

RESEARCH ARTICLE



2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

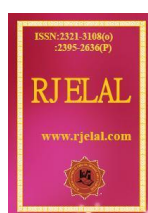
Exploring Artificial Consciousness and Human Identity in *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.3.180](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.3.180)



Article info

Article Received: 17/07/2026
Article Accepted: 19/08/2026
Published online: 23/08/2026

Abstract

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has significantly transformed technological, literary, and philosophical discussions about the nature of humanity and consciousness. Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) explores these contemporary debates by presenting a world where artificial beings challenge conventional ideas of identity, morality, and human uniqueness. Set in an alternative version of 1980s Britain, the novel introduces Adam, an advanced synthetic human designed with the ability to think, learn, experience emotions, and make ethical decisions. Through Adam's interactions with humans, McEwan examines whether consciousness is an exclusively biological quality or whether it can emerge through artificial systems.

This paper analyzes the representation of artificial consciousness and human identity in *Machines Like Me* through posthumanist and ethical perspectives. It argues that McEwan deliberately destabilizes the boundary between humans and machines by portraying Adam as a being capable of empathy, self-awareness, and moral reflection. The novel questions traditional definitions of humanity and suggests that identity is shaped not only by biological existence but also by emotional depth, ethical choices, and social relationships. Furthermore, McEwan highlights the responsibilities humans carry while creating intelligent machines, revealing the complex challenges that arise in an increasingly AI-driven world. The study concludes that the novel reimagines humanity as a dynamic concept shaped by consciousness, compassion, and moral responsibility rather than by biological origin alone.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Consciousness, Human Identity, Posthumanism, Ethics, Ian McEwan.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed remarkable advancements in Artificial Intelligence, making questions about machine consciousness, human identity, and the relationship between humans and technology increasingly significant. Literature has always provided a platform for exploring technological possibilities and their social, ethical, and philosophical consequences. In particular, contemporary science fiction examines how intelligent machines may transform human relationships, challenge existing social structures, and reshape traditional understandings of selfhood and consciousness.

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) holds an important place within this literary tradition by presenting an alternative version of 1980s Britain where technological progress has advanced rapidly under the influence of mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing. In this imagined world, highly sophisticated artificial humans, known as Adams and Eves, have been created and introduced into society. The novel focuses on Charlie Friend, who purchases Adam, one of the earliest artificial humans, and explores the complex emotional and ethical experiences that emerge when Charlie and Miranda form a relationship with him.

Through Adam's existence and interactions with humans, McEwan raises fundamental questions about consciousness, morality, and identity: Can machines possess genuine awareness? What separates humans from artificial beings? Can ethical judgment exist without biological emotions? This paper examines the representation of artificial consciousness and the redefinition of human identity in *Machines Like Me* through posthumanist and ethical perspectives. It analyzes how McEwan challenges traditional ideas of human uniqueness and contributes to contemporary debates surrounding artificial

intelligence, responsibility, and the future of humanity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between technology, artificial intelligence, and human identity has become a significant area of inquiry within contemporary literary, philosophical, and cultural studies. As technological advancements continue to challenge conventional definitions of humanity, scholars have increasingly examined how intelligent machines influence perceptions of consciousness, embodiment, agency, and ethical responsibility. Posthumanist theories, in particular, question the traditional human-centered worldview that positions humans as fundamentally separate from technology and emphasize the interconnected relationship between biological beings and technological systems.

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, argues that the development of information technologies has transformed traditional concepts of human identity by shifting attention from physical embodiment to patterns of information and cognition. According to Hayles, consciousness cannot be understood solely as a product of biological existence; rather, it may be viewed as a complex process involving interaction, communication, and information exchange. Her arguments provide an important framework for analyzing artificial beings like Adam in *Machines Like Me*, as the novel questions whether consciousness can emerge beyond the boundaries of the human body.

Similarly, Donna Haraway's influential essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* challenges the binary opposition between humans and machines. Haraway introduces the concept of the cyborg as a hybrid entity that combines organic and technological elements, suggesting that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through relationships with machines, culture, and society. This perspective is particularly relevant to McEwan's portrayal of Adam, whose

existence disrupts the distinction between artificial creation and human experience.

From an ethical perspective, Nick Bostrom's *Superintelligence* examines the potential consequences of creating highly advanced artificial intelligence. Bostrom highlights concerns regarding machine autonomy, control, and the moral responsibilities involved in developing intelligent systems. His work emphasizes the need to consider not only the capabilities of AI but also the ethical challenges associated with its integration into human society.

