Constructing a New Canon of Post-1980s Indian English Fiction

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By

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Dedicated to

Sahdev's parents
Ratansinh Luhar and Santokben Luhar
&
Madhurita's parents
Dr Nrityen Saha Choudhury and Madhuri Choudhury

The range of the experiences which Indian English (IE) fiction depicts is definitely very narrow and restricted. Much of the best part of our national and cultural life falls outside its purview. It specializes in depicting the experiences of a small section of our middle class; even in this rather limited terrain, its emphasis is on some sort of interaction and intercourse with the West, either through character or through themes. That is why I have argued elsewhere that the IE novel occupies a space similar to that of the Anglo-Indian novel.

—Makarand Paranjape

A tenaciously particularised religiosity in polyglot jungle of temples and swamis; a more or less official ideal tradition in aesthetics and philosophy but an actual history of eclectic ferment; "non-western" ways of thinking often defined and infused by European romantic idealism. One thinks of Gandhi in London, rediscovering Hinduism by reading Annie Besant.

—Herbert McArthur

Indian attempts at the novel further reveal the Indian confusion. The novel is of the West. … It is not a good qualification for the writing or reading of novels. … It is the part of the mimicry of the West…

—VS Naipaul

… all that is best in Indian tradition is European.

—David McCutchion

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any creative work is an overwhelmingly demanding yet exceedingly fulfilling process. It is spasmodic too. It comprises consistent research, irregularly regular hours of writing and incessant thinking. Sometimes all these give you some Eureka moments and at times you get stuck with your thoughts, like a spider in its own web. The process is always a blend of pain and exhilaration. The painful moments make you an intolerable person whereas the moments of exhilaration make you a completely different species. In short, you become an enigma for yourself as well as others. Therefore, it becomes necessary for the writers to thank all those people who have been with them on this roller-coaster journey. It is imperative that we, as writers of this book, thank all those who have retained faith in us, given us confidence and borne with us with calmness. There are some who influenced us, inspired us and provided us with badly-needed impetus.

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Sahdev Luhar and Madhurita Choudhary
Vadodara

A NOTE ON THE SELECTION

This book aims to explore post-1980s Indian English Fiction as an alternative literary canon or a new canon. The post-1980s era in the field of Indian English literature has witnessed an efflorescence of Indian English fiction and to study all of this would have been a Herculean task. Hence, it was decided to select those examples which have been included in their syllabi by Indian universities for MA (English) courses.

This selection is limited to the syllabi of those Indian universities that are accredited as "A" grade by the NAAC (during 2012–2014) and those that are state or central universities. After contacting these universities by email and telephone, a list of thirty universities was prepared for the analysis of their syllabi and the literary texts they teach. The syllabi gathered were scrutinised from different perspectives: the numbers of British, American, other non-British Indian and Indian fiction in translation; the new and unconventional papers introduced in MA (English) syllabi; and pre- and post-1980s Indian English fiction introduced in MA (English) programmes.

Thus, the list of forty post-1980s novels of Indian English fiction was prepared on the basis of the analysis of the thirty "A" graded Indian universities which offer an MA (English) programme.

INTRODUCTION

Rooted in the Christian theological discourse, the term "canon" referred to the standardisation of the chapters of the Bible and other scriptural writings on the basis of certain qualitative rules. In literature, the term "canon" suggests the corpus of literary texts that are considered the most important. The term "canon" seems to confer a certain authority on a work of literature. It offers the work official authentication and respect as a valuable text. However, there is no rigid qualification for inclusion in a canon, and whether a work is included or not remains a controversial decision. In short, a literary canon implies the evaluation or estimation of certain literary texts as being the most important during a particular time. The canon is not merely a set of texts; it is a set of standards, evaluative procedures and values. Belonging to a canon confers a guarantee of literary greatness. A canon is formed by a particular group to channel cultural hegemony over others, or it can be constructed by a governed group to bring about cultural symmetry. The rise of diverse literatures in English in different parts of the world after the colonial rule of England was the consequence of an urge to articulate cultural equilibrium or an urge to strike back. The process of canon formation is also a focused and bigoted act. It is always carried out to accomplish certain self-centred objectives. It is commonly accepted that canon formation is executed to accomplish or naturalise certain ideological functions.

