

**Reconfiguring Authorship and Creativity in
the Age of Artificial Intelligence: A
Posthuman Reading of Ayad
Akhtar's *McNeal***

**إعادة تشكيل التأليف والإبداع في عصر الذكاء
الاصطناعي: قراءة ما بعد إنسانية**

لمسرحية ماكنيل لأباد أختار

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Orchid Number: 0009-0007-8364-6358

**Keywords: AI, authorship, Ayad Akhtar, creativity, N. Katherine
Hayles, *McNeal*, posthumanism**

**الكلمات المفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، التأليف، إباد أختار، الإبداع، ن. كاثرين هايلز، ماكنيل،
ما بعد الإنسانية**

الملخص

مسرحية ماكنيل (2024) هي رابع مسرحية ما بعد حديثة من تأليف الكاتب الحائز على جائزة بوليتزر، أياد أختار. تستكشف المسرحية الكتابة والتأليف والإبداع، كما تقيم سلطة الكاتب ومصادقته في عصر الذكاء الاصطناعي. تستخدم هذه الدراسة التحليل النصي النقدي لدراسة كيفية إعادة تشكيل المسرحية للعلاقة بين التأليف البشري والإبداع وأنظمة التكنولوجيا، استنادًا إلى ما بعد الإنسانية عند ن. كاترين هايلز، وتحديدًا أفكارها حول الإدراك المتجسد والموزع كما وردت في كتابها "كيف أصبحنا ما بعد بشريين" (1999)، حيث أعادت تعريف الذاتية والإدراك والفاعلية ضمن التفاعلات بين الإنسان والتكنولوجيا. من خلال دراسة مشاهد محددة من المسرحية، يُظهر التحليل أن مسرحية ماكنيل تُصوّر التأليف كعملية مشتركة ومتراصة تنشأ من تفاعلات الوعي البشري والذاكرة الثقافية والذكاء الاصطناعي. على الرغم من أن الذكاء الاصطناعي يشارك في العمل الإبداعي، إلا أنه لا يُحاكي التجارب المادية والمعيشية التي تنبع من الفهم البشري. تشير النتائج إلى أن التأليف والإبداع لا ينبع من عقل مستقل تمامًا، بل هو عملية مختلطة تتأثر بالعوامل البشرية وغير البشرية.

Abstract

McNeal (2024) is the fourth meta-modern play written by the Pulitzer Prize-winning Ayad Akhtar. The play explores writing, authorship, and creativity as well as assesses the writer's authority and reliability in the era of artificial intelligence. This study uses critical textual analysis to examines how the play reconfigures the relationship among human authorship, creativity and technology systems, based on N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanism, specifically her ideas of embodied and distributed cognition as presented in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) where she redefines subjectivity, cognition, and agency within human–technology interactions. By investigating certain scenes of the play, the analysis shows that *McNeal* depicts authorship as a shared and interconnected process that arises from the interactions of human consciousness, cultural memories, and artificial intelligence. Although AI takes part in creative work, it does not imitate the physical and lived experiences that come from human understanding. The results indicate that authority and creativity don't come from a fully independent mind but is a mixed process influenced by both human and nonhuman factors.



Introduction

Creativity is commonly seen as a complicated and multi-faceted process that involves creating new and significant ideas, coming from the interplay of thinking, culture, and surroundings. Recent discussions highlight that creativity is not something permanent but an evolving process influenced by the situation, understanding, and the role of technology. (Runco, 2012) Likewise, the idea of authorship has often been linked to personal intention and uniqueness; however, this perspective has been significantly contested by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, who suggest that the author should not be viewed as the source of meaning but rather as a role within a discourse. (Boden, 2004) Expanding on these views, posthumanist theory, especially in the writings of N. Katherine Hayles, redefines authorship and creativity as shared processes that result from interactions between human and non-human elements.

Artificial intelligence has contributed to current discussions over creativity and authorship, especially in literary and cultural studies. Traditionally, creativity has been viewed as a unique human ability based on imagination, perception, and subjective experience. In liberal humanism frameworks, the author is regarded as the fundamental source of meaning, originality, and aesthetic worth. However, recent breakthroughs in AI-generated texts call into question this premise by introducing nonhuman systems capable of producing grammatically sophisticated and stylistically convincing compositions. (Runco, 2012)

Researchers like Joseph (2025) and Majumder (2025) suggest that artificial intelligence blurs the lines between being original and copying, writing by a person and work done by machines, and the roles of humans versus machines. Nevertheless, these arguments are often too broad and do not explain the deeper meanings of these changes. Instead of just taking

over human creativity, AI changes the circumstances in which creativity happens, leading to questions about how thinking, responsibility, and ownership function in environments influenced by technology.

