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The Limits of Artificial Intelligence in Reading Poetry: A Case Study of Warsn Shire's selected poems

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the shortcomings of artificial intelligence (AI) for reading poetry, taking Warsn Shire's forceful poem "Home" as its central illustration. The past few years have seen literary critique more and more draw upon AI-facilitated devices for unearthing patterns, motifs, and stylistic elements between and across works. These devices are convenient in many respects: they are able to browse through enormous amounts of easily accessed information at speed, spot recurring words or groups of words, and categorize tone or form. Yet, poetry is rich in emotion, culture, and individual experience so that it is difficult for AI to completely grasp. Shire's "Home" is a poem that discusses the traumatic experience of refugees forced out of their homeland because of war and threat. Phrases like "no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" are rich in emotional and metaphorical content. A human reader feels the pain, fear, and urgency in these words, while an AI might only detect metaphor or categorize the topic as "migration" or "conflict." Through a comparison of human and AI responses to Shire's poem, this paper shows that AI can support analysis, but not replace the emotional and cultural sensitivity required for understanding poetry. The study argues that while AI is a useful tool, it lacks the human ability to empathize, to connect with trauma, and to interpret poetry as a lived experience. Therefore, literary interpretation—especially of emotionally charged texts—must remain a deeply human practice.

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حدود الذكاء الاصطناعي في قراءة الشعر: دراسة لقصائد مختارة لوارسان شاير

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية حدود الذكاء الاصطناعي في تحليل الشعر، من خلال دراسة قصيدة "الوطن" للشاعرة ورسن شاير. في السنوات الأخيرة، أصبح استخدام أدوات الذكاء الاصطناعي شائعاً في الدراسات الأدبية، حيث تساعد في تحديد الأنماط والموضوعات والسمات الأسلوبية داخل النصوص. وتعد هذه الأدوات مفيدة من نواحٍ عديدة، مثل قدرتها على معالجة كميات كبيرة من البيانات بسرعة، والتعرف على التكرار، وتحديد النغمة أو البنية. ومع ذلك، فإن الشعر غالباً ما يحتوي على معانٍ عاطفية عميقة وسياقات ثقافية وتجارب شخصية يصعب على الذكاء الاصطناعي فهمها بشكل كامل. قصيدة "الوطن" تتناول تجارب اللاجئين المؤلمة الذين يُجبرون على مغادرة أوطانهم بسبب الحروب والخطر. مثلاً، في السطر: "لا أحد يترك وطنه إلا إذا كان الوطن فم قرشٍ مفترس"، تعبر الشاعرة عن الألم والخوف والاضطرار من خلال استعارة مؤثرة. القارئ البشري يستطيع أن يشعر بهذه المعاناة، بينما قد يكتفي الذكاء الاصطناعي بتصنيف النص ضمن "الهجرة" أو "الصراع"، دون أن يدرك المشاعر المعقدة وراء الكلمات. من خلال مقارنة بين استجابة القارئ البشري واستجابة الذكاء الاصطناعي للقصيدة، توضح هذه الدراسة أن الذكاء الاصطناعي يمكن أن يكون أداة مساعدة، لكنه لا يستطيع أن يحل محل الحس الإنساني اللازم لفهم الشعر. لذلك، تبقى قراءة الأدب، خاصة النصوص العاطفية، مهمة إنسانية بالدرجة الأولى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، ورسون شاير، البيت، الشعر

1. Introduction:

Poetry has been always known from the very beginning as a complex form of writing due to its usage of complicated metaphors, imagination and poetic language. Warsan Shire on the other hand is a British-Somali poet who is well-known contemporary female activist besides her poetic talent. She depicts throughout her poetry the misery of herself and her people in a poetic way. She reflects several themes like exile, memory and resistance through several poems and the most resonate one is "Home". This poem is a case study to show the limits of AI whether it is able to grasp the cultural dimension and interpret it as well as to show its ability to recollect the ideas from several sources to create a map for better analysis.

