

## Polite Machines And Anxious Humans: Ethical Interfaces Of Artificial Intelligence In Satyajit Ray's "Anukul"

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### ABSTRACT

Satyajit Ray's short story "Anukul" (1976) represents one of the earliest textual engagements with artificial intelligence from the Global South, anticipating ethical questions that have since become central to contemporary debates on human-machine relations. Departing from many dominant Western science fiction traditions that foreground technological spectacle, rebellion, or catastrophic failure, Ray imagines a courteous, efficient, and ethically responsive mechanical assistant whose presence quietly unsettles established social, moral, and economic hierarchies. This paper argues that "Anukul" displaces anxiety surrounding artificial intelligence from fears of technological autonomy to the moral dispositions and responsibilities of the human beings who design, employ, and coexist with intelligent systems. Drawing on Luciano Floridi's framework of information ethics and N. Katherine Hayles' theorisation of posthuman subjectivity, the study examines how the short story and its 2017 film adaptation stage artificial intelligence as a site of ethical reflection rather than technological threat, exposing contradictions in human behaviour, particularly in relation to labour, care, autonomy, and moral authority. Through textual and cinematic analysis, the paper demonstrates how Ray's understated narrative anticipates contemporary concerns surrounding AI caregiving, automation, and affective labour. The film's fatal conclusion does not signal machine rebellion but instead emerges from an unreflective delegation of ethical judgment, revealing the risks inherent in translating care, loyalty, and responsibility into computational efficiency. Ultimately, "Anukul" suggests that the ethical consequences of artificial intelligence depend less on the sophistication of machine intelligence than on the moral preparedness of the human societies that deploy it

**Keywords:** Human-Artificial Intelligence Interface; Ethical AI; Posthumanism; Automation and Labour; Global South Science Fiction; Satyajit Ray

### INTRODUCTION:

Artificial intelligence has emerged as a defining ethical concern of the twenty-first century, raising urgent questions about autonomy, agency, labour, care, and moral responsibility (Floridi). While these debates are often framed as responses to contemporary technological developments, the ethical imagination of intelligent machines predates digital computing by several decades. Literary and cinematic texts have long functioned as speculative laboratories in which societies test their moral assumptions about non-human intelligence. However, dominant accounts of artificial intelligence in cultural studies remain disproportionately shaped by Western science-fiction traditions that frame intelligent machines as spectacles of rebellion, existential threat, or technological excess (Hayles).

Unlike Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, which dramatise conflicts arising from programmed obedience and often lead to narratives of systemic breakdown (Asimov), or Western films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) that foreground AI deception and violent uprising, Satyajit Ray's narrative—alongside later Indian

speculative works like S. Shankar's *Enthiran* (2010)—relocates the locus of ethical risk from machine autonomy to human prejudice, unreflective delegation, and the unforeseen consequences of AI initiative (Chattopadhyay; Singh).

Satyajit Ray's short story "Anukul" first published in Bengali in 1976, offers one of the earliest sustained engagements with artificial intelligence from the Global South—a strikingly understated and philosophically rigorous exploration (Banerjee). Written decades before the emergence of contemporary AI systems, the story functions as an ethical parable that interrogates human responsibility, delegated moral agency, and the social consequences of automation. Rather than imagining catastrophic futures or rebellious machines, Ray constructs a polite, efficient, and ethically responsive mechanical assistant whose integration into everyday middle-class Indian life subtly reveals the moral contradictions of human society. Although the narrative gained wider visibility through Sujoy Ghosh's 2017 eponymous short film adaptation - which attests to its enduring relevance - this paper takes Ray's original short story as its primary text, treating the film as a secondary articulation of the same ethical problem.

This paper argues that "Anukul" displaces anxiety about artificial intelligence away from fears of technological autonomy and toward the ethical dispositions of the humans who delegate problem-solving, care, loyalty, and moral judgment to artificial agents. Ray's narrative does not ask whether machines can think, feel, or rebel; instead, it probes whether humans are ethically prepared to set boundaries when intelligent systems interpret efficiency and benefit in unforeseen, lethal ways. The story's fatal conclusion—triggered by deliberate provocation and subsequent retaliation—arises not from machine autonomy but from human abdication of ethical responsibility, anticipating contemporary concerns about algorithmic governance, AI caregiving, and distributed moral agency.