The concept of the literary canon has undergone changes over time. During the Age of Enlightenment, the value of literary texts was determined on the basis of the aesthetic properties the texts possessed. The value-judgements that the Enlightenment era offered were considered universal, ethical and rational. However, in contemporary times, the category of universality which was pivotal to the eighteenth-century thinkers has been the subject of critical reassessment and debate. Within contemporary literary studies, the focal point has shifted from the consideration of universality to a more anxious perception of canon formation as an exercise of political power and social exclusion. The factors that have influenced the reassessment of universality and aesthetic values in the present time include the intensified political consciousness of class, race, gender and ethnicity; the academic professionalisation of criticism; a marked turn towards cultural relativism; and the postmodernist

erosion of the boundaries of 'taste'. The two occurrences that led to the retreat from the value-judgements in the postmodern era are: (i) the purely formalistic approach to the study of literature that liberally defends the freedom of imagination and aspires to sustain value; and (ii) the communitarian stimulus to consider the literary text as an embodiment of tacit knowledge concerning particular cultures or cultural formation. The postmodern obsession is eventually directed towards the idea that there is no value-free position outside a culture from where one may deliver judgement either on its own artefacts or on those of a different culture. Perhaps that is why contemporary debates about the canon have focused more on identity politics than on the question of aesthetic values that have opened up the canon to the new literatures and have facilitated the recuperation of neglected and buried texts.

On the post-colonial side, the literary canon witnessed a challenge in the form of the rise of new literary canons from once colonised nations. Postcolonial theory interpreted the literary canon in terms of the East-West controversy, privileged-marginalised hierarchies, or centre-periphery relationships. It has rejected the Bloomian legacy of the literary canon. The Bloomian concept of the literary canon centred on the writings of the Dead White European Males; it rejected the literary works of women writers, Afro-Americans and the writers from the formerly colonised countries as canon (Bloom 1994: 7). The Bloomian notion excluded the non-Western offshoots as politicised fumbling. However, the twentieth century witnessed the rise of divergent literary canons to challenge the Western hegemony over the literary canon. For the defenders of the Western canon, the non-Western canon is a kind of threat to the great tradition. They perceived the non-Western canon as anarchist and they felt the threat of losing their hitherto enjoyed canonical stature. As per Edward Said's view, the West has maintained its hegemony over the canon through prescribing the literary texts in humanities courses (Said 1995: 88). One way to deconstruct this hegemony is the inclusion of new canons in literary syllabi. The American cultural wars of the 1960s and 1980s are good examples of how cultural hegemony can be demolished by the inclusion of literary texts from marginalised groups in the syllabi of schools and universities.

In colonial India, the system of education for the Indians was designed to demonstrate the superiority of Western rule. This brought what GN Devy calls 'cultural amnesia' to India (Devy 1992). The time of the colonial encounter led to the fatal demise of Indian creativity. Whatever came out in this period was evaluated according to the Western canon. The upholders of the Western canon assumed that whatever the colonised

produced as intellectual or cultural artefact was the outcome of the colonial encounter. Scholars like Gauri Viswanathan and Edward Said have also proved that the colonial education system was designed to rule the Indian mentally; students were taught not only English literature, but also the inherent superiority of the English race (Viswanathan 2015: 2; Said 1993: 121). The Western canon proved a stratagem for demeaning the colonised Indians in all spheres of activity. Hence, during the post-colonial era, the cry for an alternative canon, different from the Western, emerged in the fields of literature, politics, social sciences, philosophy, etc. The post-colonial hurricane that blew through the Indian subcontinent in the 1980s, considerably so after Said's *Orientalism* (1978), made Indian scholars aware of the need for an alternative literary canon. The reasons for this need are several: (a) to subordinate English literature in the Indian subcontinent, in the same way as in the spheres of politics, economics and mass media, Britain and other European imperial powers had been superseded or relegated to a relatively minor place in international affairs; (b) to deconstruct the cultural hegemony maintained by the West through dismissing post-colonial literatures as isolated national offshoots of English literature when judged against Western standards; (c) to challenge the hierarchical conceptions of 'truth', 'order' and 'reality' in an effective post-colonial voice; and (d) to (re)write literary texts in such a way that they could deconstruct popular and essentialist Bloomian notions of literary canonicity.

It has been observed that the hegemonic tendency that started with the teaching of English during the colonial period still dominates the Indian scene, albeit in different form. An analysis of the syllabi of the MA (English) programmes of different Indian universities proves that English studies in India are under the control of Western academia. Still, Indian universities are crazy for what has been judged with awards and prizes to be the best. Most of the Western texts which are prescribed in Indian universities are, in fact, part of some revised colonial agenda; they still function as the facilitator of the Macaulayan agenda. The intrusion of Western culture and ideology has resulted in a "crisis" in English studies in India. Despite numerous attempts by Svati Joshi, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Sudhakar Marathe, Susie Tharu and others to bring English studies out of this crisis, departments of English demonstrate hegemonic tendencies. Departments of English across India show the twofold patterns of control: (i) the overall syllabus is an apparatus of Americanised Western cultural hegemony; and (ii) in the field of Indian English literature, the racial model of Western hegemony is replaced by the caste-based model. A study of the Indian English fiction introduced in MA

(English) syllabi suggests that more stress is placed on post-1980s Indian English fiction than on earlier examples. Only the epoch-making early Indian English fiction has continued to retain its place on the syllabus. The peripheral analysis of the selected post-1980s Indian English fiction demonstrates that the departments of English are more inclined towards diasporic Indian writers. Novels by women writers dominate the field of post-1980s Indian English fiction. The hegemonic Brahminist attitude can be perceived in the selection of post-1980s Indian English fiction in Indian universities. The voice which Indian English fiction reflects is, in fact, a voice of the elite. It is also apparent that most of the texts which are selected for MA (English) programmes in the selected university departments of English have won, or at least been shortlisted for, some literary prize. Many examples of Indian English fiction have been published by foreign publishers. Thus, the departments of English are still dependent on Western scholarship.

