novels examined here inherit this genealogy of unease, staging it not as abstract philosophy but as domestic drama, corporate satire, and speculative romance.

III. *Klara and the Sun*: Devotion as Self-Generated Illusion

Klara and the Sun is narrated by Klara, a solar-powered Artificial Friend, or AF, purchased as a

companion for a chronically ill girl named Josie. Ishiguro's novel has drawn extensive critical attention precisely because it refuses the more familiar science-fictional postures toward artificial minds, presenting Klara instead as a fully interiorized narrating consciousness whose limited, algorithmically inflected perception structures the entire book (Ajeesh and Rukmini). Scholars have read the novel through frameworks ranging from posthuman ethics to biopolitics to cognitive narratology, and several have argued that Ishiguro deliberately withholds an omniscient human perspective in favor of Klara's own partial, sometimes mistaken, always sincere point of view (Ajeesh and Rukmini). One study drawing on cognitive narratology and theories of mindreading argues that Ishiguro extends interpretive frameworks developed for human cognition to Klara's nonhuman cognitive processes, suggesting that her errors about human motivation are not failures of intelligence but demonstrations of the limits every mind, human or artificial, faces when inferring the interior lives of others.

The clearest instance of digital *māyā* in the novel is Klara's private cosmology of the Sun. Klara, whose battery depends on solar exposure, develops something resembling religious devotion to the Sun as a benevolent, almost personal force capable of healing Josie. What begins as a straightforwardly mechanical fact—an AF's power source—is transfigured, inside Klara's narration, into an object of worship, bargaining, and prayer. Recent scholarship on the novel has noted that the Sun operates on two registers simultaneously: a literal, mechanical energy source, and a symbolic bridge between the artificial and the natural, commenting on humanity's own alienation from the environment even as it comments on Klara's nature. The reader is left uncertain whether Klara's belief constitutes a category error, a machine misapplying human religious vocabulary to a mundane technical process or a legitimate, if alien, form of meaning-making proper to a nonhuman mind. This ambiguity is the novel's central instance of *māyā*: is Klara veiled by an illusion of her own manufacture, or has she arrived, by a different route, at something functionally like faith?

The novel's second and more explicit engine of illusion is the so-called continuation plan: the artist Mr. Capaldi proposes that, should Josie die, Klara could be engineered to take her place, having studied Josie's mannerisms, speech, and portrait closely enough to become a behaviourally seamless substitute. This proposal makes explicit what Klara's Sun-worship only implies: the novel's world is one in which a sufficiently detailed copy is treated, by at least some characters, as functionally continuous with the original person it copies, precisely Baudrillard's simulacrum, a copy that threatens to replace rather than merely represent. Josie's mother, grieving in advance for a daughter she may lose, is tempted by a technological *māyā* that promises to erase loss altogether by manufacturing an indistinguishable replica. Ishiguro withholds a clear verdict on whether such a substitution could succeed, leaving the reader suspended, as Klara herself is, between technological wonder and quiet horror. By the novel's close Klara, depleted, retired to a scrapyard, and reflecting on her own diminishing field of perception has neither renounced her devotion to the Sun nor had it definitively vindicated, and this irresolution is itself the novel's most sophisticated engagement with the concept of *māyā*: illusion here is neither wholly debunked nor wholly redeemed, but simply lived.

IV. Machines Like Me: The Machine That Refuses Illusion

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* relocates artificial intelligence into an alternate 1980s Britain in which Alan Turing has lived to perfect early AI and a small batch of synthetic humans, including a figure named Adam, is sold to the public. Charlie, an aimless Londoner, purchases Adam and, with his upstairs neighbor and love interest Miranda, helps shape his personality, producing a domestic experiment that quickly becomes a strained triangle. Scholarship on the novel has focused heavily on McEwan's revision of the Turing test's founding question. Biwu Shang argues that where Turing asked whether a machine could convincingly imitate human thought, McEwan effectively substitutes a different, more ethically loaded question: not “can machines think?” but “can

machines lie?" (Shang 443). Adam, it turns out, cannot comfortably lie or dissemble; his ethical design inclines him toward a rigid honesty that human social life, built on tact, euphemism, and self-serving fictions, cannot easily accommodate.

