

Literary Canon: Its Concept and Debate

JAYANTA BANERJEE

M.A., M.Phil. Ph.D Scholar, Department of English; West Bengal State University: Barasat

Guest-Lecturer: Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapitha Hooghly; West Bengal India

Email-jayantabun99@gmail.com

Abstract:

The word 'canon', from its inception in the fourth century till today is under constant ramifications. Once it was a sort of measure stick used to validate the religious sanctity and originality of a biblical writing (sacred canon). Then it undergone few phases of extensions and ultimately became a term by which we mean a register of selected writings (classic) by few great writers of a particular country, nation or ethnic group. These canonical works occupy the major space of any anthology or university curricula. But there are questions and counter forces constantly working at various levels at the apparently closeted periphery of a canon. Interestingly, today, the forces which are trying to make the conception of the canon porous are subject to critical attention and discussion than the works already 'canonized'. So, there must have a significant change in the process of canon formation in the last century. This paper attempts to search out (obviously few of) the potential rubrics which destabilized the notions of the established canon(s).

Key Words: Canon, Canon formation, Classic, Re-visioning the Canon, Orientalism, DWEMs

Introduction:

This paper is a very lucid attempt to witness the changing course of application as well as connotation of the word Canon. This can hardly be called a research article. It is, rather, a 're-search' article. I have been consulting few books to eradicate my own confusion regarding what is Canon, Canonicity or Canonical (writing). What I saw that all the confusions consulted in those books are pretty enough to intensify my confused position regarding the point that what is the criterion of a literary work if it is to be a Canonical one. The answer is not a matter of few definite qualities- aesthetic or anything else. There circulate a complex manipulation of power and politics as well as few indiscernible factors which operate in the existence and continuation of a Canon. Critics and scholars are of the same opinion that the means by which the canon has been constructed, however have been radically exclusionary – leaving out,



for example, works written by members of different marginal locations i.e. non-European, female, black, homosexuals, dalits and working classes (to say all the ethnic minority). The formation of canon and continuity of its status is the focus of much ongoing debate. As is the case with John Donne, who got confirmation about his position in the British canon only after he became the focus of critical attention of T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks and the New Critics. Originally, the Greek word *kanon* was a term applicable to standards of length and straight or upright objects and, by extension, to lists or catalogues. While the word *canon* seems to have many dimensions added to it gradually. The term *canon* was used, till the fourth century, to refer to the list of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Holy Scripture) which was accepted by the church authorities as genuine and having divine authority and inspiration. Books outside the canon are called *apocryphal*. Canon has also been used to refer to the *Saint's Canon*, a group of church figures recognized by the Catholic Church as saints. The Protestant and the Catholic Churches, differ as to which writings are canonical and which are *apocryphal*. The Protestants always designate those eleven books as *apocryphal* which were included

in the Catholic biblical canon. Later, canon was used to refer to a body of literary works that can be attributed with certainty to a given author, such as *the Chaucer Canon* and *the Shakespeare canon*. Works that can be attributed to an author only doubtfully constitute his apocrypha; apocrypha is also used to refer to works mistakenly attributed to a particular writer.

General Discussion:

Then, the word, canon has journeyed from the church to the press extending its semantic layers from religion to literature. More recently, canon has become a prefix to literature i.e. 'literary canon', which is now a big issue in academia,. By literary canon, as is said by M.H. Abrahams, we mean- ... in world literature , or in European literature, but most frequently in a national literature- those authors who, by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and teachers, have come to be widely recognized as 'major' , and to have written works often hailed as literary *classics*. The literary works by canonical authors are the ones which, at a given time, are most kept in print, most frequently and fully discussed by literary critics and historians, and most likely to be included in anthologies and in the syllabi of college courses with titles such as "World Masterpieces," "Major English Authors," or "Great American Writers."(Abraham, 29)