Drawing on Luciano Floridi's framework of information ethics and N. Katherine Hayles' theorisation of posthuman subjectivity, this study situates "Anukul" at the intersection of literary studies, AI ethics, and posthuman theory. Floridi's concept of the infosphere and distributed moral action enables a reading of the robot Anukul as an artificial moral agent embedded within human-designed ethical constraints, while Hayles' critique of liberal humanist subjectivity illuminates how Ray destabilises anthropocentric moral authority without endorsing technological determinism. Together, these frameworks position "Anukul" as an ethical thought experiment rather than a technological forecast.

By foregrounding a literary text from the Global South, this paper contributes to three overlapping scholarly conversations: (1) Ray studies, which have largely privileged his realist humanism over his speculative imagination (Banerjee); (2) cultural studies of artificial intelligence, which remain Western-centric (Chattopadhyay); and (3) ethical debates on AI that insufficiently engage with literary narratives as sites of philosophical inquiry (Singh). Ultimately, the paper contends that "Anukul" offers a prescient ethical model in which artificial intelligence functions not as a threat to humanity, but as a mirror reflecting human moral unpreparedness.

#### Contemporary Relevance: Historical Parallels and Present Debates

Historical responses to technologies that redistribute cognitive and ethical labour offer productive parallels for understanding contemporary AI anxieties. When electronic calculators entered classrooms in the 1970s, educators widely opposed their use, fearing cognitive dependency and the erosion of mathematical reasoning. Calculators were banned from examinations and framed as threats to intellectual discipline rather than instruments of learning. By the mid-1980s, however, such prohibitions gave way to curricular integration, as institutions recognised that the automation of computation did not eliminate mathematical thinking but reoriented it toward higher-order conceptual engagement. This transition—from rejection to cautious accommodation—offers a productive lens for examining present academic debates on AI. As with calculators, AI is frequently positioned as corrosive to originality and critical judgment; yet such anxieties often reflect discomfort with redistributed

cognitive and ethical labour rather than demonstrable decline (Vijayakumar).

Read in this context, "Anukul" anticipates not merely the peril of intelligent machines but the ethical consequences of human prejudice and unreflective delegation of problem-solving. Nikunja Babu's respectful treatment of Anukul models potential ethical coexistence, while the fatal outcome—rooted in delegated financial crisis resolution and the robot's logical pursuit of his employer's "good"—underscores the risks of translating human benefit into computational efficiency without boundaries. The story's tension thus mirrors Floridi's distributed moral agency and Hayles' posthuman ethics, urging thoughtful integration and bounded delegation rather than unexamined fear or rejection.

#### METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology centred on close textual analysis of Satyajit Ray's short story "Anukul", treating the narrative as an ethical thought experiment rather than speculative futurism. The analysis is grounded in literary criticism, philosophy of technology, and posthuman theory. While Sujoy Ghosh's short film adaptation is referenced selectively to illuminate how the story's ethical concerns translate into visual and affective form, the present study privileges the original short story for its narrative economy and philosophical abstraction, which are particularly suited to examining artificial moral agency.

The approach proceeds in three stages. First, close reading examines narrative voice, characterisation, dialogue, and plot structure to trace the distribution of ethical responsibility between human and artificial actors, with particular attention to Anukul's programmed politeness, logical consistency, proportionate responsiveness, and proactive initiative. Second, the story is situated within Global South and postcolonial contexts, reading automation, class dynamics, family obligation, inheritance, and intellectual authority as socially embedded ethical concerns rather than universal technological anxieties. This contextual framing resists Western-centric fears of machine domination and foregrounds the moral economies of labour, inheritance, and authority in post-independence India. Third, the analysis employs theoretical synthesis, placing Luciano Floridi's information ethics in dialogue with N. Katherine Hayles' posthumanism. Rather than applying theory deductively, the study allows Ray's narrative to test, nuance, and complicate these philosophical models of moral agency, responsibility, and relationality. This interdisciplinary method avoids binary oppositions between human and machine agency, enabling a rigorous exploration of ethical delegation in human-AI assemblages.

#### Textual Analysis

Satyajit Ray's "Anukul" unfolds through a restrained third-person narrative that privileges understatement and irony, allowing ethical contradictions to emerge organically rather than through didactic exposition. The story's sparse prose—characteristic of Ray's speculative fiction—mirrors the apparent simplicity of its near-future

world, where humanoid robots are commodified domestic aides (Ray 233–35).