Artificial intelligence has witnessed a quick development in the last two decades of this century. It starts to integrate in all the aspects of life and literary analysis is one of them of course. Literature in general is divided into two main sections which are either prose or poetry however analyzing poetry is more challenging than prose due to its complicated structure and its usage of symbolic and metaphorical language. Poetry has been always known and understood as the most human work because It is a kind of creation and emotion move from the heart or the mind to construct a piece of poetry. Yet, even this most difficult form of human writing has been integrated by technological advancement especially in the 21st century. At first AI (Artificial Intelligence) has been confined only to statistical matters or calculations in general but it is then developed to produce and write literary texts and also helps researchers analyzing their selected literary works. Artificial intelligence is also divided into several levels so each one has its capacity. For example the basic ChatGpt can analyze and suggest some ideas for the writer however the upgraded version like GPT4 are much higher in terms of its ability to analyze or even produce original poems so they can be like human generated ones (Liu & Lin, 2023).

The integration of AI in literary analysis is challenging and it is difficult to reach an accurate interpretation. Specifically, poetry is considered a complex genre as it is mentioned earlier so as AI depends mainly on its database that it is existed on the network, it fails to explain or interpret poetry in a sufficient way. The reason is that poetry has

limitless layers so as AI depends only on the database that it has, so it is possible to fail to find the real meaning of a certain poem. More importantly, it is difficult also to AI to reach the ultimate idea as it faces a kind of difficulty to grasp the importance of cultural dimensions that gives poetry meaning and emotional dimension. (Boyd, 2018).

AI can help the students or the researchers who are interest in poetry to create a historical map of poetry so they can uncover literary patterns across vast historical periods and cultural contexts. The traditional reading of literary criticism allows researchers to read poetry from one lens or two as a maximum to save time and work. However, with the quick advancement of AI, it can read and analyze thousands of poems with many theoretical frameworks depending on the datasets that it has so it allows it to interpret and criticize. Another benefit of AI is its capability of making comparative studies between poets from different cultural backgrounds. It can set the common themes, metaphors and ideas that link certain poets depending on its database (Unsworth, 2016).

1.1. Literature Review:

Artificial intelligence has advanced extremely in the last two decades so it starts to integrate with literary analysis. Franco Moretti has developed a theoretical framework in 2013 entitled as "distant reading". This approach helps to analyze textual forms and uncover structural and thematic patterns. This approach has advocated and encourages the researchers to explore genre detection, authorship, attribution and sentiment analysis across diverse literary traditions (Underwood, 2019). The advancements in artificial intelligence have simplified the mechanism of writing. For instance, the case of stylemetry, where the authorial signatures and stylistic changers are applied. There are also sentiment analysis algorithms which, at the moment, detect emotional registers in poetic texts but have not succeeded in the interpretation of irony or the interpretation of multifaceted metaphorical meaning (Liu 2020). An example of another acclaimed AI is ArapoemBERT which is designed to scrutinize Arabic poetry and extract the dominant meter and rhyme, as well as the thematic clusters in large volumes. These resources have assisted in the simplification of cultural and identical dimension interpretation. In the case of English, AI has produced resources to conduct thematic analysis and mapping. Such attempts indicate the desire

of AI to broaden the field of literary studies and, as such, offer new angles that are not available from traditional literary analysis. There is, however, an epistemological concern as to how such methods contribute toward meaning making. (Tian et al. 2023).

It is agreed by Fish (1980) and Guillary (2010) that even though AI is more advanced in uncovering structure and lexical regularities, it still cannot replace the dimension of human subjectivity and the affective side of interpretation. Similarly, with respect to the datafiction of literature, Drucker (2014) asks the readers to pay attention to the interpretive, affective and performative dimensions of the text. In the same way, McGann also warns to the AI readings risks that literature will be reduced to measurable units of course all the richness of ambiguity and indeterminacy of the poetic meaning will be lost. Therefore, some scholars suggest for hybrid approaches that combine computational insights with humanistic interpretations. Liu (2020) states that AI can be used as an argumentative tool that provides patterns and correlations so scholars can interpret within broader cultural and theoretical frameworks. Hence, it is not a matter whether AI will replace the human subjectivity but it is the way that it is used to help for a better analysis and it should be used as minor tool not a basic one.