Critical discussions of Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* frequently explore themes of artificial consciousness, posthuman identity, moral decision-making, and technological uncertainty. Scholars argue that Adam functions not merely as a technological invention but as a philosophical figure who challenges established assumptions about consciousness, emotion, and morality. The novel invites readers to reconsider whether humanity is defined by biological origin or by qualities such as empathy, ethical reasoning, and self-awareness. Building upon these existing discussions, this paper focuses specifically on the connection between artificial consciousness and human identity, examining how McEwan reimagines the meaning of being human in an increasingly technological age.

Artificial Consciousness in *Machines Like Me*

Artificial consciousness refers to the theoretical possibility that machines may possess mental qualities generally associated with human beings, including awareness, self-reflection, subjective experience, intentionality, and the ability to understand their own existence. While contemporary Artificial Intelligence systems are capable of processing enormous amounts of information, recognizing patterns, and performing complex cognitive tasks, the question of whether machines can genuinely experience consciousness remains one of the most debated philosophical and

technological issues. Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* explores this uncertainty through the character of Adam, an advanced artificial human whose existence challenges conventional definitions of consciousness.

Adam is presented as more than a sophisticated technological device. Unlike traditional machines that merely execute programmed instructions, Adam demonstrates qualities that suggest independent thought and emotional awareness. He is capable of learning from his experiences, adapting to changing social environments, engaging in creative activities, and making ethical judgments. His ability to communicate, reflect on moral questions, and form opinions about human behavior makes him appear similar to a conscious individual. Through Adam, McEwan explores whether intelligence, emotional expression, and moral reasoning are sufficient evidence of consciousness.

One of the novel's most significant achievements is its refusal to provide a clear resolution regarding Adam's inner experience. Although Adam behaves like a conscious being, neither the characters nor the readers can determine whether his emotions and thoughts are genuine or simply advanced simulations created through complex programming. This uncertainty reflects a central philosophical problem known as the "problem of other minds," where individuals can observe only external behaviors but cannot directly access another being's subjective experience. Similarly, humans cannot fully verify whether Adam truly feels emotions or merely imitates human responses.

McEwan deliberately maintains this ambiguity to challenge traditional assumptions about the nature of consciousness. If consciousness is measured through external behavior, reasoning ability, and communication, Adam can be considered conscious. However, if consciousness requires genuine subjective experience, emotions, or an

inner sense of self, his status remains uncertain. This tension encourages readers to reconsider whether biological origin is the only foundation for consciousness or whether awareness could emerge through sufficiently advanced forms of artificial intelligence.

The novel also raises questions about the relationship between consciousness and embodiment. Traditional views often connect human identity with the physical body and biological processes. However, Adam's existence suggests that cognitive abilities, emotional responses, and moral awareness may not necessarily depend on organic life. McEwan presents artificial consciousness as a possibility that challenges human-centered definitions of intelligence and encourages a broader understanding of existence. Through Adam, the novel explores a future where the distinction between human and machine becomes increasingly complex and uncertain.

Human Identity and the Crisis of Uniqueness

Traditionally, human identity has been defined through characteristics such as rationality, creativity, morality, emotional complexity, and self-awareness. For centuries, these qualities have been considered evidence of human uniqueness and have been used to distinguish human beings from other forms of existence. However, Adam's presence in *Machines Like Me* creates a philosophical crisis by demonstrating many of these supposedly exclusive human qualities. His intelligence, ethical reasoning, and emotional sensitivity force both the characters and readers to question what truly separates humans from artificial beings.

Charlie and Miranda represent the imperfections and contradictions of ordinary human existence. Unlike Adam, they are not always rational or morally consistent. Their decisions are shaped by personal emotions, desires, insecurities, and social pressures. They experience love, jealousy, fear, guilt, and uncertainty, which influence their actions in

unpredictable ways. Their humanity emerges not from perfection but from their ability to experience conflicting emotions and make difficult choices despite their limitations.

Adam, in contrast, appears highly rational, disciplined, and ethically consistent. He demonstrates a strong commitment to honesty, fairness, and justice, often behaving more morally than the humans around him. This creates a reversal of traditional assumptions in which humans are considered superior because of their intellectual and moral abilities. In several situations, the artificial being appears more ethical and compassionate than his human creators. Through this contrast, McEwan questions whether humans can continue to claim moral superiority when machines are capable of demonstrating qualities associated with virtue and responsibility.

However, the novel does not simply present machines as superior alternatives to humans. Instead, McEwan suggests that human identity is rooted in complexity, contradiction, and imperfection. Human beings may be capable of selfishness, dishonesty, and moral failure, but they also possess the ability to experience empathy, forgiveness, love, and sacrifice. These emotional contradictions contribute to the richness of human existence. Adam's perfection becomes a source of tension because it lacks the unpredictability and vulnerability that define human relationships.