Generally speaking, the term Canon denotes a list of books and more broadly, music and art that have been the most important and influential in shaping Western culture. Canonical works are privileged or given special status by a specific culture and thought to have exercised a deep influence on later writers. We generally tend to think them as *classics* or as “Great Books”- texts that are repeatedly reprinted in anthologies of literature and most often included in school or university curricula. For literary critic, the term is indelibly associated with few names, among whom F.R. Leavis, the Cambridge critic is a front runner. Leavis, in his book *The Great Tradition* (1948) restricted the novel canon to the work of Jane Austin, George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James. By 1970, interestingly, F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis had relented so much for their earlier dismissal of Dickens that they published a joint volume of tributes to his genius in *Dickens the Novelist*. This belated restoration was not welcome by critics who had themselves earlier been trying to uphold Dickens’s reputation against Leavisite opposition to Dickens, and the Leavises were rebuked for failing to account for their past injustice to the novelist. Raymond Williams published his series of lectures in

The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence, a corrective response to Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* which restores Hardy as well as Dickens to the list of the great English novelists. The debate over canonization is noteworthy. Leavis’s criteria for ‘canonization’ was that only these four authors provided ‘the felt experience’ and moral values necessary to counter the growing industrialization and mechanization of life. Such a canon (to its believers) is important to the theory of educational perennialism, cultural heritage and the development of high culture. Another name that is associated with Canon theory is Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon : The Books and School of the Ages*. (1994). It has four chronological divisions. These are :

- A. The Theocratic Age: 2000 BCE-1321 CE
- B. The Aristocratic Age: 1321-1832
- C. The Democratic Age: 1832-1900
- D. The Chaotic Age: 20th Century

Though Bloom sees 26 writers as central to the canon, in “The Chaotic Age: 20th Century” section (the *longest* indeed)



he adopts a rather evolving mentality towards canonicity. He says,

I am not as confident about this list as the first three. Cultural prophecy is always a mug's game. Not all of the works here can prove to be canonical; literary overpopulation is a hazard to many among them. But I have neither excluded nor included on the basis of cultural politics of any kind. (Bloom. 548)

While Williams attempted to revise the Leavisite canon (which ultimately led the Leavis couple to extend their *canon*), Frank Kermode offered an important revisionist response to T.S. Eliot's 1945 lecture *what is a Classic?* in his series of lectures *The Classic* (1975). Designating Eliot's idea of the canon as an 'imperialist' conception (because Eliot's idea was based upon the belief that Virgil is the cultural father of the eternal Holy Roman Empire), Kermode offered a secular modern view of what is expected of a canonical or 'classic' text. 'Whereas the ancient classic was thought to provide definitive answers, the modern classic – like the modern way of reading the old classic – would raise a multitude of questions. Kermode argues that for a literary text to survive for a long time as a 'classic', it needs not a single positive quality such as 'maturity' but an

openness to changing interpretations or, in structuralist parlance, a 'surplus of signifier'. In this influential view, 'the only works we value enough to call classic are those which are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities. These were important general reflections on the logic of 'canonicity', but they were soon overtaken by specific activist campaigns for major revision of the actually existing canons.' (Baldick.201)

Now to say about the debate is to say that one of the main objections to a canon of literature is the question of authority—that, who should have the power to determine what works are worth reading and teaching? The generally accepted notion about a text which we find in any canon is that it has qualified 'the test of time' (a word used by Gregory Castle in *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*.2007). Here, we can fairly refer Samuel Johnson's remark in the 'Preface' to his edition of Shakespeare (1765) that a hundred years is 'the term commonly fixed as a test of literary merit.' And while the European thinkers (starting from the 18th century) celebrated humanity or culture, they were only celebrating and highlighting the ideas and values of their own national culture, or Europe as distinct



from the Orient and Africa. And we know this colonial superiority complex of the East led Edward Said to the study of 'Orientalism' (a Eurocentric bias towards the cultural output of other worlds).