Even though there is increasing research on artificial intelligence and literature, not much focus has been placed on how modern plays deal with post-humanist ideas about who creates art and what creativity means. This paper aims to fill that gap by providing a post-humanist interpretation of *McNeal*. By using critical textual analysis, the research looks at how the play portrays the relationship between human authors and AI. The study claims that *McNeal* changes the idea of creativity into a shared and connected process influenced by cultural, technological, and physical aspects. Additionally, it asserts that while the play challenges traditional views of authorship, it doesn't completely discard human involvement; instead, it shifts it into a wider network of interactions between humans and nonhumans.

Adopting N. Katherine Hayles' posthuman framework to analyze Ayad Akhtar's *McNeal* by emphasizing distributed cognition, embodied creativity, and the demise of liberal humanist authorship in the era of artificial intelligence, this paper argues that *McNeal* redefines creativity as a relational and constructed process shaped by cultural, technological, and ethical forces. The play critiques traditional ideas of authorship and originality while engaging with posthumanist perspectives that decenter the human subjectivity. Rather than portraying AI as a purely external threat to human creativity, the play dramatizes a more complex relationship in which technological assistance both enables and destabilizes authorship.



N. Katherine Hayles's Posthumanism

N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanist theory offers a crucial lens for reevaluating authorship, cognition, and subjectivity in technologically mediated environments. Hayles does not suggest the extinction of humanity in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Instead, she views the human as a thing made up of the dynamic interplay between biological embodiment and informational systems.

The fundamental premise of Hayles' posthumanism is that it rejects the liberal humanist subject, which has its roots in the Renaissance Humanism and Enlightenment era. It traditionally placed a high value on independence, rationality, and the disembodied mind. It is further based on the notion of a single, autonomous humanity and moral duty that is independent of physical context. Hayles believes that this method hides the fact that technology is constantly spreading, embodying, and mediating human thinking. Conversely, the posthuman subject is seen as an emerging product of the interplay between people, technology, and data connections.

Embodied cognition is one of Hayles's central ideas. She maintains that "Information... is never disembodied. It is always instantiated in a medium." (1999, p. 49) This indicates that cognition cannot be reduced to the processing of abstract data that is independent of the body. It highlights the interaction between the body, the brain, and the environment as the source of thought, perception, and creativity. Unlike purely computational models of mind, embodied cognition locates meaning in lived, sensory experience. The material specificity of embodiment, mediated by sensory perception, neural structures, and environmental interaction, gives rise to meaning and agency. Hayles's theory not only contradicted early cybernetic and computational models and scholars like Hubert Dreyfus that saw information as independent of its material instantiation, but also

simultaneously refuted liberal humanism's notion that the human mind is the sole source of thought and creativity, with the body having no direct or indirect connection to that process.

The concept of distributed cognition is another important aspect of Hayles's framework. According to her posthuman idea, all entities, including humans, computers, algorithms, and digital systems, share cognition. As a result, artificial intelligence and similar technologies are actively involved in cognitive processes rather than serving as mere human tools. This emphasizes a relational approach in which the human body and brain, technology, the environment, and other systems like language collaborate to create agency and meaning. Consequently, computers are not simply data; they are physically embodied in a real environment. For both the human and nonhuman sides, the consequences are thus spread throughout the body.

Importantly, Hayles's posthumanism is more critical than celebratory. She rejects a techno-utopian future where humans vanish into mere data, as well as the complete elimination of human morality and accountability. Instead, she promotes an embodied posthumanism that upholds human responsibility while acknowledging the considerable impact of technological systems on identity and agency. Her theory is especially helpful for literary and cultural analysis because of this ethical aspect, which is where digital and algorithmic treatments are making it more and more difficult to address issues of authorship, creativity, and meaning.