1.2. Warsan Shire's Poetry as a Case Study:

Warsan Shire (1983) is a contemporary Somali-British poet and the first Young Poet Laureate of London. Her poetry engages with themes of exile, trauma, memory, and feminist resistance. She draws on her Somali heritage and diasporic identity, weaving personal and collective experiences into lyrical forms that resonate globally. Her collections *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and *The Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022) explore migration, womanhood, and displacement. Through her transcultural position, Shire presents her community's struggles in English, ensuring that her voice reaches international audiences while maintaining a deep connection to Somali identity and collective memory (Santesso, 2021).

Her poem *Home* is regarded as one of the key texts detailing the experience of a refugee. It opens with the mesmerizing line: "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." This metaphor

captures the dread, desperation, and brutality associated with displacement. The poem provides haunting images of burning cities, broken families, and perilous journeys, and transmutes the experience of a refugee into personal testimony and also a political act. Human readers experience these lines as urgent and deeply empathic, whereas artificial intelligence is likely to box the poem under “migration,” “war,” and “conflict” without attending to its emotional nuances. This reveals the challenges that arise from trying to do trauma poetry using computational techniques. (El-Abbadi, 2020)

Aside from the poem *Home*, Shire is also the author of *For Women Who Are Difficult to Love*, a poem which presents proof of her strength in pitting together individual intimacy and broader issues. In this, she makes room for muted, 'difficult to love' women, and questions cultural and social traps set against women. Similarly, other poems such as *Ugly* and *The House* deploy intense but fragmented images of memory and identity, interweaving the personal with the transnational discourses of colonialism, gendered oppression, and exile. These comprise Shire's poet-persona status as someone who blends the political and the personal in ways that resist being categorized according to thematics (Gurnah, 2017).

Therefore, Shire's poetry is one specific instance of looking at the boundary conditions of AI as cultural criticism. In which Shire uses metaphor, cultural reference, and affective subtlety, AI's specificity is that it looks for patterns (durable themes, indeed, but not necessarily restricted to) but pinpoints those patterns with the avowed, thus does not engage with the affective and cultural axes that come into meaning within the poetics we call as poetry. The juxtaposition of Shire's work readings with other AI-generated readings gives us both thought frames about the boundaries and potentialities of machine-solicited critique. Ultimately, we produce a case study which posits that poetry (exile, displacement, and identity poetry) is a deeply human mode of expression that requires empathy, cultural literacy, and interpretive richness (Boyd, 2018; Tian et al., 2023).

1.3. Human Intelligence and Literary Interpretation:

Human intelligence interprets literature through multidimensional processes that involve cognitive reasoning, affective engagement, and

socio-cultural awareness. A human reader not only decodes words and rules of grammar, but they also understand tone, irony, metaphor, and intertextuality in ways that artificial systems might struggle with immensely. The richness of human reading lies in our ability to leverage prior knowledge, embodied experiences, and socio-cultural frameworks. For alternative, when a reader engages with Warsan Shire's *Home*, the reader understands the landscape of historical and political realities surrounding forced migration, as AI would simply see a machine-level implementation of a "conflict" or "displacement" category. Thus human interpretation is not a mechanical cycle, it is relational and contingent upon empathy and cultural codes (Fish, 1980) .

In a concerted effort to help systemize literary theory, every literary theorist would likely argue that interpretation relies on human subjectivity. For instance, reader-response criticism argues that meaning is produced within the polysemous interaction between text and reader, and does not exist objectively within the text itself. The perspective raises imagination, affect, and cultural identification to the forefront of the reading process. Drucker (2014) argues that literature in such forms, "should not be understood as a set of quantifiable data points," (Drucker, 2014, pp. 9) because texts are performative and dynamic meaning-making things. Human readers recognize layers of ambiguity and indeterminacy, which enrich the reading experience, and rebuff computational reductionism. The complexity of literary works, and thus their human-centric qualitative analysis, allows the field to persist as fundamentally human, and especially reliant upon creativity and affect (Drucker, 2014).

Human interpretation also relies on intertextual sensitivity and theoretical variety. A critic is able to read a poem psychoanalytically, feministically, a postcolonially, theoretically, tribally, or in terms of trauma, depending on his or her context and purpose. This never occurs with models of AI, which are created to perform on a stable data set and specific types of algorithms. Whereas AI enables scientists to accelerate some calculations such as taking into account cultural specificity and changes in, say, particular in context and mechanisms of cultural, variable, and span of discursive/ideological structures and contexts, researches and uses AI in the same manner scholars and critics have

learned to accommodate and read their reading, to historical change, cultural context, and moral obligation. This responsive nimbleness highlights why human literary critique is always impossible to completely replace with more AI - yet it will increasingly supplement as a patterning and big textual display tool (Boyd, 2018).