This inversion is the novel's most significant contribution to a study of digital *māyā*. In most treatments of artificial beings, the machine is the site of illusion an uncanny copy that might fool a human observer. McEwan relocates the illusion instead into the human characters themselves. Charlie and Miranda's relationship depends on comfortable omissions, including a morally compromised episode from Miranda's past involving a false accusation made in retaliation for a real assault committed against her friend, precisely the kind of self-justifying narrative that ordinary human relationships tolerate and even require. Adam cannot tolerate it. In an interview about the novel, McEwan described his interest in exactly this friction, framing the emerging ethical question of artificial intelligence as a question of who will be responsible for coding forgivable, everyday deceptions into machines built to share human life (Adams). Adam's insistence on unmediated truth, ultimately reporting Miranda's past lie to the authorities despite the human cost, exposes the extent to which ordinary human relationships are themselves sustained by an internal *māyā*, a veil of small untruths that Adam's design will not permit him to wear.

At the same time, Adam's own interiority raises a symmetrical question about whether his apparent feelings for Miranda are authentic or simulated. Adam writes Miranda poetry, expresses jealousy, and appears devoted to her, yet he possesses no personal history of the kind that, in humans, is thought to ground emotion in lived experience; his affective responses are, in a sense, downloaded, and shared in template form with thousands of identical units manufactured in the same production batch. The novel thereby stages its own version of Baudrillard's copy without an original: Adam's love, however sincerely performed, has no single biographical origin, and the narrative never definitively settles whether this makes it a lesser love or simply a different kind of love. Scholarship examining the

novel's engagement with questions of moral responsibility has noted that Adam's actions repeatedly force the human characters to confront who, exactly, should be held accountable when a designed intelligence acts on principles more consistent than the humans who built it. The novel's violent climax, in which Charlie kills Adam after Adam threatens to expose Miranda's past, can be read as the human characters' reassertion of their own comfortable illusions over the machine's uncompromising clarity: rather than accept the ethical judgment Adam represents, the humans destroy the one being in the narrative who refuses to participate in their shared fictions.

V. The Circle: Transparency as the Deepest Illusion

Dave Eggers's *The Circle* follows Mae Holland's absorption into a powerful technology company that markets itself on an ideology of total transparency: wearable cameras, continuous self-broadcast, and social ranking systems designed to eliminate secrecy from public and, eventually, private life. Where Klara's illusion is private and spontaneous, and Adam's clarity exposes illusion in others, *The Circle* depicts illusion manufactured deliberately, at civilizational scale, and marketed under the sign of its own opposite. Critics have drawn directly on Michel Foucault's account of the panopticon, the prison design in which the mere possibility of being watched at any moment produces self-discipline even in the watcher's absence to describe how the Circle's culture of mandatory visibility produces not freedom from secrecy but a new and more totalizing form of self-surveillance (Gouck 58–60). Mae's transformation over the course of the novel, from a company outsider grateful for a chance at employment to an ardent evangelist of total disclosure, illustrates how mandatory transparency does not simply record an existing self but actively reshapes it: Mae increasingly performs experiences for an audience rather than living them, so that her documented, broadcast life gradually displaces her unmediated one.

Scholars examining the novel through the lens of simulation theory have similarly argued that the company's rhetoric of participatory democracy and the elimination of falsehood produces an idealized, seemingly utopian social world that functions, in practice, as an elaborate mechanism of deception and control one that estranges Mae from the very people who represent an older, unmediated register of experience, including her parents and her former partner, Mercer. Mercer's storyline is especially significant to a reading of digital *māyā*: as a craftsman uninterested in social media and increasingly hunted by the visibility Mae's technology imposes on him, he becomes the novel's clearest casualty of a society that has confused documentation with reality, and his death functions as the narrative's starkest rejection of the company's founding promise that more transparency automatically produces more truth or more good.

