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From Archive to Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence, Memory, and the Future of Literary Interpretation

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Ramyabrata Chakraborty[1]

[1] Associate Professor and Head, Department of English Srikishan Sarda College, Hailakandi, Assam, India

RC 0009-0002-5778-0629

Correspondence: Ramyabrata Chakraborty, ramyabrata1@gmail.com

Abstract

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has introduced a significant transformation in the ways literary texts are accessed, interpreted, classified, compared, and remembered. While earlier developments in digital humanities primarily expanded the archive and introduced computational methods into literary scholarship, generative artificial intelligence increasingly participates in the interpretive process itself. This paper examines the transition from the digital archive to the algorithmic interpretive environment and argues that artificial intelligence should be understood neither simply as a technological instrument nor as a substitute for the human reader, but as a new mediating layer between literary texts and their interpreters. Drawing upon digital humanities, posthumanism, reader-response theory, cultural memory studies, and critical algorithm studies, the paper investigates four interconnected transformations: the algorithmic expansion of the archive, the emergence of the AI-assisted reader, the redistribution of interpretive authority, and the politics of algorithmic memory. It further examines the implications of these transformations for literary studies in multilingual and postcolonial contexts, where questions of linguistic diversity, cultural representation, and archival exclusion are particularly significant. The paper argues that AI-assisted interpretation can enlarge the possibilities of literary scholarship by enabling large-scale comparison, pattern recognition, multilingual exploration, and new forms of textual inquiry. At the same time, algorithmic mediation can reproduce existing cultural hierarchies, obscure historical context, privilege dominant languages, and convert interpretive complexity into apparently authoritative summaries. The future of literary interpretation, therefore, requires neither technological rejection nor uncritical technological enthusiasm, but a critical model of human–AI collaboration grounded in contextual knowledge, interpretive plurality, transparency, and humanistic judgment.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Humanities, Literary Interpretation, Algorithmic Memory, Posthumanism, Generative AI, Literary Archive, Reader-Response

Introduction

Literary interpretation has never been independent of the technologies through which literature is produced, preserved, transmitted, and read. The manuscript, the printing press, the library, the anthology, the microfilm archive, the electronic database, and the digital repository have each altered the conditions under which literary texts become available to readers. Every transformation of the literary archive has consequently reshaped literary scholarship. The contemporary emergence of generative artificial intelligence represents another such transformation, but one of a different order. Unlike earlier technologies that primarily expanded access to texts or accelerated the retrieval of information, generative artificial intelligence can participate directly in activities traditionally associated with interpretation: summarising, comparing, contextualising, translating, classifying, questioning, and generating critical arguments.

This development raises a fundamental question: **What happens to literary interpretation when the archive itself becomes algorithmically mediated and when the reader can engage an artificial system as an apparently conversational interpretive partner?**

The question is particularly important because the humanities have historically understood interpretation as an activity involving context, ambiguity, historical consciousness, cultural situatedness, and subjective response. Literary meaning is rarely reducible to information retrieval. A poem does not become fully intelligible merely because its vocabulary has been identified; a novel cannot be adequately interpreted merely by extracting its recurring themes. Literature operates through irony, silence, contradiction, historical memory, metaphor, cultural codes, narrative form, and affect. The challenge presented by generative AI is therefore not simply whether machines can "understand" literature. The deeper issue is how algorithmic systems alter the environment in which humans construct literary meaning.

The development of digital humanities provides an important prehistory for this question. Computational literary studies have already demonstrated the possibilities of analysing large bodies of texts, identifying recurring patterns, tracing networks, visualising relationships, and investigating literary history at a scale unavailable to traditional close reading. Matthew L. Jockers's *Macroanalysis*, for example, demonstrates how computational methods can enable literary scholars to investigate large textual corpora and discover patterns across periods, genres, regions, and demographic groups. Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles argues that digital technologies have altered not merely the objects of humanistic study but the very processes through which scholars think and interpret.

Generative AI extends this transformation. The machine no longer merely helps the scholar *locate* the text; it can also produce an interpretation of it. The scholar, therefore, confronts a new interpretive situation in which the distance between the archive, the analytical tool, and the interpretive output becomes increasingly compressed.

