



The Journey, Not the Destination: AI Co-authorship and a New Literary Aesthetic in Contemporary Fiction

Miss. Nabanita Roy

Independent Research Scholar, Old Police Line, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India

Received: 13.07.2026; Accepted: 18.07.2026; Available online: 31.07.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

AI is no longer merely a medium through which difficult tasks get done within minutes. When both Human and AI collaborate, something new comes into existence – the core meaning of a literary work spread beyond the text itself and converts into the story of "How" it was made. The paper studies this change with the help of real examples and the already existing Literary Theory.

This paper does a close reading of Robin Sloan's novel Sourdough (2017), which actually used AI while writing and composing and he didn't hide it. He basically used AI to generate music for the audiobook version of his novel. To understand what significance it holds for literature, the paper has used ideas from three eminent literary thinkers – Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and N. Katherine Hayles. While studying these the paper came across something marvellous – AI is actually not eliminating the author. Instead, it is bringing the author back or resurrecting him to a new role – not as a creator who creates but as the one who chooses, guides as well as explains.

The paper identifies this new form of articulating Literature as "Aesthetic of Transparency" – which means that when an author is co-authoring with an AI, the author must be transparent and clear about how the work came into form. This marks a huge difference. It is a genuinely new arena in 21st century literature – and what it asks of us is reading, judging, and understanding literature from now on.

Keywords: AI co-authorship, literary aesthetics, paratext, aesthetic of transparency, Robin Sloan, digital humanities, postcolonialism, authorship

1. Introduction:

It was the year 2018 when novelist Robin Sloan came out in the public and openly talked about using an AI while writing his novel Sourdough, which was trained on science fiction texts. Strangely it was not at all a role switch or replacement of the creativity that the human brings in, but a quite productive negotiation. It was a dynamic process of human intentions and algorithmic suggestion that Sloan experienced while co-authoring with an AI. Robin Sloan talked about how satisfying the process was, when a machine after understanding his intentions designed phrases that naturally he would have never thought about alone. What was most striking, though, was not the process of writing but the narration of that writing – the painstaking process of public documentation of this method.

The inseparable narrative of the Text and the story is what this paper is significantly focused on. The AI systems that generate like ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, and Gemini in recent times did not only enter the world of writing with a nuance but genuinely affected the very phenomenology of the writing process— may it be its co-authorship, intentionality, aesthetic value, or the reader's perspective.

The Literature that is written by a human and an AI does not look different but its meaning feels different. The manner in which meaning is created has changed. This paper talks about that change and tries to explain it through the expanded paratext— meaning the author's disclosure of the process becomes a part of the work itself. Taking ideas from Roland Barthes, Genette, and Hayles, this paper argues that this produces something unique— an Aesthetic of Transparency— where the creative process, its truthfulness, its ethics, and the negotiation between the human and the machine, everything becomes a part of the literary work itself.

This is not a small or merely academic change. It has far reached, real consequences— for how we define authorship, for how we judge literature, for how we teach literature in classrooms, and for what the face of literature will look like in the future.

2. Theoretical Framework:

2.1 Roland Barthes and the Death of the Author

It was in 1967 that Roland Barthes wrote his famous essay talking about how the author no more matters. Now the reader is the priority. It simply meant that the meaning of a text is no more determined by who wrote it or why. It is decided by the one who reads it. The author, for Barthes, is essentially and surely dead the moment the text is born.

So according to Barthes the author is dead. Ironically, when AI steps in, the author is brought back to life— in a new form. Now the meaning of author changes. He is no more the one who creates everything from scratch. Instead, he takes the console in his hand— just as we see in video games how the console instructs the game's characters to do things— in the same manner the author guides the AI, by prompting, selecting, describing, and then tells the world how the complete work was actually curated.

2.2 Foucault and the Author-Function

Michel Foucault in his essay 'What is an Author?' (1969) took a different stance than Barthes. He didn't ask whether the author is dead or not! He asked— 'What does the name of an author do in a society?' He called this the author-function— the author's name classifies the text, authorizes it, helps us trust it or maybe question it.