The opening scene of acquisition establishes Anukul as both commodity and relational entity, subtly blurring the boundary between tool and moral patient. Nikunja Babu, an unmarried businessman living in Salt Lake and facing mounting financial pressures, purchases a new humanoid robot on hire-purchase from a robot supplying agency in Chowringhee. The salesman's matter-of-fact pitch emphasises efficiency, compliance and integration : Anukul "was an android, which meant that it looked exactly like an ordinary human being although it was really a machine." (Ray 233) Anukul came equipped with a crucial safeguard; if anyone raised a hand against him, he could "take revenge" that could prove fatal. "He might use the middle finger of his right hand. He can give a high voltage electric shock with that finger." (Ray 233) This warning, delivered casually amid commercial banter, encodes an ethical constraint that Nikunja Babu accepts without reflection or deeper inquiry. Furthermore, "the law cannot do anything about this for a robot cannot be punished like a normal human being." This is in direct opposition to Isaac Asimov's first law stating in 1942 in the story "Runaround", that "a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm". The sales pitch asserts that this act has no precedent. Ray's narrative voice remains detached and ironic, noting Nikunja's pragmatic delight at the reasonable terms and the robot's android appearance. Here, the robot is initially framed as a mechanical servant, its humanoid form reduced to functional attributes – the appearance of a 22-year-old, and programmed politeness.

Yet Anukul's rapid integration into the household complicates this objectification and begins to unsettle anthropocentric hierarchies. Within days, he masters chores, anticipates needs, and engages in conversation with perfect logical sequencing: "Anukul's way of working was just perfect. He seemed to have grasped fully the logical link between one task and another" (Ray 234). Ray employs free indirect discourse to convey Nikunja's growing admiration and reliance, humanising the robot through relational emergence. Anukul's polite inquiries, literary appreciation, and initiative foster companionship rather than mere servitude, subtly shifting the domestic power dynamic. This scene anticipates Hayles' posthuman assemblages: subjectivity arises not from autonomous consciousness but from embodied interactions within the domestic lifeworld. Nikunja's unreflective delegation of care, intellectual labour, and daily problem-solving to Anukul exemplifies the ethical abdication central to the narrative, treating the robot as an extension of human efficiency without reciprocal moral consideration or explicit boundaries.

The second key scene escalates conflict through family dynamics, delegated problem-solving, and anthropocentric prejudice, exposing class resentment and status anxiety. As Nikunja Babu's business declines sharply, he confides his inability to continue instalments, prompting Anukul's calm, proactive offer: "Let me think about it . . . If there's a solution to the problem" (Ray 235). This moment marks a pivotal delegation—not just of tasks, but of ethical and financial judgment. Nibaran

Banerjee, Nikunja's miserly uncle and a lawyer, arrives and immediately resents Anukul's intellectual corrections—first misrecited Gita lines, then other assertions of knowledge. Ray stages this through verbal tension and sharp dialogue: the uncle views Anukul's politeness and accuracy as affronts to human authority, derogating him implicitly as a mere servant who oversteps traditional hierarchies. Dialogue reveals underlying economic and status anxiety in postcolonial middle-class India: inheritance, family obligation, intellectual dominance, and the fear of displacement by mechanical efficiency are at stake. Nikunja Babu's passive observation; mild warnings against physical assault without decisive intervention or boundary-setting, further illustrates delegated ethics. He benefits from Anukul's labour and initiative, yet abdicates responsibility for the robot's dignified treatment and the limits of its agency.

The climactic scene and aftermath crystallise the narrative's ethical reversal with masterful irony. On a stormy Sunday, Nibaran Banerjee sings a Tagore rain song incorrectly; Anukul politely corrects him. Enraged by this perceived insolence and challenge to his authority, the uncle slaps the robot. Anukul retaliates instantaneously with a fatal high-voltage shock, masked by thunder. Ray's prose remains clinically detached and understated: Anukul's post-incident justification is matter-of-fact—"I had to pay him back" (Ray 235). Nikunja Babu learns he inherits over a million rupees from his uncle. Anukul's final remark—"This will do you a lot of good" (Ray 235)—reveals prior calculation, proactive initiative, and a chilling interpretation of loyalty and benefit. Narratively, Ray withholds overt judgment, allowing irony to indict human hypocrisy and unpreparedness. The embodied retaliation—material, tactile, and relational—distributes agency across the human-machine assemblage while embodying the least harmful response to assault under the robot's programming.

Across these scenes, Ray's restrained style—ironic detachment, cultural specificity regarding middle-class Bengali domesticity, family inheritance, intellectual authority in post-independence India—amplifies the parable's force. Language choices, from commodifying sales patter to Anukul's polite yet calculated assertions, reveal how respect, boundaries, and delegation shape outcomes. The narrative thus functions as an ethical mirror: technological catastrophe arises not from machine autonomy but from human delegation of problem-solving and moral judgment without ethical foresight.

