

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE CHALLENGES BEFORE SOCIETY,
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE: RETHINKING THE HUMAN IN THE AGE OF
THE MACHINE

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Abstract

The unprecedented rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly generative language models, has unsettled long-held assumptions about human uniqueness in the domains of society, language, and literature. This paper examines three interlinked challenges: the social disruptions produced by algorithmic mediation of labour, information, and identity; the linguistic consequences of machine-generated discourse, including the flattening of stylistic diversity and the marginalisation of low-resource languages; and the literary-critical crisis provoked by machine authorship, which reopens debates on originality, authorial intention, and aesthetic value. Drawing upon Turing's foundational speculation, poststructuralist theories of authorship, postcolonial critiques of linguistic hegemony, and recent scholarship on large language models, the paper argues that AI does not so much replace the human as compel a redefinition of it. The humanities, far from being rendered obsolete, become indispensable sites for interrogating the ethical, cultural, and epistemological stakes of the algorithmic age. The paper concludes by proposing a framework of critical AI literacy for literature classrooms in India and beyond.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, generative language models, authorship, linguistic diversity, posthumanism, digital humanities, critical AI literacy

1. Introduction: The Question Turing Left Us

When Alan Turing asked in 1950, “Can machines think?”, he deliberately replaced the metaphysical puzzle with a linguistic test: could a machine converse so convincingly that a human interlocutor could not distinguish it from another human (Turing 433)? It is profoundly significant that the founding thought-experiment of Artificial Intelligence was staged not in mathematics or mechanics but in language—the very medium of society and literature. Seventy-five years later, Turing's imitation game is no longer hypothetical. Large language models (LLMs) draft legal briefs, translate poetry, tutor students, and produce prose

that routinely passes for human writing. The question before the humanities is therefore no longer whether machines can imitate human language, but what happens to society, to language itself, and to literature when they do.

This paper approaches that question from the standpoint of literary and cultural studies. It contends that the challenges posed by AI are neither purely technological nor purely economic; they are fundamentally hermeneutic. They concern meaning: who makes it, who owns it, and who is authorised to interpret it. The discussion proceeds in three movements—society, language, literature—before turning to pedagogical implications for the Indian classroom.

2. AI and Society: The Algorithmic Mediation of Human Life

The first and most visible set of challenges is social. AI systems now mediate employment, credit, policing, healthcare, and public discourse. Three concerns deserve emphasis.

First, the disruption of labour. Automation anxieties are as old as the Luddites, but generative AI is historically novel in targeting cognitive and creative labour—translation, journalism, copywriting, coding, teaching—work long assumed to be safely “human.” For a country like India, whose service economy rests substantially on language-intensive knowledge work, the stakes are acute. The challenge is not merely unemployment but the devaluation of linguistic labour: when a machine drafts acceptable prose in seconds, the social prestige and economic worth of the trained writer, translator, and teacher are called into question.

Second, the crisis of epistemic trust. Because LLMs generate fluent text without any internal commitment to truth, they can produce confident misinformation at industrial scale. Emily Bender and her co-authors famously describe such systems as “stochastic parrots”—mechanisms for “haphazardly stitching together sequences of linguistic forms” without reference to meaning (Bender et al. 616–17). A society saturated with plausible but ungrounded text faces a corrosion of the shared factual ground on which democratic deliberation depends. Deepfakes, synthetic news, and algorithmically amplified propaganda extend this crisis from the verbal to the visual.

Third, the problem of bias and exclusion. AI systems learn from historical data, and history is not innocent. Models trained predominantly on English-language internet text inherit and amplify the biases of that corpus—racial, gendered, casteist, and colonial. Algorithmic decision-making thus risks laundering old prejudices through the apparent neutrality of mathematics. Luciano Floridi has argued that we now inhabit an “infosphere” in

which the boundary between online and offline life has dissolved (Floridi 40–43); in such a world, biased code is not a technical glitch but a social institution.

3. AI and Language: Homogenisation, Hegemony, and the Fate of Linguistic Diversity

If the social challenges of AI are visible, the linguistic ones are subtler and perhaps more profound, for they operate upon the very medium of thought.

The first linguistic challenge is stylistic homogenisation. LLMs are, by design, engines of statistical probability: they predict the most likely next word. Their default register is therefore a smooth, standardised, mid-Atlantic English—grammatically impeccable, rhetorically safe, and stylistically anonymous. As students, journalists, and institutions increasingly draft through such systems, there is a real danger that the glorious unevenness of human style—dialect, idiolect, error, experiment—will be sanded down into a global monotone. Language lives by deviation; a technology that statistically penalises deviation is, in the deepest sense, anti-literary.

The second challenge is the deepening of linguistic hegemony. The overwhelming majority of training data for major models is in English and a handful of other dominant languages. Low-resource languages—including many of India's scheduled and tribal languages—are either poorly represented or absent altogether. David Crystal warned that roughly half of the world's languages face extinction within a century (Crystal 19); AI threatens to accelerate this attrition by making the digital world ever more rewarding for dominant languages and ever more inhospitable for marginal ones. NgũgĩwaThiong'o's celebrated argument that language is the “carrier of culture” and that linguistic domination is the subtlest form of colonisation (Ngũgĩ 13–16) acquires renewed urgency: the new empire may be neither British nor American, but algorithmic.