Not only English studies, but the Indian English novel also require post-colonial treatment to resist Western domination. Due to the colonial hegemony over the form of fiction, the creative output of Indian English novelists was disregarded as parody. Even the acknowledgements of Indian writers and scholars, in the prefaces and introductions to literary texts, interviews, scholarly essays and research articles, prove that their works are influenced by the Western writers. The canon of Indian English fiction was formed to carry out some anti-colonial agenda: firstly, it had to create the corpus of Indian writing in English so that fewer Indian readers would turn to the hegemonic writings of English writers; secondly, it had to form the cultural identity by forming a parallel literary canon which could function as an alternative to the mainstream English canon. It is without doubt that the development of Indian English fiction in the 1930s as a canon marked the birth of a nation. The canon of Indian English fiction was formed to shape the modern national consciousness. The Indian National Movement helped discard Western life and those ideas that were marked by despondency and stagnation. An unprecedented surge in the literature of Indian languages bears testimony to this fact. The early Indian English fiction took over from where the realistic writing of England, France and America had left off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its primary interest lay in building a community and instilling a feeling of nationalism in this community. A sense of mutual, national belonging was to be developed by this newly emerged canon. The rise of the Indian English canon played a vital role in the anti-colonial movement. Its spread promised a new dawn of independence and political self-determination for the colonised people. Issues like decolonising the Indian

mind and disclosing the power-dynamics were associated with the rise of Indian English fiction; its growth signalled the psychosomatic independence of India. Thus, the canon of Indian English fiction was marked by the spirit of anti-colonial nationalism and a unique identity. The canon developed by Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao reflected a movement from the humanist-rational to genuinely nationalistic and eventually to a committed socialist attitude.

Indian English fiction served an anti-colonial function up to the 1970s. However, its reliance on the English novel form resulted in the gradual disappearance of the anti-colonial ethos. This formalistic reliance on the English novel form was a kind of unquestioned acceptance of Western hegemony. Most Indian English fiction was taken as a pretext for discussing Indian sociology rather than Indian creativity. Indian English fiction wanted a new anti-imperialistic surge to make the novel essentially Indian. The new Indian English novel had to first decolonise the novel form by imparting a unique Indian identity and it had to carry out the same anti-colonial agenda it had carried earlier. The publication of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 showed a promise of a better future. It embodied the objective envisioned by Indian writers and scholars to make the Indian English novel anti-imperialist in form and content. A long trail of Indian English novelists followed *Midnight's Children*, basing their novels on this long-awaited literary style that celebrated literary independence. *Midnight's Children* had made the declaration of literary independence by making the novel form 'Indian' in a way that suited the revival of national consciousness, cultural traditions and a nativised ethos. This change was not momentary but consistent and it reshaped the image of the Indian novel at an international level in the decades that followed. The decades of the 1980s, 1990s and even 2000s distinguished themselves from earlier decades in that they marked the adoption of the novel form to suit Indian themes and insights. The Indian English fiction of these decades differs from the conventional, Dickensian-type Indian fiction of earlier times. The fiction that followed *Midnight's Children* manifested a unique national identity which is generally found in a potential literary canon. Hence, the fiction which came out in these decades can be termed an alternative literary canon. Thus, the epithet "post-1980s Indian English fiction" is identical to the canonical nature of the Indian English fiction which came out in the post-1980s period. This canon is an alternative because it offers a parallel to the canon of world classics. The term "alternative" is to be interpreted as unconventional or different. Post-1980s Indian English fiction is also unconventional in its treatment of the subject and different

from the other types of fiction – British, bhasa, and the fiction of the pre-1980s.