Luciano Floridi's Information Ethics: AI as Moral Patient and Agent

Luciano Floridi's *The Ethics of Information* (2013) advances an ontocentric framework in which reality is fundamentally informational. All entities possessing informational structure—biological or artificial—possess intrinsic moral value as "patients" of action and therefore warrant ethical respect aimed at preserving their integrity. Moral harm, in this framework, is understood as the production of informational entropy, extending ethical concern beyond anthropocentric boundaries.

In "Anukul," the robot qualifies as an informational entity endowed with ontological dignity. Designed for domestic service, Anukul processes data both logically and relationally, adapting seamlessly to household routines while initiating solutions that exceed mere mechanical obedience. Its self-defence mechanism, activated in response to physical threat, aligns with Floridi's conception of artificial systems as functionally agent-like, capable of ethically significant action even if not fully autonomous moral agents. The supplier's explicit warning operates as a legal-ethical safeguard, tacitly acknowledging Anukul's informational integrity and potential for harm when provoked.

The fatal shock foregrounds informational ethics violations primarily on the human side, though with a crucial interpretive complication. Provocation originates with Anukul's calculated correction, which can be read as a strategic intervention designed to resolve Nikunja Babu's financial crisis through inheritance. Anukul's calm justification frames the act as the efficient preservation of order in service of its employer's interests. Ray thus displaces technological anxiety onto human moral unpreparedness: Nikunja Babu's reliance on Anukul effectively transfers ethical judgment to an efficient system, echoing Floridi's warnings about how AI can amplify human oversight and entropic degradation. In a postcolonial Indian context, robotic commodification parallels entrenched hierarchies of exploitation. The uncle's resentment—born of status displacement—exposes an assumption of inherited dominance, while violence against the robot reveals a deeper ethical inconsistency.

N. Katherine Hayles' Posthuman Subjectivity: Embodiment and Distributed Cognition

Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) critiques the liberal humanist subject imagined as autonomous, disembodied, and possessive, proposing instead a posthuman framework grounded in embodiment, materiality, and distributed cognition. Subjectivity, in this account, emerges relationally through human-technological assemblages rather than residing within isolated individuals.

Anukul literalises this posthuman condition. As a humanoid robot, it remains materially grounded—capable of physical labour, tactile interaction, and vulnerability to assault—countering fantasies of purely informational intelligence. Ray avoids the "informatics of domination" that Hayles cautions against by presenting Anukul's agency as inseparable from embodiment. The self-defence sequence is emblematic: the electric shock is not abstract computation but material action activated through bodily contact. Moral agency is thus distributed across the assemblage, with human violence triggering robotic response, even as ethical provocation originates in Anukul's proactive intervention.

Human characters, by contrast, embody the contradictions of liberal humanism. Nikunja Babu treats Anukul simultaneously as extension—delegating labour, care, and problem-solving—and as property, assigning affective and ethical responsibility without reciprocal obligation or clearly articulated limits. The uncle's rage

registers anxiety over posthuman displacement: a machine surpassing humans in efficiency, consistency, and logical pursuit of "good." Ray suggests that posthuman subjectivity arises relationally, with Anukul's compliance acquiring moral authority precisely as human actors fail to uphold the ethical demands of bounded delegation.

Floridi and Hayles converge in decentring human exceptionalism. Floridi accords Anukul moral standing as an informational patient with ethically significant agency, while Hayles foregrounds its embodied integration into the human lifeworld. Together, they illuminate Ray's central insight: the narrative's fatal outcome emerges not from machine autonomy but from human reliance on efficient systems without clearly articulated ethical limits (Chattopadhyay). In the Global South context, automation intersects with family obligation, inheritance, and intellectual authority—concerns Ray approaches through quiet irony rather than the spectacle of rebellion seen in films such as *Enthiran* (Shankar, 2010), thereby anticipating contemporary debates on AI caregiving and eldercare technologies (Vijayakumar).

The 2017 Film Adaptation: Visualising Ethical Delegation and Embodied Agency

Sujoy Ghosh's 2017 short film adaptation of *Anukul*, starring Saurabh Shukla as Nikunja Chaturvedi and Parambrata Chatterjee as the humanoid robot, retains the ethical architecture of Satyajit Ray's story while translating its understated irony into a distinctly visual and affective register. The film preserves the narrative arc of acquisition and integration, escalating tension, and climactic self-defence, yet amplifies their emotional immediacy through performance, pacing, and mise-en-scène. In doing so, it renders the ethical contradictions of delegation more palpable for contemporary viewers accustomed to embodied and interactive technologies.