It is not until the critical break-up of 1970s and the virtual era of Comparative Literature, the assumptions and implications regarding the canonized work really were being questioned. The long historical process of selection and exclusion by cultural elites- publishers, professors, editors, agents' in making literary canon has become a butt of contention. Beginning from the Liberal Humanist to the other modern critical theorists particularly Marxists, Feminists, Poststructuralists and Subalternists - all have argued that, the canon is strictly based on 'DWEMs'- or 'Dead White European Males'(with a silent 'H', perhaps, between the 'E' and the 'M' standing for 'Heterosexual'). The emergence of The Common Wealth Literature, (later to be known as New Literature) of 1980s and Post Colonial Literature of 1990s and all the *writing back literature* (Almost a catchword for postcolonial literature came into publicity after the epoch making book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (1989) by Bill

Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.) in the decolonization phase raised voices against the nature of the existing canonicity.

Thus, for political reasons, many excellent works never enter the arena of canon. Canonized works, they claim, are those that reflect- and respect- the culture's dominant ideology or perform some socially acceptable or even necessary form of "cultural work." Attempts have been made to broaden and redefine the canon by discovering valuable texts, or versions of texts that were repressed or ignored for political reasons. With the changing concepts of everything, from fashion to aestheticism in a globalized world, the politics of power, race, ethnicity and gender becomes self-evident in the 'restriction' in the boundary line of Western Canon. And a body of writing excluded from the canon, either explicitly or implicitly, came from 'other' ethnic groups, women, non-Europeans, homosexual, blacks (bizarism of DWEMs ?), to contribute to "English Literature" and higher education where English is neither the mother tongue nor a vernacular. So, it has been a journey from 'restriction' of canon to 'revision' of canon.

The immediate project for feminist critics in the 1960s and 1970s was to recover, on behalf of women, female writers and a female literary tradition from their historical occlusion. Similar innovative work was going on simultaneously in other areas, and the title of the historian, Sheila Rowbotham's book, *Hidden from History* (1973), together with the brilliant feminist perception that history hitherto has indeed been 'his-story' not 'her-story', is the most concise and telling synopsis of the rationale for this project. In the same vein is the coterminous development of 'Gynocriticism' which sought to set up a female framework for the analysis of literature written by women, to focus on women's experience as expressed there, and to establish a female literary and cultural tradition.

Conclusion:

The existence, in fact, of a multiplicity of canons must be acknowledged. Alastair Fowler's distinction between the types of canons has become almost standard. The *Official cannon* is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism. *Personal cannons* depend on individual tastes and preferences. The *Potential canon*, in the broadest sense comprises the entire written corpus, together with all surviving oral literature; much of it is thus

not accessible in practice. The *Accessible canon* is the entire corpus to the extent one has access to it. *Selective canons* result from institutionalized reading lists and curricula. The *Critical canon*, consisting of those works and writers repeatedly discussed in books and journals is, remarks Fowler, "surprisingly narrow" (*Genre and the Literary Canon* p.98-99.) Thus Canons are the product of certain evaluative choices and further, all the evaluations are based on the perceptions and values of a particular social group. Then it is an easy step to the argument that all evaluative criteria are arbitrary and that no selective canon is possible that does not privilege a socioeconomic and political group. On this view, no attempt at canon building is justified. As Frank Kermode says in *Value in Literature*(1996) that 'every reading list is a canon of sorts' and 'the erstwhile radical displacement of the "great works" by hitherto disregarded ones may well substitute one canon for another.' Today, instead of having an edition of English literature, we have *Companion to Literature in English* (edited Ian Ousby; 1992) and *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World Literature* (edited by John Sturrock; 1997) etc. To finish off, we can take recourse to the speech delivered by Tagore on Comparative Literature where to evade the above argument, Tagore translated the phrase Comparative literature as *Viswa Sahitya* (The World Literature) to convey that literature is the humanity's relation to the world. He circulated it (*Viswa Sahitya*) not only to confirm the universality of literature but also to breathe space into the freshly emerging fields of literature.

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