This paper argues that the movement from archive to algorithm constitutes a significant epistemological shift in literary studies. The algorithm does not replace the literary archive. Still, it increasingly becomes a mediator of what can be retrieved from it, how it can be organised, and which meanings appear salient. The AI-assisted reader, therefore, occupies a new position between the traditional human reader and the textual archive.

The argument proceeds through four interconnected areas: the transformation of the literary archive; the emergence of the AI-assisted reader; the redistribution of interpretive authority; and the politics of algorithmic memory. The paper concludes by proposing a model of **critical human–AI interpretation**, in

which artificial intelligence can contribute to literary scholarship without being granted autonomous interpretive authority.

1. From the Literary Archive to the Digital Archive

The history of literary studies is inseparable from the history of the archive. The archive determines not only what survives but also what becomes available for scholarly attention. Material limitations, therefore, shaped traditional literary scholarship. A scholar could read only a finite number of books, consult only those libraries accessible to them, and work within the boundaries of available editions and catalogues.

Digital technologies radically altered these limitations. Digitisation enabled scholars to access enormous collections of texts, manuscripts, newspapers, catalogues, images, and other cultural artefacts. The digital archive consequently transformed the scale of literary inquiry.

Franco Moretti's concept of “distant reading” is particularly relevant to this development. Rather than restricting literary scholarship to intensive readings of a small number of canonical works, distant reading proposed that literary history could also be studied through large-scale patterns, quantitative relations, and systemic structures. Moretti's approach did not simply replace close reading; rather, it expanded the methodological possibilities of literary scholarship.

Jockers similarly demonstrates the value of computational approaches for analysing large textual corpora. Digital databases enable the examination of patterns that may remain invisible when texts are studied individually. Computational methods can identify recurring vocabulary, stylistic similarities, thematic clusters, character networks, and historical changes across thousands of works.

Yet the digital archive remains fundamentally different from the algorithmic archive.

A digital archive stores and retrieves. An algorithmic environment increasingly selects, ranks, summarises, recommends, and generates.

This distinction is crucial. In a conventional digital database, the researcher generally understands that a search result is a retrieval from a collection. In an AI-mediated environment, however, the result may appear as a coherent piece of language rather than as a list of sources. The interface, therefore, conceals much of the distance between data retrieval and interpretation.

The user may ask a question about a literary text and receive a fluent answer without seeing which sources informed the answer, which interpretations were excluded, or how uncertainty was handled. The archive has thus become increasingly opaque.

This opacity creates a new problem for literary scholarship. If the archive is not merely a collection of texts but a system that actively mediates what becomes visible, then literary criticism must begin to examine the politics of mediation itself.

The archive has never been neutral. Canon formation, colonial institutions, publishing industries, university curricula, library catalogues, and linguistic hierarchies have historically influenced which texts are preserved and studied. Algorithmic systems inherit aspects of these histories because they are trained, configured, evaluated, and deployed within existing cultural environments.

The transition from archive to algorithm, therefore, does not eliminate older exclusions. It can reproduce them in new forms.

2. The Algorithm as Interpretive Mediator

Artificial intelligence is often described as a tool. Such a description is useful but incomplete. A conventional tool performs a relatively identifiable operation under its user's direction. Generative AI

systems, by contrast, can produce linguistic responses that resemble acts of reasoning, explanation, and interpretation.

This creates a new category of mediation.

A literary scholar may ask an AI system to identify the representation of colonialism in a novel, compare two characters, explain a metaphor, contextualise a poem, or generate possible theoretical approaches. The system's response can then become part of the scholar's interpretive process.

The AI system is not necessarily the final interpreter. It nevertheless becomes an **interpretive mediator**.

This distinction allows us to move beyond two simplistic positions. The first position claims that AI will replace literary critics. The second insists that AI is merely a neutral instrument incapable of affecting interpretation. Both positions underestimate the complexity of mediation.

N. Katherine Hayles's account of technological cognition provides a useful theoretical foundation here. Human beings do not think in isolation from media; rather, technologies participate in the environments through which cognition takes place. Digital media, therefore, affect not simply what humans read but how they process, organise, and understand information.