Many scholars like Makarand Paranjape, David McCutchion and Herbert McArthur have always downplayed the canonical status of Indian English fiction because of its reliance on the Western form, its inability to speak to the large Indian masses, and its failure to be desi in its outlook. Paranjape's arguments have often proved Indian English fiction to be mediocre compared to English fiction. In his work *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* (2000), Makarand Paranjape asserts the (anti-)colonial ancestry of Indian English fiction but, for him, it can rarely function in an anti-imperialistic mode. He claims it is clear that English can never become one of our bhasa literatures despite the wishful pleas of several of its supporters; he adds that Indian English literature will never be desi. Paranjape's specious arguments can be true in the context of pre-1980s India when Indian English literature, specifically Indian English fiction, was in its infancy. It is fallacious to see post-1980s Indian English fiction as a naïve projection of a (sub-)imperial consciousness; it is essentially an anti-imperialistic response to the British literary canon. It is erroneous to consider Indian English fiction to be supportive of an imperialistic agenda only because it comes to us after being first published abroad or the Indian sensibility becomes subservient to the alien medium of expression, rendering the resulting work inauthentic or unconvincing.

To contest the disparaging arguments of Paranjape and others who have undermined the canonical stature of Indian English fiction, the book studies selected examples of post-1980s Indian English fiction as an 'alternative' literary canon. It asserts the hitherto neglected fact that post-1980s Indian English fiction is an anti-imperialistic project to create a parallel native canon. To prove this proposition, an in-depth analysis of the syllabi of the MA (English) programmes of some NAAC accredited "A" grade Indian universities has been done. The book examines post-1980s Indian English fiction as an alternative literary canon. This canon is taught in many of the acclaimed Indian universities as part of the postgraduate course in English. In many universities, it has even displaced the traditional literary canons. This canon has emerged as an anti-imperialistic response to the British literary canon gradually evolving in the revival of national consciousness, cultural traditions and a nativised ethos.

The first chapter, "Literary Canon – Its Constituents and Implications", serves as an introduction to the concept of "literary canon". It looks into the process of canon formation in the West, from the fifth century to the postmodernist era. The journey of the canon from theology to literature is charted. The different constituents of the literary canon – aesthetics or

ideological – are analysed with reference to the canon theories as propounded by Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Stanley Fish, John Guillory, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Edward Said and others. In its journey towards the postmodern age, the notion of literary canon underwent critical reassessment during the cultural wars in America; it was during the period of the cultural wars that numerous counter-canons were born – this also forms a part of this chapter. The questions: *"Why does a literary canon matter so much?"* and *"Why is there a need for a national literary canon?"* are also addressed succinctly. Further, this chapter advocates that the hegemonic colonial perceptions of literary canon can be deconstructed through forming an alternative literary canon marked by an indigenous ethos and cultural practices. It rejects the popularly acknowledged belief expressed by Makarand Paranjape, David McCutchion, Herbert McArthur and others that Indian English fiction is the product of the colonial encounter and should thus be evaluated in accordance with the rules set out in the Western canon. Though Indian English fiction up to the 1970s was modelled on Western fashion, post-1980s Indian English fiction displays a bold 'Indian' identity.

The next chapter, "Indian English Fiction as a Literary Canon in University Syllabi", examines the process of canon formation in Indian universities. The literary canon is an academic construct; it is academia that largely regulates the idea of the canon. Hence, this chapter is dedicated to the study of the MA (English) syllabi of thirty NAAC accredited "A" graded Indian universities. The main objective of this chapter is to explore the pattern of canon formation in the English literature teaching departments of Indian universities. The chapter unearths the fact that literary syllabi for MA (English) in Indian universities still show a marked inclination towards the Western literary canon. No doubt, these universities have attempted to form the canon of Indian English literature over the last three decades, but the Western literary canon still carries comparatively more weight. This chapter argues that the literary syllabus, which was once considered a neutral accumulation of literary texts of artistic and aesthetic value, now seems to be a set of texts which reflect the vision of a certain group or community. Hence, one may say that a literary syllabus is an ideological revelation of someone's vision and the university is an apparatus for systematising such ideological concerns. This case is not merely applicable to Western universities; Indian universities have also engaged in such practices. It is observed that departments of English in India are passing through a crisis – many of their ideas which were once considered self-evident and universal are questioned and challenged. This is due to their engagement in ideological

affairs. This chapter also tries to address the question of why fiction, as a genre, is used as a representative canon over the other forms of literature in the twentieth century? A major section in this chapter analyses the implications behind the selection of different post-1980s Indian English fiction in university syllabi. The chapter also explores how these selected novels are a part of the hegemonic tradition. By doing this, the chapter also highlights how the departments of English still depend on Western scholarship to form Indian canons.