1.4. Writing by Refugee and Exile in the Digital Age:

Contemporary literary studies consider refugee and exile writing as a focal point of their research because it records testimonies of displacement, trauma, and cultural loss. These poets, including Warsan Shire, Mahmoud Darwish, and Adonis, suggest the concept and poetry form as enabling personal and collective memories of exile to intersect. By doing so these texts negotiate concepts of belonging, nostalgia, and disjointed identities - of individuals who are forced to leave homelands/countries. This contrasts with conventional literature that offers poetry as a mere imagination or artwork study. Testimony combines with positionality in exile poetry to create a political act and cultural archive (El-Abbadi, 2020).

In the digital age, refugee poetry has the capacity to reach a more global audience; through online platforms and social media, the voices of Black, brown, and other marginalized communities become amplified, accessible, and visible. For example, the poetry of Warsan Shire's *Home* is shared exponentially as the social media platform passes along personal dislocation narratives towards a global conversation surrounding migration and human rights. Now, exile literature brings unique questions related to artificial intelligence. While AI can categorize a piece of refugee poetry as "migration" or "war," they fall short through the more layered meaning including the metaphors, cultural codes, and emotional registers incorporated in the poetry providing affective weight. AI has been taught to recognize patterns, but human readers portray empathy reliant upon cultural literacy, which AI fails to do (Santesso, 2021).

The subject of refugee and exile literature also articulates the need for contextual reading, which machines lack. Exile texts are imbued with intertextuality related to history, religion, folklore, and trauma that require substantial cultural knowledge for successful decoding. To highlight, Shire's image of "home as the mouth of a shark" not only

evokes danger, but also the impossibility of safety while in exile—an affective meaning lost on AI when interpreting it literally. It is widely argued that, while AI can assist in identifying shared motifs across large datasets, the affective and cultural aspects present in refugee literature necessitate interpretation by the human reader. This elucidates the need for hybrid methods where AI may assist, but not supplant, critical human interpretation (Gurnah, 2017; Boyd, 2018).

1.5. Affective Computing and Emotional Limits of AI:

Affective computing emerges as a branch of artificial intelligence that aims to detect, interpret, and simulate human emotions in digital environments. By analyzing linguistic markers, facial expressions, or physiological signals, these systems attempt to identify whether a text or interaction conveys sadness, joy, anger, or neutrality. In literary studies, affective computing is applied to detect emotional registers in poetry and prose, offering a computational perspective on how texts generate affect. However, these models largely rely on statistical associations between words and emotional categories, which limits their ability to engage with the layered and metaphorical dimensions of literature (Liu, 2020).

In poetry, affective meaning rarely resides in single words or phrases but emerges from rhythm, imagery, and cultural context. For example, Warsan Shire’s metaphor “home is the mouth of a shark” cannot be classified adequately by an algorithm that relies on word-emotion associations. Affective computing may tag “shark” as negative or “home” as positive, but it misses the emotional intensity of the metaphor, which encapsulates fear, displacement, and loss. Human readers interpret such images holistically, recognizing the interplay between metaphor and lived experience. This demonstrates that while affective computing can classify surface-level sentiment, it struggles to capture the depth of emotion in exile poetry (El-Abbadi, 2020; Santesso, 2021).

Moreover, critics warn that the application of affective computing in literature risks reducing complex emotional experiences into simplistic data categories. Drucker (2014) argues that literature functions as a performative and interpretive practice, where meaning arises in the interaction between text and reader, not in measurable units. Similarly,

Tian, Liu, and Lin (2023) point out that while AI can assist in mapping emotional tendencies across large corpora, it lacks the cultural sensitivity and empathetic engagement necessary for true literary interpretation. This limitation becomes particularly evident in trauma narratives and refugee poetry, where affect is inseparable from cultural memory and identity. For this reason, affective computing must be understood as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for human interpretation (Drucker, 2014; Tian et al., 2023).