Hayles's notion of the posthuman is the main theoretical framework used in cybernetic literature for analyzing how modern writing obscures the boundaries between the self and the system, the human and the machine, creativity and replication. Her book examines technological



interconnections rather than binary oppositions like human vs machine or natural vs artificial. In her opinion, "We need to understand that the human form... may be changing radically, and thus must be re-envisioned." (p. 24) Hence, it offers a sophisticated comprehension of posthuman situations as varied, morally complex, and reconfiguring of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century, rather than fundamentally dehumanizing or freeing.

In this study, we explore how *McNeal* portrays the relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence, focusing on literary creation and authorship, using Hayles's concepts of embodied and distributed cognition as analytical instruments. No matter how well an artificial brain conveys information, it cannot grasp context, develop a critical viewpoint, or acknowledge aesthetics as a subjective experience, as demonstrated by this interaction.

Discussion

There are two story lines in *McNeal*, one concerns the declining health of the main character Jacob McNeal, while the other, and what really matters, at least for him, is winning the Nobel Prize, which is clearly and technologically reflected in the very opening off light scene, only for the blue screen of an iPhone as a set. Hayles's distributed cognition between human and technology is apparent and intentional in this scene. Instead of appearing as an external tool for typing, the keyboard starts to appear as an extension of one's ideas. The audience can hear the sound of tapping and see the cursor of an iPhone typing "who will win the Nobel Prize for Literature this year?" (Akhtar, 2024, p.3). The message is trustfully directed to GPT and not to a human, just like the protagonist who sends it, the prominent novelist Jacob McNeal. His character is drawn as "a

magnetic, cantankerous, personable” (p.3) and lonely, drunk man in his sixties who is expected to face liver failure within the next three months. He is going through tough days not only because of his disease, but also because it is October, which is the month of Noble Prize announcement. However, he shows carelessness and irresponsibility towards his health status.

Hayles’s posthumanism, which asserts that correlation between human and technology without compromising humanity itself, is consistent with Akhtar's comment on that in an interview by saying, “the fundamental conflicts in *McNeal* are not about writing per se but about being human. (Lemon, 2024) *McNeal* is the perfect epitome of posthuman character in the way he appears fragmented and more nonhuman than a human. His self sense and agency are shaped by technology. “A live DEEPFAKE OF *McNeal*... morphing... multiple faces coexisting...” (P.31) By presenting a character with a body illness that suffers from hallucination and addiction to alcohol, Akhtar is challenging the traditional view of creativity and align with Hayles’s embodied cognition, which is attributed to many interrelated components, where the mind is only one of them.

Once the light is on, the second scene starts in the clinic where *McNeal* is running his regular test, and the one and only concern there is his iPhone. The smartphone is both lifeless and, in a certain sense, alive through him. The conversation between *McNeal* and Dr. Grewal, his physician, reveals much about his opinion as a writer using AI to generate stories. His comment on good literature vs bad one, when he says “Good books, the best ones, don’t matter how you feel about the people in them, ... new computer-generated stories flooding the zone like odorless sewage” (Akhtar, 2024, p.7), This corresponds with Hayles's idea of embodied cognition, which disputes the belief that thinking can solely be



seen as processing abstract data. In this view, understanding comes from how the body interacts with its surroundings and sensory inputs. McNeal's insights about writing especially his focus on feelings and human challenges highlight the notion that creating literature is linked to our physical experiences. The scene ends with a phone call informing him that he will be the Noble Winner this year.

Throughout the play, there are several references to literary history, particularly through references to classic authors like Shakespeare. Akhtar admits that he adopts his play from many texts and topics, such as Kafka's letters, *Seize the Day*, *Hilda Gabbler*, and some of Shakespeare's works. There is a question about that intentional reference to Shakespeare in particular. His works are famous, but they have yet to be adopted from other works (Lemon, 2024). Would that give justification or permission to use AI in writing? If Shakespeare were here today, would he use AI as well, just as McNeal?

According to Hayles, this intertextual layering might be interpreted as a type of distributed cognition in which human memory, cultural texts, and technology systems cooperate to produce creativity rather than an isolated individual. *McNeal's* argument of AI-assisted writing is based on the assertion that literary originality has always needed borrowing, adaptation, and modification. By comparing Shakespeare's use of earlier materials with AI-created text, the play situates contemporary technological endeavors within a broader tradition of intertextuality. This is shown in the scene of Stockholm City Hall, where McNeal is in the Banquet Room receiving the Nobel Prize, and later, he delivers a monologue written by GPT in the Shakespearean style, as McNeal himself recommends.