Yet the picture is not wholly dark. The same technologies imperilling linguistic diversity can be turned to its defence. Machine translation, speech recognition, and corpus-building tools can document endangered languages, generate pedagogical materials, and connect dispersed speech communities. Indigenous NLP initiatives in India—building models for Marathi, Kannada, Santali, and other languages—demonstrate that the direction of the technology is not fated but chosen. The challenge before linguists and policymakers is to ensure that AI becomes an instrument of linguistic ecology rather than linguistic enclosure.

A third, philosophical challenge concerns what machine fluency reveals—or conceals—about language itself. Noam Chomsky and his co-authors have insisted that LLMs, however impressive, “differ profoundly from how humans reason and use language,” since they learn from brute statistical exposure rather than from the innate, rule-governed creativity that permits a child to acquire grammar from meagre data (Chomsky et al.). Whether or not

one accepts the Chomskyan framework, the debate itself is salutary: the machine has become a mirror in which linguistics must re-examine its deepest assumptions about competence, creativity, and meaning.

4. AI and Literature: Authorship, Originality, and the Aesthetic

The literary challenges of AI condense all the foregoing anxieties into a single, ancient question: what is an author? When a machine composes a sonnet, a short story, or a novel-length narrative, literary criticism confronts a limit case of its own founding categories.

Poststructuralist theory, ironically, prepared us for this moment half a century in advance. Roland Barthes declared the death of the author in 1967, insisting that a text is “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” and that meaning is produced in the reader, not deposited by an originating genius (Barthes 146). Michel Foucault, in turn, reduced the author to a “function”—a historically variable principle for classifying and controlling discourse (Foucault 108). On a strictly Barthesian account, an LLM is the perfect author-less text-machine: a literal tissue of quotations, a recombination of the archive without an originating consciousness. AI thus does not refute literary theory; it embarrassingly fulfils it.

And yet the humanist unease persists, and it deserves articulation rather than dismissal. Literature has traditionally been valued not merely as an arrangement of words but as testimony—the trace of a lived, embodied, mortal experience. A poem about grief written by a bereaved human and a stylistically identical poem generated by a model differ not in their syntax but in their ontology: one is expression, the other simulation. Walter Benjamin's meditation on mechanical reproduction is instructive here. Benjamin argued that reproduction withers the “aura” of the artwork—its unique existence in time and place (Benjamin 221)—yet he also saw that new technologies create new arts and new publics. Generative AI may similarly dissolve one aura while producing unforeseen forms: interactive fiction, co-written texts, algorithmic experiments that are to the novel what cinema was to theatre.

N. Katherine Hayles's account of the “posthuman” offers the most productive frame. For Hayles, the posthuman is not the erasure of the human but a reconfiguration in which cognition is distributed across humans and intelligent machines (Hayles 2–3). On this view, the future of literature is neither purely human nor purely mechanical but cybernetic: writers using models as instruments, provocateurs, and collaborators, much as earlier poets used the constraints of the sonnet or the surrealists used automatic writing. The critical task is to develop criteria for evaluating such hybrid works—criteria attentive to intention, curation, and context rather than to a naive test of unaided origination.

Practical challenges accompany the theoretical ones. Plagiarism and academic integrity must be rethought when detection is unreliable and generation is effortless. Copyright law strains to decide whether training a model on copyrighted literature constitutes fair use or mass appropriation, and whether machine output can be owned at all. The livelihoods of working writers—screenwriters, translators, textbook authors—are directly implicated, as recent industrial actions in the creative sectors have shown. Literary studies cannot remain aloof from these material questions; the economics of authorship has always shaped the forms of literature, from patronage to print to platform.

5. The Indian Context: Multilingualism, Pedagogy, and Opportunity

India occupies a distinctive position in this global drama. It is at once a major producer of AI talent, a vast market for AI products, and a civilisation of extraordinary linguistic and literary plurality. The challenges outlined above therefore arrive with particular inflections. English-medium higher education must decide whether AI writing tools deskill or empower second-language learners. Regional-language literatures must negotiate digital ecosystems built for English. And the Indian classroom—often crowded, under-resourced, and examination-driven—must find pedagogically honest ways of integrating tools that students already use.

This paper proposes critical AI literacy as the appropriate response. Such literacy has three components. First, functional understanding: students should know, in non-technical terms, how LLMs work—that they predict tokens, that they hallucinate, that they carry bias—so that fluency is never mistaken for authority. Second, ethical reflexivity: coursework should foreground questions of consent, labour, data, and ecological cost. Third, creative and critical use: rather than banning the machine, literature classrooms can make it an object of analysis—comparing machine pastiche with canonical style, critiquing machine translations of Tukaram or Kolatkar, using generation itself to illuminate, by contrast, what human writing does. The humanities seminar, long practised in suspicious reading, is arguably the best-equipped room in the university for interrogating AI.

6. Conclusion: Redefining, Not Replacing, the Human

The challenges that Artificial Intelligence poses before society, language, and literature are real and urgent: labour displacement and epistemic pollution; stylistic homogenisation and linguistic hegemony; the destabilisation of authorship, originality, and literary value. But the deepest challenge is conceptual. For centuries, the humanities defined the human by capacities—speech, reason, narrative, art—now convincingly simulated by machines. The temptation is despair; the opportunity is redefinition. What the machine cannot

simulate is not eloquence but experience: mortality, embodiment, responsibility, the capacity to mean what one says and to be answerable for it. Literature, as the most concentrated record of that answerable life, does not lose its purpose in the age of AI; it discovers it anew. Turing's question—can machines think?—returns to us inverted and enriched: now that machines can write, we are compelled, at last, to say what it is that humans do when they write. Answering that question is the task, and the privilege, of the humanities in the twenty-first century.

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