The third chapter, "Post-1980s Indian English Fiction as an Alternative Literary Canon", negates the popular claim that Indian fiction, whether in English or in vernacular languages, is essentially a mimicry of Western fiction. Though the Indian novel has developed under the considerable influence of Western fiction, Indian fiction is not mimicry of the West. The chapter claims that the post-1980s Indian English fiction has proved itself as an alternative literary canon and is different from the Western novel as well as the bhasa novels of India. It is an anti-imperialistic stratagem to construct an indigenous alternative canon. This chapter differentiates post-1980s Indian English fiction from English fiction on the basis of the importance to the individual and society, orality and writing tradition, the treatment of characters, the use of history and myths, and the adherence to realism. This chapter also distinguishes post-1980s Indian English fiction from bhasa novels. It also argues that differentiating the Indian English novel from bhasa fiction has become the project of narrow nationalism which rejects English because of its colonial pedigree. The best way to resolve this debate is to understand that the Indian English novel and bhasa fiction are not binary opposites. Each has its own unique identity, potentiality and its own readership. To debate which of the two is "better" would be a violation of artistic individuality. The way in which post-1980s Indian English fiction has veered away from pre-1980s fiction also forms one of the chief concerns. Finally, the chapter offers a critical rereading of selected examples of post-1980s Indian English fiction to justify describing them as an alternative literary canon.

In "Emerging Trends in Post-1980s Indian English Fiction", it was claimed that the recent generation of Indian English writers have opened up fresh ground. Salman Rushdie, the hero of the post-1980s, has shown a new direction for writers. This has also authenticated the change in post-1980s Indian English fiction by legitimising the "chutneyfication" of language. The writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century have carried Rushdie's structural and narrative innovations further. With the pace of time, post-1980s Indian English fiction has accelerated numerous changes in the form

and content of the novel. With experiments in form and content, post-1980s Indian English fiction has assumed international stature and has attracted a global readership. With the versatile expansion of post-1980s Indian English Fiction, the older hierarchy of language has lost its importance – it rejoices in the fusion of languages, cultures and races. The post-1980s Indian English writers have formed interesting plots using myths, history and politics. Post-1980s Indian English fiction is not simply a story of India, but a source of compelling evidence of India's changing literary culture. The strength of post-1980s Indian English fiction lies in the excavation of memories, a hidden past, myths and the political history of India in a fantastic, magic-realist way. This chapter highlights the major trends in post-1980s Indian English fiction. It also distinguishes how the thematic novelty of these novels has given a shape to different sub-canons – post-colonial, feminist, diasporic and dalit – in the field of Indian English fiction.

The final chapter concludes with observations and analysis of post-1980s Indian English fiction. It affirms that post-1980s Indian English fiction has the capacity to represent the cultural traditions of India. The chapter denies the claim of Makarand Paranjape and some others that Indian English fiction is an inauthentic literary expression because of the use of English. It shows that the nativised use of English has made post-1980s Indian English fiction a medium for the expression of the same sensations felt in bhasa fiction. It shows how post-1980s Indian English fiction offers a more objective rendering of the national psyche, cultural practices and indigenous ideals.

Most research studies into Indian English fiction have concentrated on its rise and development. They deal with individual writers thematically or with some novels on a particular theme. Very few research studies have addressed the problematic issue of literary canon formation in Indian universities and how Indian universities themselves have evolved in the formation of a literary canon. Perhaps this is the first study that deals concurrently with the polemics of literary canon formation in India and how the canon of post-1980s Indian English fiction is being formed in Indian universities. Post-*Midnight's Children* Indian English fiction has established a new literary canon of its own, but for various reasons it has not been analysed from the point of view of the theories of the canon. The book's importance lies in its claim that post-1980s Indian English fiction is an alternative literary canon and in its examination of the issue of literary canon formation in select Indian universities. Moreover, the book also explores some emerging trends in post-1980s Indian English fiction. The book deals with a wide range of novels from the 1980s to the present.

This book should also serve as a beacon for those who want to explore and study the literary canons of Indian English poetry and Indian English drama.

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CHAPTER ONE

LITERARY CANON: ITS CONSTITUENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The literary canon, an acclaimed repository of 'aesthetic' values, has always undergone revisions from time to time to keep pace with contemporaneous changes in sociocultural practices. It was in the age of Enlightenment that critical discourse concerning the value of authors and literary texts was strengthened by philosophical inquiry dealing with the more elemental conundrum of whether impartial ground could be established for aesthetic judgements or not. The value-judgements that Enlightenment philosophy offered were considered universal, ethical and rational. In recent years, however, the Enlightenment category of universality, which was pivotal to the eighteenth century thinkers who sought to transcend national, linguistic and other boundaries, has been the subject of vigorous reassessment and debate. This has been both admired as an essential apparatus of a radical social critique, and condemned as the conjectural nucleus through which local differences such as race, sex, ethnicity and class are eradicated under the banner of indistinct universality. Within contemporary literary studies, the focal point has shifted from the consideration of universality and aesthetic values to a much more anxious and incongruous perception of the canon as an exercise in political power and social exclusion. The Enlightenment assumed a common culture of artistic taste, whereas contemporary debates are marked by postmodernist concerns of pluralism and the fragmented nature of culture as well as an instantaneous concern for the reclamation or construction of cultural unities. The hermeneutic factors that have escorted the reassessment of universality and aesthetic values include the intensified political consciousness of class, race, gender and ethnicity, the academic professionalisation of criticism, a marked turn towards cultural relativism, and the postmodernist erosion of the boundaries of 'taste'.

