Interrogating the Politics of Canon Formation: A Theoretical Purview

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Abstract

The term 'canon 'is Greek in origin and signifies a "standard" or "measuring rod" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). It designates a set of rules and also denotes a body of writing that is considered to be authentic. In English literature, 'canon 'initially referred to biblical writings authenticated by church authorities as genuine but later also included the works of select authors and validated selectively by critics. The proposed paper interrogates the European notion of "literary canon" as proposed by critics like Harold Bloom, which instead of counter arguing the approach adopted in the formation of "biblical canon," follows more or less a similar path of exclusion. The paper also seeks to question the politics of canon formation via challenging its universalist dimension and thereby exposing its particularist aspect. An attempt will also be made to unravel the prejudices, biases, and predilections behind the accumulative consensus of critics. To broaden the ambit of discussion on canon formation, the ideas of thinkers such as Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Harold Bloom, Wendell V. Harris, John Guillory, and Michel Foucault shall be availed of. To counter the exclusionary stance vis-a-vis canon formation, an alternative extensional and inclusive approach as proposed by Earl R. Anderson and Gianfrancesco Zanetti will be pressed into service.

The word 'canon 'has gained wide currency in contemporary literary discussions and debates. These debates have also raised controversy over literary canon. Although the question of politics involved in canon formation has caught little scholarly attention, yet arguments pertaining to the creation of already existing canon are taken up for discussion quite frequently. Moreover, our contemporary understanding of canon formation contradicts the traditional views that led to canon formation in the past.

Brief Historical Overview of the Term

After Christianity's arrival, the Greek word canon was extended to denote a list of Holy Scriptures (Bible and New Testament) that were authenticated by church authorities as genuine. The markers adopted by authorities to authenticate writings remain unknown. Kilian McDonnell highlights 'Koinonia 'as the standard adopted in the formation of 'biblical canon 'and claims, "The process of determining the canon of the scriptures was a process of the self-identification of the *koinonia*, though the primary goal was the preservation of the gospel" (29). Moreover, koinonia, the experience of salvation conjoining the Christ and the Spirit, incorporates "relationality" among scriptures and people (as it demands the active participation of the communities for whom these writings were intended), further shows "the participation in one reality held in common" (McDonnell 29). But it also displays the problem with standards that led to the politics of exclusion. By including only select writings and ignoring the others makes 'biblical canon 'a close entity that does not provide any space for that are ignored.

Opposite to the authoritative biblical canon are the works termed 'apocrypha': works that are considered invalid according to certain standards. McDonnell considers "oral tradition" as another marker for "distinguishing between books which would be acceptable as scriptures", meanwhile *Acts of Paul* is rejected "because they teach that women can baptize" which was "opposite to the liturgical practice of the church" (38, 47). Consequently, the formation of 'biblical canon 'is not based on certain criteria, rather it also exposes the biases involved in canon formation. Similarly, books that were authenticated in the Roman Catholic biblical canon were considered apocryphal by Protestants (Abrams 28).

The term literary canon is sometimes used interchangeably for classic. It designates those authors, who with accumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and academicians have considered as major, and their works as classics. These literary works achieved the status of "major" as they are discussed fully by literary critics, most kept in print, and included in anthologies and syllabi of literary courses. John Guillory, instead of taking interchangeable interpretation of two terms considers "canon" as a displacement of the word "classic." He claims:

> The latter term (canon) does not now signify the same relatively uncritical regard for the great works of Western literature as its predecessor (classic), but rather a critique of the very regard, a critique that has all but retired the word "classic" as the signifier of a practical era of criticism (Guillory 36).

The word classic has established as the signifier of the practical era of criticism through the writing of critics like Samuel Johnson, who in his "Preface to Shakespeare" considers "Shakespeare canon" as classic because it has outlived his "century", the term "commonly fixed as a test of literary merit" (3). Moreover, Matthew Arnold's concept of "touchstone" in his "The Study of Poetry" has similar implications. He considered Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton as classic (great) writers, as select passages of their writings can serve to evaluate the literary merit of other writings when compared (Abrams 321).