This difference makes the idea of originality and creativity more complex. Instead of seeing originality as creating something completely

new, the play indicates that it comes from rearranging what already exists. According to McNeal, it is permitted to borrow from ‘other sources’ as long as it is turned into an exceptional work of art. He highlighted *King Lear* when he accepted the Nobel Prize, stressing the fact that Shakespeare used the work of another author to produce a wonderful piece of art. However, this view seems to be Akhtar’s since he revealed in an interview saying that “For me, Shakespeare is the ultimate lens on how language operates on our consciousness and how language shapes our cognition, which is basically what AI is doing.” (Lemon, 2024) This position brings up the subject of artificial intelligence as an assistant writer. However, the role of humans isn’t overlooked or undermined as much as it intensifies the relation between human and technology.

To end his speech with a Shakespearean phrase with the help of AI, McNeal is trying to evoke a sensitive point here and activate even a strong response. This moment, viewed through Hayles’s lens (1999), depicts the posthuman condition, in which authorship is diffused among human-machine systems rather than being limited to the autonomous human subject. Hayles contends that while modern culture increasingly views information as separate from embodiment, she also emphasizes that meaning is created through their interaction rather than sheer computation alone. It could suggest that it is allowed to use AI in writing despite the fact that people are deliberately ignoring that central topic in our lives. Akhtar supports this when he alludes to an article in *Hollywood Reporter* suggesting that AI is now indispensable and used by everyone regardless of their silence about it. (Lemon, 2025) In this way, McNeal's use of AI does not merely replace human creativity, but rather exposes a hybrid type of authorship in which human intention and algorithmic production work together to produce textual meaning.



According to Hayles' posthumanism, informational systems constantly influence human mind, hence AI acts as a manifestation of cognitive functions instead of a substitute for them. Authorship is now co-produced through interactions with accessible media and technology rather than being limited to the individual intellect. What AI does is actually resembling human creative process. It is all about the previous readings that we have been loaded with throughout our lives. McNeal confirms that "Writing for the writer is a need. A way of relief and feeling better." (Akhtar, 2024, p.20) This supports Hayles' argument that meaning ultimately rests on embodied human experience, even in digitally mediated systems. What the writer writes is a mix of earlier readings along with our emotions, feelings, and reactions to what we read. In other words, our writings are our contribution and addition.

McNeal mentioned in the prize acceptance speech that although AI wrote three best-selling books, no one died since "AI knows how much we hate dying, how much we lie to ourselves about it, and it's all too happy to help us forget." (Akhtar, 2024, p.10) The intermediation between human and technology is clear in the way that human values, culture, and consciousness are embedded in the technological system. Artificial intelligence satisfies people's need for happy, fulfilling outcomes. However, MacNeal could not have a happy ending, not even with AI.

An important part of Hayles's posthumanism is its focus on ethical duties. Even though thinking can be shared, being responsible is still a human matter. This aspect is shown in the play through McNeal, whose moral shortcomings both in his personal life and work—cannot be blamed on technology. Despite his literary talent, McNeal lacks compassion. He was a bad husband and a cheater. His estranged son, Harlan, charges him with stealing his deceased mother's works and claiming them as his own. Harlan vows to reveal his father's deceit by sending the original writing to

The New York Times. There is an implication that MacNeal drove his wife to suicide while simultaneously undermining her literary career. McNeal himself is a machine-like, no care about others, and his success is the most important thing. Choosing such a character with such a subplot is purposeful to dispel the idea of artificiality even in human beings.

One of the conceptual challenges in interpreting the play is figuring out if AI is an agency, a tool, or anything in between. The text presents AI in a number of ways, some of which may be inconsistent. It can occasionally seem as a tool that supports the writer by generating content in response to prompts. At other points, it seems to be an active participant that directs the plot. It is also shown as a delicate entity affected by literary works, language, and human desire, rather than a dominant replacement for human cognition. When McNeal uploads his computer with different masterpieces and asks it for a new book in Jacob McNeal's style, those texts are read and selected by McNeal himself as input texts.