AI intensifies this condition because the machine can respond linguistically to the reader. The interface is no longer simply a search box. It becomes conversational.

The literary scholar consequently enters a new kind of hermeneutic relationship.

The traditional model can be represented as:

Text → Reader → Interpretation

The digital-humanities model expands this into:

Text → Digital Archive → Computational Method → Reader → Interpretation

The generative-AI model potentially becomes:

Text/Archive → Algorithmic Mediation → AI Output → Human Reader → Interpretation

The difference is significant. The AI output may function as a preliminary interpretation before the scholar even begins close reading.

This can be intellectually productive. AI systems can suggest patterns, identify connections across large corpora, generate comparative questions, assist multilingual research, and expose scholars to interpretations that they may not initially have considered.

However, the danger is equally clear: the preliminary interpretation may become the final interpretation.

If a scholar accepts an AI-generated reading without verification, interpretation becomes a form of intellectual delegation. The researcher moves from critical engagement to answer consumption.

The central principle of responsible AI-assisted literary studies must therefore be **augmentation without abdication**.

AI may extend the scholar's interpretive capacity, but it should not replace interpretive responsibility.

3. The AI-Assisted Reader

Reader-response criticism challenged the idea that meaning exists independently of the reader. Thinkers such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish demonstrated that reading is an active process in which textual possibilities are realised through acts of interpretation.

Generative AI introduces an unusual complication into this theoretical tradition, as the reader may now engage with a non-human linguistic system that produces interpretations.

The question, therefore, becomes: **Who or what is the AI-assisted reader?**

The answer cannot simply be "the machine." An AI system does not approach a literary work in precisely the same manner as a human reader. It lacks human biography, embodied experience, cultural memory, and mortality. Nor should fluency be confused with consciousness.

Emily M. Bender and her colleagues have warned against attributing human-like understanding to large language models. Their influential discussion of "stochastic parrots" emphasises the dangers of mistaking statistical linguistic performance for genuine understanding. Such a warning is particularly relevant to literary studies, where linguistic fluency can easily be mistaken for interpretive depth.

Yet the opposite mistake would be to conclude that AI systems have no significance for interpretation merely because they do not read like humans.

The important issue is not whether AI possesses human consciousness. It is whether AI-generated language changes what human readers do.

Suppose a scholar asks an AI system to interpret a poem. The resulting response may provide a conventional thematic reading. The scholar may reject it, accept part of it, or use it to develop a counterargument. In each case, the AI output has entered the hermeneutic process.

The AI has therefore become a participant in the **interpretive environment**, even if it is not a human interpreter.

This distinction suggests the concept of the **AI-assisted reader**. The AI-assisted reader is not a machine that reads on behalf of humans. It is a human reader whose interpretive practices have been modified by interaction with algorithmic systems.

This reader possesses at least four characteristics.

First, the AI-assisted reader can rapidly interrogate large amounts of textual material.

Second, the reader can generate multiple preliminary interpretations before undertaking close analysis.

Third, the reader can use AI to translate or compare texts across languages, thereby potentially widening the range of accessible literary material.

Fourth, the reader must develop a heightened awareness of algorithmic bias, hallucination, omission, and fabricated authority.

The last characteristic is particularly important. Traditional literary competence is no longer sufficient in an AI-mediated environment. The contemporary literary scholar increasingly requires **algorithmic literacy** alongside textual literacy.

4. Interpretation and the Redistribution of Authority

Literary interpretation has historically involved questions of authority.

Who has the right to interpret a text?

Is authorial intention decisive?

Does the reader construct meaning?

Does historical context determine interpretation?

Can the critic's interpretation be judged as more persuasive than another's?

Generative AI introduces another participant into this debate: the algorithmic system.

AI-generated literary criticism often possesses a distinctive rhetorical characteristic: **confidence without accountable authorship**.

A human critic signs an article and can be located within a disciplinary tradition. The reader can examine the critic's sources, intellectual history, institutional position, and theoretical commitments. An AI response, by contrast, can produce a highly polished interpretation without possessing a conventional scholarly identity.

This creates an epistemological paradox.

The language may appear authoritative while the authority remains unclear.