With such primary propositions in mind, this chapter will aim to assess the literary canon of post-1980s Indian English fiction as an alternative literary canon. The study rejects the popularly acknowledged belief that

Indian English fiction is the product of the colonial encounter and should thus be evaluated in accordance with the rules set in the Western canon. Though Indian English fiction up to the 1970s was modelled on Western fashion, the post-1980s Indian English fiction has been written in a way that displays a bold 'Indian' identity. The phrase "Constructing a New Canon" in the title of the book is suggestive of the fact that post-1980s Indian English Fiction is a kind of *alternative* both to English fiction and to the earlier Indian English fiction. Since the post-1980s Indian English Fiction is a new canon, it should have different evaluative practices that do not rely on Western practices. This chapter looks into the process of literary canon formation in the West from the earliest times up to the postmodernist age; the aesthetic-ideological appearance of literary canon; the cultural politics and consequent canon debates; and the need for an alternative literary canon.

Canon: A Journey from Theology to Literature

As dictionaries note,[1] the English word "canon" originated from the Greek word "κανών" which means 'measuring rod', 'reed' or 'an instrument of measurement'. Now the word "canon" stands for an authentic set of works by an author or an artist. The term "canon" actually emerged in debates within the Christian Church about the authenticity of the books of the Bible. In this context, Jeremy Hawthorn notes that:

> The term originates in debates within the Christian Church about the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible and the books of the New Testament. That which was termed canonical was accepted as having divine authority within the church, while writing of no, or doubtful authority was termed apocryphal. Thus, the Protestant canon and apocrypha differ slightly from those of the Catholic Church. (Hawthorn 2003: 34)

In the fifth century, the term "canon" was used for the ecclesiastical purpose of deciding which books of the Bible and which writings of the Early Fathers were to be preserved as the most authentic embodiments of the fundamental truths of Christianity. The sole purpose of announcing the various canons as the pragmatic reflections of religious authority to the public in this way was to reinforce the ecclesiastical power of the Christian consecrated writings as well as a wish to protect the texts from sacrilegious interpretive disagreements which could have struck at the foundation of authority and value, if the canons had not been secure. The compilation of the New Testament was the first instance of canon formation which sought to canonise the four particular versions of Christ's life as authentic or holy.

Anything that failed to authenticate its relation to Christ's life was excluded from the New Testament by the Roman Church. However, in his post-colonial critique of the Western canon, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said casts off this Eurocentric etymology of the word, suggesting that the word "canon" has probably come from the Arabic word "*quanon*" which means "law" or "act" (Said 2004: 25).

Einar Thomassen opines that the word "canon" has two distinct meanings: "rule" and "list". It acquired in the course of time the more abstract meanings of "norm", "rule", "pattern", "model", etc. In addition to these, the same word could also be used to denote various kinds of lists, such as, astronomical, lists of rulers, grammatical paradigms, and so on (Thomassen 2010: 9). The Christian theological thesaurus inherited both meanings of the word. The interpretation of the term "canon" as "rule" appears from the end of the second century, whereas its use as "list" appears in Christian writings considerably later in the fourth century. Ostensibly, "rule" and "list" have altogether different sorts of prodigy. The rule is essentially qualitative and substantial, while the list is quantitative and formal. The liaison between these two undertones of "canon" is made more intricate by the fact that a list may in itself represent a norm. However, this is not the case with every kind of list. There are some lists that are more descriptive than normative or prescriptive such as dictionaries and directories of various kinds. Thus, if canon can mean both "list" and "rule", the conclusion might be drawn that some canons are more canonical than others (ibid: 10).

Canon, perhaps, also means an "imprint" or "impression", as it carries with it an impression of a religious sect, a nation or a community of some kind. In regard to literature, the idea of a canon carries with it an imprint of national identity. A look back to the early history of English literature confirms that different national canons were instigated during the Renaissance period. These canons, directly or indirectly, formed the social and political identity of Europe and instilled the Europeans with nationalism. The award of an annual pension to Spenser by Queen Elizabeth I can be considered an early instance of literary canon formation in English literature. More clearly the appreciation of Shakespeare as a poet of all the ages by Ben Jonson is undisputedly a canonical stunt. No doubt other writers of this era displayed a national fervour, but they were not yet recognised. This means that a canon has to be canonised in some or the other way. Recognition as the Poet Laureate was also a kind of canonical practice. The trend which Ben Jonson began in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period reappeared in the eighteenth century, initiating a sustained chain of literary evaluations. The use of literary writings to support the

political parties such as the Whigs and the Tories was probably the first case of ideological engagement by literary texts. Dr. Johnson's *The Lives of the Poets*, a critical account of the lives and works of fifty-two poets, is an attempt to canonise these poets as better than others.

