

Envisioning Plurality: Towards a Multicultural and Inclusive Literary Framework

Rinu Rijisha K P

Research Scholar

Department of English,

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady.

rinurijishakp@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and necessary transformation of the literary canon in response to changing sociocultural dynamics. Through critical analysis of canonical formation, the research traces how the established literary canon has historically functioned as an instrument of cultural hegemony, privileging white male European perspectives while marginalizing others. Drawing on postcolonial, feminist, and queer theoretical frameworks, the study demonstrates how the canon reinforces power structures through institutional mechanisms including academic curricula, publishing industries, literary awards, and critical reception. The research traces the etymology of "canon" and its development as an institutional mechanism for reinforcing selected traditions while marginalizing diverse voices. The investigation reveals the colonial and heteropatriarchal foundations of canonical selection, while documenting how various social movements- including feminism, anti-racism, postcolonialism, and LGBTQ+ activism—have challenged these exclusionary practices. Key voices in this resistance include African writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, feminist critics such as Virginia Woolf, and queer theorists like Eve Sedgwick, all of whom have contested the universalist claims of Western cultural norms. The research argues that the post-millennium literary landscape has undergone significant transformation through these collective interventions, creating space for previously marginalized voices. genuine canon reformation requires ongoing critical engagement and institutional reconfiguration to create a truly democratic literary framework that apprehends all human dimensions regardless of class, gender, race, or sexuality. This process of canon metamorphosis is presented not merely as an academic exercise but as a cultural necessity aligned with broader aspirations for social equity and justice in a rapidly changing global context.

Keywords: Literary Canon, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Queer theory, Multiculturalism, Euro-centrism etc.

Canon should change with changing world. Canonical status was afforded to the established works in the institution of literature. The canonizing move then bestows a kind of high cultural aura on literary texts as they fade in to English antiquity. According to Terry Eagleton English canon is the 'colonial' canon. Heteropatriarchy created the universal canon. The phallogocentric canon is being steeped in power, gender, racist bias and many other blind spots created by societal norms. The concept of canon goes back at least as far as the 1860s, when the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold articulated being the pursuit of "the best that has been thought and said" (12). This very wording was used to define the objectives of England's national Curriculum. Canon should be deconstructed and democratized. It must be decentred from the Euro-centric white supremacy. The metamorphosis of canon from elite texts to diverse, multicultural, and representative texts is going on by the upsurge of various cultural, political social movements including feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, anti-racism, etc. Canon should apprehend all human experiences without any discrimination regarding class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity etc.

Canon is a site of power that specializes in reinforcing the continuity of selected traditions and institutions. It can be considered as an imperialist strategy where by ruling class imposes its values and culture on society. Origin the word 'canon' can be traced back to ancient Greek 'Kanna', denoting types of reeds with straight- firm- stems and the associated word 'Kanon'. In time, it acquired the meaning of the right measure in architecture and correct proportion in arts. The arrival of English as university subject is a significant moment in the in the history of English Canon formation. Universities endorsed the study of canon as an ethical and intellectual, respectable, necessary and viable enterprise.

Canon has a vital role in naturalising nineteenth and early twentieth century imperialism. The process of canonisation entails a gradual process of familiarisation. The infiltrations of literary reputations into civic and popular culture have been happened through the publishing industry, the agencies that receive and review books, from learned journals to Sunday papers, educational institutions, literary prizes, art councils, learned academies, media producers etc. This a gradual process of conscious or unconscious inculcation leads people into accepting an established hierarchy of authors. The move to abolish the canon that came to head in the 1980s in America was contributed to and supported by the few African writers too. Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong' O were each critical of the

Universalist claims of the Western cultural norms, of the metropolitan critics' tendency to denigrate as provincial those African writers whose object it was to be the earnest and assertive voice of their native culture, and of the kind of education offered in schools and universities across Africa, where the language, literature, history, and culture of the colonialists- mainly Britain, France, and Portugal- were at the centre, and those of Africa, either absent or misrepresented.

In the nineteenth century the anti-slavery movement gave rise to the slave narratives, a whole genre of powerful American writing revealing the material, ideological, and psychological basis for continuing U. S racism. Harlem Renaissance produced great writers like James Weldon, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston etc. They opposed the reinstitution of the racist canon. African literature forward by associating obviously with the theme of resistance, with the conscious formation of a counter-hegemonic discourse. They shifted representational strategies away from established European models. In what sense Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* a response to and/or correction of Conrad. Decolonizing the canon in Postcolonial countries underscore the identification of 'the wretched of the earth'. They emphasize the lived experience s of marginalized victims through the enormous variety of South African literature, Nigerian literature, Kenyan literature etc.

The metamorphosis of English literature from literatures of English assimilates multiple voices. The cultural nationalism of Raymond Williams, and array of critical practices drawing on French Poststructuralist thinkers Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida began influencing departments of English on both sides of the Atlantic. And in the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s it was the recognition of this literature power nexus, variously explored and critiqued by deconstructionists, psychoanalysts, postcolonialists, newhistoricists, feminists, and queer theorists among others that animated and United the radicals in the battle with the traditionalists. The canon has to be changed in favour of something that is multicultural and non-hierarchical. What follows crystalizes the conjunction of economic and religious metaphors that permeate discourse on male authorship and authority.