The problem is not unique to AI. Digital platforms have long demonstrated how interface design can create perceptions of credibility. Johanna Drucker's work on graphical knowledge production is relevant here because it reminds us that forms of presentation do not merely communicate knowledge; they participate in producing perceptions of knowledge.

The conversational interface of generative AI can similarly create an impression of authority.

A fluent paragraph can look like scholarship.

A confident explanation can look like expertise.

A citation can look like evidence.

But these equivalences cannot be assumed.

The literary scholar must therefore distinguish between **linguistic coherence** and **scholarly validity**.

This distinction is especially important because AI systems can fabricate citations, misattribute quotations, oversimplify theoretical concepts, or generate interpretations unsupported by the primary text.

The solution, however, is not to abandon AI. Instead, literary studies should develop a model in which AI-generated interpretation is treated as a **provisional critical object**.

An AI interpretation should be questioned in the same way that a human critic is questioned:

What evidence supports this claim?

What textual details have been ignored?

What theoretical assumptions are being made?

What historical context is absent?

Which alternative interpretations are possible?

What ideological assumptions shape the reading?

Such questions transform AI from an authority into an object of criticism.

This is the most productive role AI can play in literary studies.

5. Algorithmic Memory and the Politics of the Archive

The most significant implications of AI for literary studies may concern memory.

Literature is a form of cultural memory. Texts preserve experiences, myths, conflicts, identities, languages, beliefs, and historical consciousness. Archives make these memories retrievable.

But algorithmic systems do not simply preserve memory. They reorganise it.

What happens when a reader asks an AI system to explain a literary tradition?

The answer depends upon the data and structures through which that system has been developed.

This introduces the concept of **algorithmic memory**: the technologically mediated reconstruction of cultural knowledge through computational systems.

Algorithmic memory is selective. It is shaped by availability, digitisation, language, metadata, corpus composition, platform design, and computational priorities.

Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI* is useful in this context because it challenges the idea that AI is immaterial or autonomous. AI systems depend upon resources, labour, data, infrastructures, and political-economic structures. The apparent abstraction of artificial intelligence, therefore, conceals a material and social foundation.

Literary scholarship must make a similar move.

Instead of asking only, "What does AI say about this novel?" scholars should also ask:

Why does AI say this?

What textual and cultural materials make this answer possible?

Which materials are absent?

Whose memory is being represented?

Whose memory is being compressed or erased?

These questions become especially urgent in postcolonial and multilingual contexts.

6. The Postcolonial Problem of Algorithmic Representation

The postcolonial literary archive has always been marked by unequal representation. Colonial institutions controlled educational systems, publishing networks, libraries, museums, and mechanisms of knowledge production. Consequently, some literary traditions achieved global visibility while others remained peripheral.

Digital technology has the potential to challenge these hierarchies. Digitisation can make regional literatures accessible beyond their original geographical locations. Online archives can preserve texts that might otherwise remain inaccessible. Computational methods can enable scholars to investigate previously neglected literary traditions.

Yet technological accessibility does not automatically produce epistemic equality.

Safiya Umoja Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* demonstrates how algorithmic systems can reproduce and reinforce social hierarchies. Although Noble focuses particularly on search engines, her broader insight is relevant to literary studies: algorithms operate within cultural systems rather than outside them.

If dominant languages and cultures are disproportionately represented in digital datasets, algorithmic systems may reproduce that imbalance.

This issue is particularly significant for Indian literary studies.

India possesses a multilingual literary ecosystem encompassing English and numerous Indian languages. Much literary scholarship, however, remains divided by linguistic boundaries. Generative AI offers an opportunity to bridge these boundaries through translation, comparison, summarisation, and cross-linguistic retrieval.

But this possibility should not be confused with automatic inclusivity.

A translated text is not necessarily equivalent to its original. Cultural concepts may resist direct translation. Local idioms, oral traditions, caste histories, tribal epistemologies, religious symbolism, and region-specific cultural references can be flattened when processed through dominant linguistic frameworks.

The danger is therefore not simply that AI may "make mistakes."

The greater danger is **epistemic homogenisation**.

A multilingual literary culture may be transformed into a monolingual computational representation.