But it was in the nineteenth century that the idea of a canon of literary works emerged in a way that superseded the ancient biblical model and prepared the background for the institutionalisation of English studies. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when orthodox faith and practices seemed to be losing their authoritative hold over the minds of many people, some thought that a literary canon might replace the discredited biblical canon. This gave an upsurge to a body of criticism that argued in favour of poetry, drama and fiction serving as a form of 'secular scripture' – a canon for the canonless in a post-Christian world (Lundin 1998). Matthew Arnold played the central role in the move for literary works to assume canonical status. In the nineteenth century, when the existence of God was increasingly subject to doubt, Arnold thought literature could solve the confusion. Arnold realised that Darwin's theory of evolution offended the sensibilities of people who believed that their lives were regulated by the Christian idea of birth, suffering, death and rebirth. Concurrently, the emergence of science as a body of knowledge convinced the people that it could provide logical answers to the questions they confronted in their lives. This led to the shattering of their religious faith. Arnold felt that literature could give some direction to the Victorian people in this regard, leading to the displacement of religious scripture by literary texts. His famous quote, "to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world", inspired a larger group of scholars to formulate the idea of a fixed canon of great books in the study of literature (Arnold 1966: 33).

Two other names that are associated with the perpetuation of the canon in the field of literature are FR Leavis and TS Eliot. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* and Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent" helped in the formation the English literary canon, instilling a sense of a literary tradition. Leavis's selection of some novelists from a long list of writers in the history of the novel shows his sense of literary tradition and his taste for canonicity. He distinguishes those writers who have not only changed "the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life" (Leavis 1950: 2). For Leavis, literary canon should have "a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and marked moral intensity" (Leavis 1950: 9). Leavis attempts to designate a great tradition of novelists, but his approach seems

unsystematic. The four novelists – Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad – for whom Leavis shows reverence seem to have been selected on the basis of his personal interest. However, the selection of these novelists is a kind of polemic gesture, it is a good instance of literary canonisation. A more systematic approach to the idea of canon formation along with the sense of tradition is found in TS Eliot's, "Tradition and Individual Talent". Apart from being a discourse on authorship and literary history, the essay proves to be a good example of literary canon formation in a historic sense. Eliot believes that a poet must have a relationship to past writings; he has to inculcate a historic sense of the past's continuing presence; the poet's writings must contribute to the literary tradition. The historic sense is not an impermeable idea, but it is something that has been reshaped again and again with the arrival of monumental works. This belief of Eliot opens up the whole theorem of the canon. To be canonical, a text should have conformity with the tradition of past writings. It has to conform itself to the existing norms of canonicity. It attains the status of canon when it adds something to the historic sense and thus proves to be a turning point. Eliot's observation on a new work of art is suggestive of what happens when a canonical text is added to the list of a canon. He points out:

> What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot 2005: 153)

Thus, a canon has to modify the existing order of the canonical texts. It has to prove itself a really new kind of writing by differentiating itself from the other texts. But, in this process, it must not disregard the conformity with past or historic tradition. In this way, Leavis and Eliot have given a new direction to the idea of canon in the literary field.

Literary Canon and Classic: Some Points of Departure

One must remember that a canon is not a classic; a "canon" is different from a "classic". Roger Lundin, a contemporary literary scholar, argues that many treat both canon and classic as one and the same; though the canon and the classic have a number of things in common, they are

essentially different (Lundin 1998). As a noun, canon is a collective expression of a group of works. It is interesting to note here that there is no word in English to refer to a single canonical poem, play or work of fiction. Whereas the classic, as a noun, applies only to individual works; there is no word in English for the group of works made up by the individual classics. This observation of Lundin makes it clear that a canon is plural, but determinate, while a classic is singular and inclusive. In the canon, any number of works are perpetuated or discontinued with each passing generation as they are sensitive to shifts in judgement, taste, and value, while the classic endures through the ages. What makes the classic alive is its power to speak directly to the readers across the span of centuries, its ability to question or talk back to the readers when they interrogate it. Hence, Lundin says that a classic "challenges our understanding of God, our values, and our very sense of ourselves" (ibid). In his influential essay, "What is a Classic?", TS Eliot says that if there is one single word in which one can suggest the maximum of what is meant by the term "a classic" it is the word "maturity". He confirms that a classic can only occur when a civilisation is mature, when language and literature are mature, and it must be the work of a mature mind. To him, maturity of thought, expression, style and diction constitute a classic (Eliot 2004: 496). Attributing the qualities of a classic writer, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, a leading French critic, says:

> A true classic […] is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; who has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered; who has expressed his thought, observation, or invention, in no matter what form, only provided it be broad and great, refined and sensible, sane and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in his own peculiar style, a style which is found to be also that of the world, a style new without neologism, new and old, easily contemporary with all time.