Now when human and AI co-write, whose name should go on the cover? Who should get the credit? Who is responsible for it? Whether it is the human or the AI? Or maybe the company that built it! Rather the millions of books the AI was trained with!! Who knows?! That confusion gets addressed and makes the author feel the need to come out and explain how the work was actually made.

2.3 Genette's Paratext: From Doorway to House

When we read Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987) we see Genette writing about everything that surrounds a book— the title, the preface, the author's note, the dedication, interviews given by the author— all in one place. Genette calls this whole the paratext and says it is the doorway of the text. It is not the book itself, but its entrance.

However, when AI co-authors, this doorway or entrance transforms into an entire house. The explanation that the author provides of how AI was involved is no longer just a small note at the start of a book. It becomes a priority. Without it the work will feel incomplete – also dishonest. Now the frame is the painting itself.

2.4 Hayles and Distributed Cognition

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012), says a very fascinating thing. She says thinking is not happening only inside your brain. In this digital era, thinking is happening across your tools, your devices, and your environment. You are now thinking with your phone, your computer, and your notebook. As we know, writing has always been like this. Earlier it was the pen, the typewriter, the printing press – all of these are just extended thinking beyond your brain. But now AI takes this much further. Now if you write with an AI, you cannot always say whether you thought of that phrase or did the machine suggest it to you? That uncertainty is not dangerous. It is actually beautifully productive. And do you know how? Because sometimes the machine shows you something about yourself you never thought you knew. That is why sometimes writing with AI becomes a journey of self realisation.

3. Close Reading I: Robin Sloan and the Machine-Learning Manuscript:

Robin Sloan has documented his practice of working with a custom machine-learning model – a writing collaborator that provides this paper's first site of close reading. What he did was train it on a corpus of science fiction texts and then used its suggestions as a prompt while he was composing. Robin Sloan did not only use the AI and maintain his silence on it. He actually documented everything – how he trained the AI, what it suggested, what he accepted and also what he rejected. This is itself the perfect embodiment of everything this paper is arguing – how the process of making becomes the most interesting story rather than what is made.

One thing to be noted here is that Sloan never ordered the AI to write for him. Rather he took the AI as someone who is well versed on a certain topic and can give valuable inputs while he documents his work. According to him, if he had done so, it would have been a dishonest task on his part and also proved him to be lazy. The result of such a procedure was completely dependent on how well he could converse with the AI on the topic and how well he could churn his brain on it. Robin Sloan has drawn a very beautiful comparison to describe his work. He talks about two jazz musicians playing together. One of them has absorbed every piece of music ever recorded in history – symphonied it into his very being. Therefore, sometimes he plays something totally unexpected – maybe a note, a turn – which the other musician would have never discovered alone. This jazz improvisation would never have been possible if they had not worked together. It is not that the human is writing and the AI is just adding up. It is something totally different – born because the two specialists conversed. And this newly born aesthetic is exactly what this paper is arguing for.

4. Close Reading II: The Sourdough Audiobook and AI-Generated Sound:

This is the most interesting part – once you know it you are sure to be amazed. Robin Sloan was writing a novel called *Sourdough*, in which he wrote about an imaginary mysterious group of people called the Mazg. These people sang – and their songs needed to be heard in real life when the audiobook of *Sourdough* was to be released. But a problem arose – the songs of these fictional people needed to become a reality. They were

just stories until then. No real people and no real songs of that sort existed. They had to be made.

But Robin Sloan is a genius. He did something out of the box. He went for an AI which was trained on folk music to generate these songs. The AI soon generated nearly 100 songs. Sloan minutely listened to every single one. He then chose the best of them and sat with the audiobook producer to beautifully place them in the final recording. How magical and amazing – fictional people, fictional songs, but made reality with an Artificial Intelligence! Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) talked about something very important. He said when someone reproduces a work mechanically – suppose printing a thousand copies of a painting – its aura is lost. That uniqueness of being the one and only, the originality, made by only one person in one moment of time – that is what is special and magical.