The redefinition of authorship in a posthuman world is a major theme of the play. The conventional conception of authorship has been linked to individual originality, intention, and ownership. McNeal's use of AI, though, makes this model more complex by adding numerous layers of mediation to the writing process. Yet the revision of McNeal's book with his agent Stephie Banic by choosing very specific words "You're *endowed* with abilities, physical traits. You're *endued* with virtues." (Akhtar, 2024, p.13) shows the human free will of deciding the most suitable words for the context and confirms the machine's limited understanding of meaning.

Hayles reiterates the significance of the human mediator, contending that without a critical human mind to direct, examine, and hold accountable, any successful deployment of artificial intelligence is incomplete. She makes the argument that creativity necessitates an intellectual and emotional gestation that cannot be mimicked or duplicated,



rather than just being a question of production speed or organizational aptitude (Hayles, 1999). In this way, artificial intelligence is at best a technical assistance that requires human leadership and direction. McNeal goes with that when he says, “Give them 10, or 200, or 4,000 words—and they will suggest with uncanny probability what the rest of the words you need should be.” (Akhtar, 2024, p.10) However, these are texts that rely on earlier writings. AI reproduces but do not create, composes but do not produce, with no free self. It still needs the order from us. Those machines need to be directed and fed with our own information. (Hayles, 1999)

Although it has a great deal of potential for linguistic analysis and material modification, AI lacks an intuitive understanding of meaning, which comes from an existential, conscious experience that cannot be technically replicated, rather than from a large repository or artificially intelligent methods to expand vocabulary. (Majumder, 2025) When Dr. Grewell talked about getting assistance from a Swiss clinic to help McNeal to die, He responded that a novel can be written under the name ‘Swiss Clinic.’ (Akhtar, 2024, p.6) People get inspired by others’ ideas or experiences which participate partially in cognitive processing. Another outstanding example of Hayles’s embodied cognition where mind and body share thinking and memory, is when McNeal says, “Easy to find language when it’s that deeply burned into your muscle memory.” (p. 35) Meaning is a mental, physical, and environmental interaction.

Hayles’s distributed cognition indicates that texts produced by AI systems perform at a formal level. They acknowledge the text's structural makeup but lack the depth of symbolism, history, and interpretation that sets human texts apart. Hayles confirms that when she says, “The relation between striking a key and producing text with a computer is very different from the relation achieved with a typewriter” (1999, p.26)

There are moments in the play that suggest artificial intelligence is writing the scenes, even directing the story. In some way, Akhtar alludes to this idea when he told *The Atlantic's* reporter Jeffrey Goldberg, “I wanted some part of the play to actually be meaningfully generated by ChatGPT or some large language model—Gemini, Claude. I tried them all.” (Strong, 2024) *McNeal* questions the idea that creativity is a uniquely human quality by obfuscating the distinction between human and computer agency. Therefore, rather than acting as a completely foreign force, artificial intelligence serves as a mirror that reveals the processes behind human innovation

Hayles contends that consciousness is an emergent product of intricate interactions between bodies, environments, and technologies. “Embodiment can be destroyed, but it cannot be replicated.” (Hayles, 1999, p.49) means that each person has their own unique living experience that can’t be recreated or copied with the same circumstances, emotions, memories, personal or physical existence. This strongly points to the limitation of AI. On this very spot, the creativity and authenticity of humans establish their long-standing relationship. *McNeal* can be dynamically and continuously reconstructed as an entity rather than being an inflexible one. This alters our perception of meaning itself, making it adaptable and ever-evolving rather than permanent.

Conclusion

This research has looked into how authorship and creativity change in light of artificial intelligence by analyzing *McNeal* from a posthumanist perspective. Using N. Katherine Hayles's ideas, the study reveals that the play doesn't show artificial intelligence as taking over human creativity, but rather as a factor that changes how creativity, thinking, and authorship function.

By highlighting the ideas of embodied and distributed thinking, the research illustrates that *McNeal* questions the individualistic view of the independent writer. In the play, creativity appears as a shared process influenced by the connections between human experiences, technology, and cultural history. This change does not remove human control; rather, it places it within a wider system involving both human and nonhuman elements.

Significantly, the play also brings up moral issues that are essential in discussions about posthumanism. Shifting cognitive and creative tasks does not eliminate accountability; instead, it increases the necessity to thoughtfully reflect on how technology is applied, managed, and understood. In this regard, *McNeal* supports Hayles's idea of an embodied posthumanism that recognizes the role of technology while still ensuring human responsibility.

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