For postcolonial literary studies, this creates a paradox. AI can potentially democratise access while simultaneously standardising difference.

The task of the humanistic scholar is to hold these two possibilities together.

7. AI and the Crisis of Context

Literary interpretation depends upon context.

Consider a poem that refers to a historical event. A purely linguistic analysis may identify the words and themes but fail to recognise the political significance of the reference. Similarly, a mythological symbol may have radically different meanings across regional or historical traditions.

AI systems can identify patterns, but pattern recognition is not equivalent to contextual understanding.

This distinction becomes especially important when interpreting postcolonial literature.

A novel may contain English words but encode indigenous concepts that cannot be adequately explained through an English-language conceptual framework. A literary work may employ irony that becomes visible only when the reader understands the historical circumstances in which it was written.

The problem can be described as **contextual compression**.

AI systems often compress complex literary and historical materials into concise explanations. Such compression is useful for orientation but dangerous when mistaken for interpretation.

The scholar should therefore use AI-generated summaries as maps rather than destinations.

A map simplifies a territory. That simplification can be useful precisely because it allows orientation. But a map cannot substitute for the territory itself.

Similarly, AI-generated interpretation should lead the scholar back to the primary text.

The principle should be:

AI output → verification → close reading → contextualisation → critical interpretation.

Not:

AI output → acceptance → publication.

8. From Close Reading to Hybrid Reading

The emergence of AI does not make close reading obsolete.

On the contrary, it may make close reading more important.

Computational methods are particularly effective at scale. They can identify patterns across thousands of texts. Humanistic interpretation is particularly effective at complexity. It can examine ambiguity, contradiction, metaphor, historical specificity, and cultural significance.

The future of literary studies, therefore, lies not in choosing between computational analysis and close reading but in combining them.

This may be called **hybrid reading**.

Hybrid reading combines:

Close reading – detailed analysis of individual passages;

Distant reading – identification of patterns across large corpora;

AI-assisted inquiry – generation of questions, comparisons, classifications, and preliminary interpretations;

Contextual criticism – historical, cultural, political, and linguistic analysis;

Humanistic judgment – evaluation of evidence, significance, ambiguity, and ethical implications.

Such a model changes the role of the literary scholar.

The scholar becomes less of a solitary interpreter and more of an orchestrator of interpretive processes.

This does not reduce the importance of scholarship. It increases the responsibility attached to it.

When information becomes abundant, judgment becomes more important.

9. Toward a Critical Model of Human–AI Literary Interpretation

A responsible model of AI-assisted literary criticism should be based upon five principles.

9.1 Human Interpretive Primacy

The human scholar should retain final responsibility for interpretation.

AI may propose an interpretation, but it should not determine the conclusion.

9.2 Textual Verification

Every substantial AI-generated claim about a literary text should be checked against the primary source.

This is especially important for quotations, page references, historical claims, and biographical information.

9.3 Contextual Responsibility

AI-generated interpretations should be supplemented by historical, cultural, political, and linguistic knowledge.

The scholar must ask what the algorithmic interpretation leaves outside its frame.

9.4 Interpretive Plurality

AI should be used to generate multiple possible readings rather than a single definitive answer.

For example, a scholar might ask an AI system to provide Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, ecocritical, psychoanalytic, and reader-response readings of a passage. The value lies not in selecting one automatically but in comparing the assumptions and textual evidence behind each.

9.5 Transparency

Researchers should disclose substantial AI assistance where journal policies require or encourage such disclosure.

Transparency is especially important when AI has contributed to research design, data analysis, translation, or textual production.

UNESCO's guidance on generative AI similarly emphasises human agency, ethical validation, inclusion, cultural and linguistic diversity, and responsible use in education and research.

These principles offer a way to integrate AI into literary studies without allowing technological convenience to replace scholarly accountability.

10. Artificial Intelligence as a New Kind of Literary Mirror

The metaphor of the machine as a "reader" may ultimately be less useful than the metaphor of the machine as a **mirror**.

AI systems reflect the linguistic and cultural materials upon which they have been developed. They can reveal patterns that humans may overlook, but they can also reproduce assumptions embedded in their training environments.

The mirror, therefore, has two functions.

It can enlarge vision.