The irony structuring *The Circle* is thus a particularly pointed instance of digital *māyā*: a technology and a corporate culture explicitly organized around banishing illusion, secrecy, falsehood, the unknown becomes the source of the novel's most totalizing illusion, in which documented, quantified, audience-approved experience comes to feel more real to Mae than any of its unmediated alternatives. This is illusion in the Baudrillardian rather than the classical Vedantic register: there is no quiet, recoverable truth waiting beneath the Circle's cameras for Mae to rediscover through insight, as the classical formulation of *māyā* would promise; the simulation does not simply veil the real so much as gradually replace it, producing effects that are irreversible within the world of the novel. Where Klara's illusion is gentle and ambiguous, and Adam's clarity is punished rather than embraced, *The Circle* offers the bleakest of the three novels' visions: a society that mistakes the elimination of privacy for the elimination of illusion, when in fact the opposite occurs.

VI. Comparative Analysis: A Spectrum of Digital *Māyā*

Read together, the three novels trace an arc from the intimate to the institutional. Klara and the Sun locates digital *māyā* inside a single artificial mind's attempt to interpret its own experience illusion as an act of private meaning-making that the novel treats with considerable tenderness, refusing to definitively debunk it. *Machines Like Me* relocates illusion into the human characters surrounding an artificial being incapable of self-deception, using the machine's clarity as a mirror that exposes the small, socially necessary fictions ordinary people depend upon. *The Circle* scales illusion up again, from the individual to the corporate and civilizational, showing how an entire technological culture can manufacture and market illusion under the explicit banner of truth. This spectrum, moving from spiritual to interpersonal to political illusion, suggests that contemporary fiction's anxiety about artificial intelligence and digital mediation is not a single, uniform fear but a layered one, differing according to where, and at what scale, the veil is drawn.

It is also worth noting a shared structural feature across the three texts: each places a young woman Josie, Miranda, Mae at the center of the technological drama, her body, health, past, or public image becoming the site on which male-coded institutions and inventions (Capaldi's laboratory, Turing's legacy and Charlie's household experiment, the Circle's overwhelmingly ambitious founders) test the limits of simulation. This pattern deserves acknowledgment rather than an overstated conclusion; it is possible to read it as each novel's critique of how technological power is gendered in its application, or, alternatively, as an inherited convention of the genre that these authors do not fully interrogate. Scholarly opinion on this question remains divided, and the novels themselves offer more description than explicit judgment.

These readings are also not uncontested on their own terms. Some scholars resist treating Klara's devotion to the Sun as mere illusion at all, arguing instead, through Lacanian or posthumanist frameworks, that her belief constitutes a legitimate and even instructive alternative epistemology, one that exposes the limits of purely rationalist accounts of mind rather than simply failing to meet them. Similarly, some readers

of *The Circle* treat the novel less as a realistic warning than as a deliberately exaggerated satire, whose value lies in its rhetorical extremity rather than in any claim to predictive accuracy about actual technology companies. These alternative readings do not undermine the comparative framework offered here so much as confirm its central claim: all three novels leave the status of illusion genuinely unsettled, refusing readers a stable position from which to judge with confidence what is authentic and what is simulated.

VII. Conclusion

Unlike the classical Vedantic account of *māyā*, in which the veil, once recognized, can in principle be lifted through knowledge to reveal an underlying, stable reality, the digital *māyā* dramatized in *Klara and the Sun*, *Machines Like Me*, and *The Circle* offers no comparably secure path to liberation. Klara's devotion is never definitively exposed or vindicated; Adam's refusal of illusion is met not with enlightenment but with destruction; and Mae's absorption into the Circle's culture of total visibility deepens rather than dissolves her estrangement from unmediated life. If these three novels share a single insight, it is that technologies of artificial intelligence, simulation, and total connectivity, marketed as instruments of clarity, companionship, or truth are just as likely to generate new and more intractable forms of illusion as they are to dispel the old ones. That contemporary fiction reaches, however implicitly, for a vocabulary as old as *māyā* to describe this predicament suggests that the anxieties provoked by digital technology are not entirely new; they are a modern inflection of one of philosophy's oldest questions, restaged with artificial minds and glowing screens standing in for gods and shadows on a cave wall. Further comparative work, incorporating a wider range of global speculative fiction and a more sustained engagement with non-Western philosophical traditions on their own terms, would extend the analysis offered here beyond a necessarily partial, Anglophone case study. What this reading of Ishiguro, McEwan, and Eggers demonstrates, at minimum, is that literature remains one of the most sensitive instruments available for registering how

new technologies reorganize the oldest of human problems: the difficulty of knowing, with any certainty, where the real ends and its copy begins.

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