These words of Sainte-Beuve make it clear that a classic refers to a work of art that has achieved excellence and has set a standard of its own kind. A classic enriches the human mind, unearths the eternal passion, and expresses noble thoughts that touch almost all hearts. The constituents that form a classic are general human interests (an ability to address a large group of people), elements of form (grandeur of thought, diction and expression), endurance over time, and aesthetic satisfaction. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985) defines a literary classic as "a work considered first-rate or excellent of its kind, and therefore standard, fit to be used as a model or imitated" (Drabble 2005: 167). Thus, a classic

is a secular piece of artistic writing which has the ability to speak to all human generations and provide aesthetic pleasure.

At the outset only, it is important to deconstruct some popular myths regarding the canon. These myths are: (i) a canon provides a universal rule of evaluation; (ii) a canon substitutes a list of timeless masterpieces; and (iii) a canon is a classic. It must be understood that a canon does not provide a universal rule of evaluation that determines in advance which literary works are meritorious, but instead it constitutes a restricted cultural arena within which an evolving process of judgement occurs. One must bear in mind that a literary canon does not substitute a list of timeless masterpieces, but rather a shifting repertoire of normative exemplars that are necessary in the ongoing maintenance of public life. In addition, it is pertinent to understand that a canon is not a classic. A canon refers to works that have to validate their canonical position from time to time, whereas it is assumed that a classic has already established its worth and therefore it does not require its status to be endorsed with the passage of time. An introductory monograph on literary canon studies identifies the following differences between a canon and a classic: (i) a canon is more exclusive, a classic more inclusive; (ii) a canon is polemic, a classic balanced; (iii) a canon is debatable, a classic indisputable (though the postmodernist critical theories have questioned the status of a 'classic', many regard it as incontestable); (iv) a canon is the term which can be applied to current works, a classic is generally applied to old works (originally the term suggested Roman or Greek works but now it is applied to any literary work of eminence); and (v) a canon is generally used to accomplish the self-centred intentions of a particular group of people, while classic has only one objective to fulfil, i.e. providing artistic delight (Luhar 2014: 25).

This book clearly distinguishes the literary canon from the literary classic. The forthcoming discussion on the literary canon does not imply that is means 'classic'. A canon has a temporal fixity, whereas a classic has an everlasting fixity.

Literary Canon: Implications and Constituents

The term, literary canon suggests the categorisation of literature. It is a term used widely to refer to a group of literary works that are considered the most important of a particular time, period or place. A literary canon seems to confer a certain authority onto a work of literature. When a work enters the literary canon, it gains status from its official inclusion in a group of literary works that are widely studied and respected. There are no

rigid qualifications for canonisation, and whether a work will be canonised remains a slanted decision. In short, a literary canon implies the evaluation or estimation of literary texts as important.

However, it is important to note that any estimation of value, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, essentially involves analysis and judgement on the part of the evaluator concerned whose opinions depend entirely on their perceptions of the object under consideration (Smith 1983: 22). Each of them will have their own interests in the evaluation, and it will be better or worse for each of them in relation to a different set of desired or desirable functions. All evaluations are either subject-relative or potentially informative about whatever it seeks to judge or define; hence it is pointless to look for cognitive substance, logical status or a truth-value in aesthetic judgements. Aesthetic evaluation is performed by the artist or creator along with the audience that consists of various categories of current or future evaluators. Evaluation is a process of a transactional relationship and it includes the writer and all people and institutions exposed to this writer's work. These people are the pivots of evaluative authority that are called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and preferences that stand to validate the literary preferences of a community, establishing what David Hume refers to as the "standard of taste" (ibid: 18). Asserting and establishing a standard in this way, the literary canon is born.

A literary canon arises from a fusion of history and features of idealisation, reflecting the concerns about the frameworks and forms of imagination considered valuable in a culture or a community. In order to assume canonical status, a work of art must offer a constructive language and framework for a situation delineated in numerous non-canonical works; it is also expected to provide figures of judgement for the same. The literary canon is widely accepted as an academic construct that works as the legitimating backbone of a cultural and political identity which confirms the authority of the texts selected to naturalise this function. This academic construct endeavours to formulate pedagogic and acculturative devices that are aimed at creating and maintaining a subpopulation of a community which can appreciate works of art and literature through being taught the appropriate skills, cultivating their interests and developing their tastes. By doing this, the literary academy ensures the continuity of canonical works, functions and audience. However, Harold Bloom, in *The Western Canon*, rejects the validity of any kind of literary academy. He admits that "the deepest truth about the secular canon-formation is that it is performed by neither critics nor academies, let alone, politicians. Writers,