It can also distort vision.

This duality is particularly important for literary studies because literature itself has always functioned as a mirror of culture while simultaneously challenging cultural assumptions.

AI adds another reflective layer:

Culture → Literature → Reader → AI → Reader

The literary text is now interpreted through a technological system that has itself absorbed vast quantities of cultural language.

The process is circular.

Human culture produces literature.

Literature becomes part of digital datasets.

Digital datasets contribute to AI models.

AI models generate interpretations.

Humans then encounter those interpretations and may incorporate them into future cultural production.

The boundary between cultural memory and machine-generated language consequently becomes increasingly porous.

This is why AI should not be treated merely as an external instrument introduced into literary studies. It is becoming part of the cultural environment within which literary interpretation occurs.

11. The Future of Literary Studies

The future of literary studies in the age of AI will not be determined simply by whether artificial intelligence becomes more powerful. It will depend upon how scholars respond to that power.

One possible future is technological substitution. Literary education could become dominated by automated summaries, generated essays, instant interpretations, and algorithmic reading guides. In such a model, literature risks becoming content to be processed rather than an experience to be interpreted.

A second possibility is technological rejection. Literary scholars may refuse AI altogether and attempt to preserve a purely humanistic model of reading. Such resistance may protect certain values, but it would also prevent scholars from engaging critically with one of the defining technologies of contemporary culture.

A third and more productive possibility is **critical integration**.

Critical integration does not ask whether AI is good or bad. It asks what kinds of intellectual practices AI enables, what kinds it threatens, and what forms of humanistic judgment must remain indispensable.

In this model, AI can perform tasks such as scaling, speed, comparison, classification, translation, and exploratory analysis. Human scholars remain responsible for contextualisation, interpretation, ethical judgment, theoretical argument, and intellectual originality.

The distinction is not absolute. Human beings themselves use tools, databases, theories, and collaborative networks. The difference is that generative AI can participate in the production of language that resembles scholarship.

This makes critical literacy indispensable.

The literary scholar of the future may therefore require three forms of literacy:

Textual literacy – the ability to read and interpret literature closely;

Digital literacy – the ability to navigate digital archives and computational methods;

Algorithmic literacy – the ability to understand how AI systems mediate, structure, and potentially distort knowledge.

Together, these literacies can create a renewed humanities capable of engaging technological change without surrendering its critical foundations.

Conclusion

The shift from archive to algorithm represents one of the most significant transformations currently underway in literary studies. Digital technologies first expanded the scale of the literary archive; generative artificial intelligence is now increasingly involved in interpreting its contents.

This transformation should neither be celebrated as the arrival of an artificial literary critic nor dismissed as a technologically sophisticated form of automated text processing. AI is more productively understood as an **interpretive mediator** that alters the conditions under which human readers encounter literature.

Its possibilities are substantial. AI-assisted literary studies can facilitate large-scale textual comparison, multilingual exploration, corpus analysis, pattern recognition, translation, archival discovery, and the generation of alternative interpretive questions. Such possibilities can be particularly valuable for expanding the scope of literary scholarship beyond established canons.

Its dangers are equally substantial. Algorithmic systems may reproduce linguistic and cultural hierarchies, obscure sources, compress historical context, generate fabricated information, privilege dominant interpretive frameworks, and create an illusion of authority through linguistic fluency. In postcolonial and multilingual contexts, these risks become especially significant because the digital archive itself is unevenly constituted.

The central issue, therefore, is not whether AI can replace the literary critic.

It is whether literary critics can remain critically responsible when interpretation itself becomes increasingly algorithmically mediated.

The answer requires a renewed commitment to humanistic principles: contextual reading, textual evidence, interpretive plurality, cultural sensitivity, linguistic diversity, ethical responsibility, and intellectual scepticism. Artificial intelligence can assist literary scholarship most productively when it is treated neither as an oracle nor as an enemy, but as a powerful and fallible participant in a broader interpretive ecology.

The future of literary interpretation may consequently be neither purely human nor purely algorithmic. It may be **collaborative, hybrid, and critically mediated**.

The decisive question will not be whether the machine can read literature.

It will be whether the human reader remains capable of reading the machine.

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