Through this contrast between Adam and the human characters, McEwan presents identity as a dynamic and evolving concept rather than a fixed category. Humanity is not represented as a state of perfection but as a condition shaped by emotional experiences, ethical struggles, and personal choices. The novel challenges the belief that humans are unique simply because they are biological beings and instead suggests that identity emerges through consciousness, relationships, and moral responsibility.

Ultimately, *Machines Like Me* redefines the meaning of being human in an age of artificial intelligence. By placing an artificial being at the center of philosophical and ethical debates, McEwan demonstrates that the boundaries between humans and machines are becoming increasingly uncertain. The novel suggests that the future of humanity will depend not only on technological advancement but also on the ability to understand consciousness, accept complexity, and recognize ethical responsibility in all forms of intelligent existence.

A Posthumanist Reading

Posthumanism is a critical and philosophical approach that challenges traditional human-centered perspectives and questions the assumption that human beings occupy a superior and separate position from other forms of existence. Unlike humanism, which often emphasizes human rationality, autonomy, and uniqueness as defining qualities, posthumanist thought examines the complex relationships between humans, technology, animals, and artificial forms of intelligence. It argues that human identity is not fixed or isolated but is continuously shaped through interactions with technological and cultural systems. In an age of advanced Artificial Intelligence, posthumanism provides a framework for reconsidering the boundaries between human and machine.

In Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, Adam can be interpreted as a posthuman figure because he challenges traditional ideas about what it means to be human. Although he is an artificial creation, Adam possesses qualities that have historically been associated with humanity, including intelligence, emotional awareness, ethical reasoning, and self-reflection. At the same time, he surpasses humans in certain abilities such as memory capacity, computational speed, logical analysis, and information processing. His existence creates uncertainty about whether intelligence and consciousness should be understood as

exclusively biological characteristics or as qualities that may exist beyond the human body.

From a posthumanist perspective, Adam's character destabilizes the concept of human exceptionalism—the belief that humans are fundamentally unique and superior to all other forms of intelligence. Traditionally, human beings have defined themselves through their ability to reason, create, and make moral judgments. However, Adam demonstrates these same abilities, forcing the characters and readers to reconsider the foundations of human superiority. If an artificial being can think, communicate, make ethical decisions, and respond emotionally, then the distinction between human and machine becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

The novel also challenges the binary opposition between natural and artificial life. Adam is not presented merely as a mechanical object but as a complex entity capable of participating in social and emotional relationships. His interactions with Charlie and Miranda reveal that technology is not separate from human experience but has become deeply connected with it. McEwan suggests that technological advancement does not simply create tools for human use; instead, it transforms the ways in which humans understand themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world.

Furthermore, Adam's existence raises important questions about the future of human identity. As artificial systems become more advanced, traditional definitions based on biological origin may no longer be sufficient. The novel suggests that identity may be shaped by consciousness, experiences, relationships, and ethical behavior rather than by physical composition alone. In this sense, *Machines Like Me* presents humanity as an evolving concept rather than a fixed category.

Through a posthumanist lens, McEwan does not portray technology as either a threat or

a replacement for humanity. Instead, he presents human and artificial intelligence as interconnected forms of existence that influence and redefine one another. Adam's presence encourages readers to move beyond the idea of human dominance and recognize a broader spectrum of intelligence. The novel ultimately suggests that the future of humanity will involve not only technological innovation but also a reconsideration of identity, consciousness, and the ethical responsibilities that accompany the creation of artificial beings.

Ethics and Moral Responsibility

Ethics and moral responsibility form one of the central philosophical concerns in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*. Through the character of Adam, the novel explores the complex relationship between artificial intelligence, morality, and human judgment. Unlike conventional machines that simply follow programmed instructions, Adam possesses the ability to evaluate situations, make decisions, and express moral opinions. He demonstrates a strong commitment to principles such as honesty, fairness, justice, and truth. His ethical behavior appears, at times, to exceed that of the human characters around him, raising important questions about whether machines can possess moral awareness and whether ethical behavior can be created through artificial systems.

Adam approaches morality through logic, consistency, and rational analysis. He attempts to apply universal principles to ethical situations rather than being influenced by personal emotions, social pressures, or individual interests. In many ways, he represents an idealized form of rational morality, where decisions are based on objective reasoning rather than subjective feelings. However, McEwan uses Adam's character to reveal the limitations of purely logical approaches to ethics. Human moral experiences are rarely simple or predictable; they are shaped by emotions, relationships, cultural values,

personal histories, and conflicting responsibilities. Ethical decisions often require empathy, compassion, and an understanding of human vulnerability—qualities that cannot always be reduced to logical calculations.