However, now AI is also doing something similar – generating endlessly, statistically, without any single moment of creation. So, the question arises – is AI destroying the aura completely? This paper says – NO. Something more magical is happening instead. When Sloan listened to the 100 songs generated by an AI and then manually selected the best among them, that act of selection created a completely new aura. It is not the aura of creation – but of curation. And here lies the difference. The magic moved from Making to Selecting. The aura was not destroyed. It simply took a new form. It relocated.

5. Discussion: Toward an Aesthetic of Transparency:

The close readings developed above converge on a single underlying fact – AI co-authorship gives birth to a new aesthetic paradigm, where the journey becomes more aesthetically significant rather than the destination. This paper terms this paradigm the 'Aesthetic of Transparency.' It has several significant features:

First, it is dependent on the paratext. One cannot fully enjoy the work without knowing the process of its making. The disclosure of the author is no more optional – it is essential.

Second, the authorial identity is relocated from expression to curation. The author is no longer merely the creator but the curator – the one who selects, shapes, and finalises. Think of it this way – the author is now also acting like a father figure, not just a mother. The Mother gives birth. The Father shapes, guides, and presents to the world.

Third, a new ethics of readership is also produced. The reader can no longer engage only with the text. They must know how it was produced. If not, they are reading it incompletely.

Fourth, something new is born – 'productive strangeness.' That slight strangeness you come across when you read AI assisted writing. That unusual texture, that slightly unfamiliar quality – it is not at all a flaw. It is actually a new literary feature. It is like that new colour which you didn't have in your palette while you sat to draw, but which suddenly and beautifully came from nowhere and adorned your painting.

6. Implications for Literary Studies:

From now on the Aesthetic of Transparency changes how we study literature. Traditional close reading looks at the text just as a finished, closed object. However, AI co-authored literature demands something more. It says we must also read the process of how a work was made – not only the text itself.

Also — the way we judge literature changes now. Earlier we asked only one question — is the text good or not? But now a second question carries equal weight — was the author honest about how it was made? Honesty and transparency are no more just moral qualities. They are now aesthetic qualities too. A beautifully written AI co-authored text that hides its AI involvement is now — in some sense — an incomplete and even dishonest work of art.

It is for Indian scholars specifically that this question goes even deeper. Most AI systems are trained predominantly on Western texts. So, when AI is helping write literature — whose values are being spread? Whose way of seeing this world is being reproduced? Is AI quietly becoming a new kind of colonial force — if not politically, then aesthetically and literarily? These are urgent questions that Indian and postcolonial scholars must ask and surely answer.

7. Conclusion:

The motive of this paper was to show that AI co-authorship is not only a new form of writing — it is a new way of delivering meaning. Through Robin Sloan's practice and the Sourdough audiobook, and through Barthes, Foucault, Genette, and Hayles — the paper has shown four crucial things:

First — aesthetic value moved from the Text to the Process of Making. Second — the paratext moved from a doorway to the house itself. Third — the author is no more a creator but a curator. Fourth — productive strangeness is now a new literary feature.

These are not just small changes but fundamental shifts in how literature works from now on. They will only grow stronger as AI becomes more powerful and more deeply involved in our lives. Understanding them must be considered one of the most urgent tasks of literary studies in today's world.

And to conclude — yes, the machine does hold the pen. But the human hand is always there to guide it. The human voice accounts for it. They cannot be done away with.

References:

1. Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 142-148.
2. Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217-252.
3. Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 113-138.
4. Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
5. Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
6. Sloan, Robin. *Sourdough*. MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.
7. Sloan, Robin. "Writing With the Machine." robinsloan.com, 2018, www.robinsloan.com/notes/writing-with-the-machine.
8. Sloan, Robin. "Making the Music of the Mazg." mcdbooks.com, 2017, www.mcdbooks.com/features/sourdough-music.