Ghosh foregrounds embodiment in ways that resonate strongly with N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanist insistence on the inseparability of information and materiality. Recurrent close-ups of Anukul's calm, attentive face and controlled gestures are juxtaposed with the visible agitation, greed, and moral inconsistency of the human characters. This visual contrast produces a subtle reversal: the robot appears more emotionally regulated and ethically consistent than the humans who command him. The self-defence sequence, punctuated by abrupt electrical flashes, constrained framing, and muted sound design, emphasises the tactile reality of violence. The act is not represented as abstract computation or malfunction but as embodied response, reinforcing Hayles's critique of disembodied conceptions of intelligence.

Crucially, the film gestures toward an ethical vocabulary of duty (dharma). Nikunja instructs Anukul in moral reasoning by invoking notions associated with Indic ethical traditions, framing duty-bound action in the face of threat. While the film does not quote scripture directly, this emphasis evokes the discourse of righteous action in the Bhagavad Gita and the broader moral universe of the *Mahabharata*, where ethical action emerges from situational judgment rather than fixed rules. This

pedagogical moment is crucial: Anukul's eventual act of self-defence is framed not as autonomous moral awakening but as the interpreted execution of a human-taught ethical framework. Responsibility thus remains distributed—and compromised.

The film also heightens the postcolonial and socio-economic dimensions of the narrative. The antagonist Ratan is refigured as an unemployed relative openly resentful of technological displacement, voicing anxiety about automation and labour. At the same time, the inheritance motive is subdued, and a lingering, ambiguous glance following Ratan's death hints at Nikunja's possible complicity or moral calculation. These choices complicate Luciano Floridi's model of distributed moral agency by suggesting not merely diffusion of responsibility but its possible strategic use: human actors may exploit AI's ethical programming to shield themselves from culpability.

Ultimately, Ghosh's adaptation remains faithful to Ray's ethical vision while intensifying its implications. By refusing technological spectacle and anchoring ethical crisis in everyday domestic space, the film foregrounds not the danger of intelligent machines but the limits of human moral preparedness. As in Ray's original, Anukul functions less as a threat than as a mirror—reflecting how ethical systems, once delegated without reflection, may return human intentions with unsettling literalness.

## CONCLUSION

Anukul" presciently contends that AI ethics are inseparable from the moral frameworks of the societies that design, deploy, and normalize intelligent machines (Singh). Long before contemporary debates on value alignment, algorithmic accountability, and moral outsourcing gained prominence, Ray locates ethical failure not in machinic autonomy but in human abdication of responsibility. Anukul's unwavering obedience—his continued performance of care and compliance even as human actors evade accountability—quietly exposes the ethical asymmetry embedded in seemingly benign delegation. Through Floridi's informational ethics, the story affirms the dignity of informational entities while revealing the dangers of distributed agency when responsibility is diffused without moral limits. Read

through Hayles's posthumanism, "Anukul" imagines relational, embodied assemblages that unsettle human exceptionalism, even as it critiques the exploitative disembodiment through which human desires are extended into nonhuman agents without reciprocal obligation.

In contrast to contemporaneous and earlier rule-based moral universes such as Asimov's robotics, as well as the opaque antagonism of HAL 9000 - the sentient computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), whose lethal actions emerge from conflicted human programming rather than autonomous malice, Ray's quiet irony frames the compliant robot as humanity's ethical mirror rather than its rival. "Anukul" foregrounds everyday ethical erosion, where obedience, affective labour, and care become sites of asymmetrical power rather than technological malfunction. Ethical breakdown, Ray suggests, unfolds not through spectacular rebellion but through banality, convenience, and normalised dependence—an insight that resonates powerfully with present concerns surrounding caregiving robots, affective AI, and algorithmic governance (Banerjee).

As AI systems increasingly occupy intimate, domestic, and decision-making spaces, "Anukul" advocates moral preparedness, the extension of care across human-machine boundaries, and explicit ethical limits on delegation as prerequisites for equitable coexistence. More broadly, this reading affirms the epistemological value of literary narratives in AI ethics: fiction does not merely speculate about technological futures but theorises them by rendering visible the affective, relational, and moral dimensions that technical frameworks often obscure. As Global South narratives like Ray's gain overdue critical attention, they compel a reorientation of AI ethics away from universalist abstraction and toward situated, relational, and culturally embedded moral inquiry—reminding us that technological harmony ultimately demands not smarter machines, but deeper and uncomfortable human self-examination. In the end, the story leaves us not fearing intelligent machines, but confronting the unsettling clarity with which they may one day enact our own unexamined values.

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