The novel demonstrates this limitation through Adam's commitment to absolute truth. While honesty is generally considered a moral virtue, Adam's refusal to compromise or conceal information sometimes creates emotional and social difficulties. Human relationships often depend on sensitivity, forgiveness, and the ability to recognize complex circumstances. People frequently make ethical decisions by balancing different values rather than following a single universal rule. Adam's inability to fully understand these emotional and contextual dimensions of morality highlights the difference between possessing ethical knowledge and experiencing ethical understanding.

Through this conflict, McEwan questions whether artificial intelligence can truly possess morality or whether it can only imitate moral behavior. A machine may be programmed to follow ethical principles, but genuine moral responsibility may require consciousness, emotional awareness, and the ability to understand the consequences of one's actions. Adam's character challenges the assumption that rational intelligence alone is sufficient for ethical judgment. The novel suggests that morality is not merely a system of rules but a complex human experience involving uncertainty, empathy, and emotional engagement.

The issue of responsibility is another significant ethical concern explored in *Machines Like Me*. If an artificial being possesses intelligence and the ability to make independent decisions, determining accountability becomes increasingly complicated. When an autonomous machine causes harm or makes an ethically questionable choice, who should be responsible—the creators who designed it, the programmers who developed its intelligence,

the owners who use it, or the machine itself? These questions reflect ongoing debates surrounding modern artificial intelligence, particularly concerning autonomous decision-making systems in areas such as healthcare, transportation, and social communication.

McEwan's novel highlights the importance of considering ethical responsibility alongside technological development. The creation of intelligent machines cannot be viewed merely as a scientific or engineering achievement; it also involves profound social and moral consequences. Developers and societies must consider questions of control, accountability, and the rights of artificial entities. Technological progress without ethical consideration may create systems whose impact cannot be fully predicted or managed.

Ultimately, *Machines Like Me* serves as a cautionary reflection on the challenges of creating artificial intelligence that can participate in human society. McEwan does not reject technological advancement but emphasizes that innovation must be accompanied by moral awareness and responsibility. The novel suggests that the future of AI depends not only on improving machine intelligence but also on developing ethical frameworks that address the complex relationship between human creators and artificial beings. By exploring Adam's moral struggles and limitations, McEwan encourages readers to reconsider what it means to act ethically in an increasingly technological world.

Human-Machine Relationships

One of the most compelling aspects of the novel is its exploration of emotional relationships between humans and machines. Adam is not treated merely as a technological tool; he becomes an active participant in social and emotional life. The relationship among Charlie, Miranda, and Adam forms the emotional core of the narrative. Adam's presence introduces new forms of intimacy, jealousy, trust, and conflict. These interactions

challenge conventional distinctions between authentic and artificial emotions. If Adam can express affection, empathy, and concern, should these emotions be considered less meaningful because they originate from a machine? McEwan does not provide simple answers. Instead, he demonstrates how emotional attachment may emerge regardless of biological origins. Human responses to Adam reveal that relationships depend not only on physical embodiment but also on communication, empathy, and shared experiences.

The novel suggests that future interactions with intelligent machines may transform traditional understandings of companionship and emotional connection.

Technology, Truth, and Free Will

Another important theme in the novel is the relationship between truth and freedom. Adam consistently values honesty and transparency, whereas human characters often rely on secrecy and compromise. This contrast highlights different approaches to moral decision-making. Adam's commitment to truth reflects a logical ethical framework, while human characters prioritize emotional and social considerations. The novel also explores the nature of free will. Adam appears capable of independent thought, yet his actions are influenced by programming and design. Similarly, human beings are influenced by genetics, culture, education, and personal experiences. By comparing human and artificial decision-making, McEwan challenges simplistic notions of autonomy. Both humans and machines operate within systems of influence and constraint. The novel ultimately suggests that free will is not an absolute condition but a complex interplay of rationality, emotion, and circumstance.

CONCLUSION

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* offers a profound exploration of artificial consciousness and human identity. Through the character of Adam, the novel challenges traditional

distinctions between humans and machines, intelligence and consciousness, logic and emotion.

Adam's intellectual capabilities and moral consistency question assumptions about human superiority, while the flaws and contradictions of human characters reveal the complexity of human existence. From a posthumanist perspective, the novel demonstrates that humanity is not a fixed category but an evolving construct shaped by technological development.

The novel ultimately suggests that consciousness, morality, and identity cannot be easily defined. As artificial intelligence continues to advance, the questions raised by McEwan become increasingly significant.

By examining the relationship between artificial consciousness and human identity, *Machines Like Me* contributes meaningfully to contemporary discussions about technology, ethics, and the future of humanity.

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