The so-called canon of Western Civilization consists in the official publication of the system of oppression, and it is no accident that the authors in the canon are almost exclusively white men, because the civilization is ruled by a caste of white men. And like Western patriarchal culture, the literary canon has historically functioned as paternal edifices, erected

on a firmly circumscribed plot that has contained and maintained itself by keeping women out or keeping them in secondary and dependent positions. Nancy Chodorow has argued that, “Because men have power and cultural hegemony in our society, they are able to use and have used this hegemony to institutionalize their unconscious defences’ against repressed yet strongly experienced conflicts” (Chodorow, 9). The concept of a universal androcentric canon attained the status and force of myth, largely because they embody in metaphoric form some of the primary sociohistorical drives, institutions and ideologies by which phallogentric culture has organized and perpetuated itself. Women's relationship with canon and other gender inflected questions should be problematized. Recurrently asked question is how and where to ‘make a room’ of women's writings in the canon. So, each should create and recreate its own canon, according to a complex historical process that entangles aesthetic judgement and discourse with changing ontologies, mutable tastes, shifting cultural ideologies, political pressures and academic Exigencies. The feminist project to establish a noncanonical theory of value is in progress, will eventually be institutionalized.

Canon should apprehend all human dimensions. The publication of LGBT fiction, drama, poetry, and creative nonfiction proliferating, and LGBT literature as an area of study and course offering continues thrive. When the culturalist needs turned to what academic circles argued best represented and served LGBT literary history, Eve Sedgwick’s influential text *Epistemology of the Closet* introduced the idea that reading from the traditional master-canon presupposes reading LGBT literature. In her often-cited adaptation of Saul Bellow's question, she considers the possibility from LGBT perspective:

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?

Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?

Has there ever been a gay Proust?

A short answer though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare and Proust; and beyond that legion- dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to call our culture as indeed, always in different forms and senses, every other.”

Framing reading practices through a queer lens provides an analytical basis for interrogating and deconstructing normative representations of sexuality and gender in the traditionally institutionalized canonical works. Canon should dismantle gendered and heteronormative constructions. Canon should be inclusive and reflexive of diversified human experiences. Canon should incorporate every alternate and subordinate cultures. It must incorporate multiple marginalized voices of the universe. The discourse of changing canon is a parallel way of anticipating an equitable world.

Literature is very different in the post millennium era to what it was in 1950s. This is in terms of what there is available to read, what gets published, reviewed, and promoted; what gets prescribed on university programmes; what gets critically defended and affirmed; what wins prizes, gets anthologized, gets critically acclaimed and studied. All this is hugely different. These nuances have been created by cultural reconfigurations, political actions and educational progress.

In conclusion, for the sake of survival, every era should create, recreate, rethink, relearn and culturally reconfigure the canon. Canon formation is defensive, reactive, custodial and radical reconfiguration of the past. Emphasize on canonical revision by innumerable intersecting cultural movements embarked ethnic, social, political, and economic change in the world. There is a possibility of inclusion, and reflexivity in the canon. Each and every marginal voice is the embodiment of artistic and literary excellence. They are the powerful depiction of the intricacies of human psyche. The imperialist canon must be revised and recreated. Canon should represent the complex realities of human psyche unbiased of language, ethnicity, nation, race etc.

Works Cited

Aiken, Susan Hardy. Woman and the Question of Canonicity. *College English*, vol. 48, no. 3, Mar. 1986, pp. 288 – 301, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/376642>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.

Anderson, Earl R. “Defining the Canon.” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 116, no. 5, Modern Language Association, Oct. 2001, pp. 1442 – 43, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/10.1632/pmla.2001.116.5.1442>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.

- Baraka, Amiri. "Cultural Revolution and the Literary Canon." *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1991, pp. 150 – 56, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/2931447>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. London: Papermac, 1994,
www.google.com/search?gs_ssp=eJzj4tLP1TcwMYg3sjQwYPQSLMIIVShPLS5JLcpTSE7My88DAIcCCZI&q=the+western+canon&oq=the+western+canon&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j46i39i512i650j0i512l11.6676j1j9&client=ms-android-xiaomi-rvo2b&sourceid=chrome-mobile&ie=UTF-8. Accessed on 12 Dec. 2023.
- Camille, Michael. "Rethinking the Canon: Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 2, June 1996, pp. 198 – 217, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/706809>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Ford, Brian W. "Choosing the Canon." *The English Journal*, vol. 82, no. 2, Feb. 1993, pp. 60 – 61, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/819706>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Gugelberger, Georg M. "Decolonizing the Canon: Considerations of Third World Literature." *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1991, pp. 505 – 24, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/469201>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: UoC, 1993, press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo3634644.html. Accessed on 12 Dec. 2024.
- Holderness, Graham. "'An Arabian in My Room': Shakespeare and the Canon." *Critical Survey*, vol. 26, no. 2, Jan. 2014, pp. 73 – 89, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3167/cs.2014.260204>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Jayesh, A. K. "Beyond the Canon: Whither Beyond?" *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, Aug. 2014, pp. 46 – 66, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1080/02564718.2014.949408>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Kachru, Braj B. "Toward Expanding the English Canon: Raja Rao's 1938 Credo of Creativity." *World Literature Today*, vol. 62, no. 4, Dec. 1988, pp. 582 – 86, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40144514>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Kramnick, Jonathan Brody. "The Making of the English Canon." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 112, no. 5, Oct. 1997, pp. 1087 – 101, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/463485>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
- Pruitt, John. "LGBT Literature, Courses, and Question of Canonicity." *College English*, vol. 79, no. 1, Sept. 2016, pp. 81 – 105, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44075156>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.

Robinson, Lillian S. "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." *Tulsa*

Studies in Women's Literature, vol. 2, no. 1, University of Tulsa, Jan. 1983, pp. 83 – 98,
JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/464208>. Accessed on 7 Dec. 2023.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: UoC, 1990. print.
Sekher, Dr Ajay S. “Democratizing the Canon: Inclusions and Representations.”
uploaded by Nirmala Institutions, YouTube, 30 June 2021,
youtu.be/gxhamU8nl5I?si=6NZMTvx5DVBgBJ_x. Accessed 12 Dec. 2023.
Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin, 2008. print