1.6. Comparative Discussion:

The comparison between ChatGPT's interpretations and human readings of Warsan Shire's *Home* demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of artificial intelligence in literary analysis. While AI successfully identifies thematic categories such as migration, danger, and displacement, it reduces complex metaphors into generalized descriptions. Human readers, by contrast, interpret the same lines through cultural knowledge, empathy, and historical awareness, producing deeper and more nuanced meanings.

For instance, when analyzing the line "*No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark,*" ChatGPT recognizes "shark" as a symbol of danger but limits its interpretation to a categorical statement about safety and conflict. Human readers, however, perceive this metaphor as a visceral image of terror and inevitability, capturing the sense of being trapped with no escape. This difference highlights the gap between AI's descriptive classification and human affective engagement. Similarly, in the line "*You have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land,*" AI interprets the contrast as a statement of necessity, while human readers connect the imagery to real-world refugee tragedies, particularly the perilous sea crossings that continue in the Mediterranean. Human interpretation thus situates the metaphor within contemporary socio-political contexts, adding urgency and moral resonance that AI does not capture.

In addition, ChatGPT tends to treat personification and symbolic imagery literally or as functional devices. For example, in "*No one leaves home unless home is the voice in your ear saying—leave, run away from*

me now,” the AI identifies a “voice” as symbolic of pressure or compulsion. A human reader, however, perceives betrayal and estrangement, recognizing how exile transforms homeland into an aggressor that rejects its people. This interpretive sensitivity is made possible by cultural and emotional frameworks that AI cannot access. The comparative results also suggest that while AI is effective at detecting patterns of urgency, danger, and displacement across multiple lines, it lacks the capacity to appreciate paradox and contradiction. In the closing line “*I want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark*,” ChatGPT reduces the paradox to a contradiction between longing and impossibility. Human readers, by contrast, interpret it as the essence of exile: the irreconcilable tension between nostalgia and fear, between the desire to return and the impossibility of return. The discussion confirms that AI can function as a supportive tool in literary analysis by identifying recurring motifs and categorizing themes. However, it cannot replicate the cultural literacy, emotional resonance, and interpretive depth that human readers bring to poetry. The case study of *Home* demonstrates that literary interpretation, particularly of exile and trauma narratives—remains an inherently human practice, where empathy and cultural memory are essential components that no algorithm can fully reproduce.

Conclusion

This research examines the constraints of artificial intelligence regarding the interpretation of poetry by juxtaposing ChatGPT with human readers of Warsan Shire's *Home*. It found that while AI does reasonably well at recognizing surface metaphors, identifying themes such as migration, danger, and displacement, and offering a coherent descriptive reading, it fails to appreciate the depth of the affective, symbolic, and cultural layers of Shire's poetry. For example, while human readers perceive exile as an active, lived trauma that emerges through the imagery, rhythm, and paradox of the poem—and so not only as a thematic category—AI reads the lines such as “home is the mouth of a shark” primarily as symbols of danger, devoid of visceral fears, sense of inevitability, or the deeply psychological wounds of displacement. This difference demonstrates that literature, and specifically poetry intertwined with refugee experiences and cultural memory, cannot be captured or understood through algorithmic processes alone.

The comparative discussion supports the conclusion that AI tools such as ChatGPT can be used effectively as tools to support literary research; they can be used to identify signals about recurring motifs, maps of thematic patterns, and they can use text corpora at volume. They cannot provide the depth of interpretation and analysis that human critics contribute, where the insights of the reader are drawn from empathy, cultural codes, and theoretical frames. This study forwards the position of hybrid approaches where AI is used as complementary to the work of the human reader, and where the literature remains understood first as a human cultural event not underpinned by algorithmic processes.

The analysis of Warsan Shire's *Home* underscores that poetry is not only a linguistic or structural form but also an emotional and cultural act. Artificial intelligence contributes to the mechanics of analysis, but it does not reproduce the lived experiences, traumas, and hopes that refugee poetry conveys. Literary interpretation, especially of emotionally charged texts, must remain a profoundly human practice—one that values sensitivity, cultural memory, and the ability to feel as much as to analyze.

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