Binarism in Canon Formation

It is not only authoritatively sanctioned works i.e., canonical and the works that are rejected, i.e. apocryphal, present on binary construction, but the very term 'canon 'also has binarism in its praxis. The use of the term 'canon 'first for biblical text and then for literary writings reflects binary opposition. The praxis of the term with reference to both biblical and literary writings obliterates the essential difference between the two. Biblical canon, vested with authoritative power to sanction restriction, is a confining construction that allows neither addition nor deletion. On the contrary, the literary canon is loose in boundaries, suggestive rather than explicit, and always open for inclusions, and thus subject to change when needed (Abrams 29).

Consequently, the Eurocentric notion of making select text prominent (center) marginalize those are rejected to the periphery. This idea is intrinsic to binary opposition, where one aspect remains at the center and other marginalized. Moreover, the binary opposition is not limited to biblical/literary distinction. Even the 'literary canon 'contains binarism, as it is intrinsic to the term 'canon. 'Furthermore, it highlights the politics involved in canon formation via exposing the standards followed for inclusion and exclusion.

Accordingly, the binary present in the canon is double-edged. It exposes the standards of exclusion. The literary canon is challenged for being male-centered and patriarchal that excludes women's writings. But even the formation of female literary canon shows similar prejudices, and by making some writings the center, it excludes other writings and transgender as marginal.

Process of Canon Formation

Canon formation is a social and literary process through which any literary work or writer is designated as canonical. The process involves diverse viewpoints from scholars, critics, and authors to form an accumulative consensus for the assignment of authors and texts in school, college, and university curricula. Canon formation involves several other factors that designate politics involved in the process. Zepetnek claims that "canonization is a cumulative process, involving the text, its reading, readership, literary history, criticism, publication mechanism (i.e., sales of books, library use, etc.), politics, etc." (109). Building his arguments with reference to the postulations of thinkers like John Guillory and Jan Gorak, he contests readership as a prominent marker involved in canon formation. Moreover, these factors are visible while discussing canon formation.

Canon formation is sometimes considered indistinguishable from identity formation. Such views concern with ideological predilection and power relations involved in the process. Silvia Schultermandl condemns the polarization of American literary canon through institutionalization of multiculturalism, which accords "ethnicity" with the status of generic other (288). Stretching the ideas proposed by Guillory, who considered canon primarily as a "political act" and the "representative of a social identity," Schultermandl postulates that "Canon formation is an applied field of identity politics because there is an inherent link between canon formation and national identity" (Guillory 37: Schultermandl 289). Such critiques of canon formation reasonably argue that the process of inclusion is simultaneously a process of exclusion. Even the literary canon that is claimed to be subjective, borderless, and inclusive is not independent from the biases and prejudices involved in its creation.

Proclamations about the inclusive and universal nature of literary canon are contestable because Eurocentric. Eurocentric assumptions of forming literary canon follow more or less a similar path of exclusion. The formation of literary canon as an exclusive phenomenon resembles the methods adopted in the formation of the biblical canon, is exemplified by Harold Bloom in his defense of Western literary canon. Whether he questions the replacement of "world tradition" with that of "western tradition": which shows the monopoly of biblical canon, the selection of writers in the book does not justify his claims to make the canon universal (Bloom 15). Rather, the selection reveals its particularist aspect as he considers Shakespeare at the center of western canon and selects twenty-six other writers on the basis of an ongoing inspiration of Shakespeare's writings.

Bloom considers "aesthetic supremacy" and "originality" as the only markers of being canonical and attacks the values of literature proposed by members of "School of Resentment":

> Originality becomes a literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition, which do not gladden the hearts of Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors – of all those whom I have described as members of the School of Resentment (20).

Whom Bloom portrays as "members of the School of Resentment", have questioned the nature of canon formation. These diverse critics, whether Feminists, Marxists, or deconstructive, have opposed the established western literary canon via exposing the biases and politics involved in its formation.

Mary Ellen Waithe highlights such biases while discussing the wrongful omission of women from the English-language canon of philosophy. She proposes few criteria to judge the philosophical merits of women writing, with a view to expand the present canon of philosophy so that it can include the perspective of minority and indigenous people. By proposing an extensional approach of canon formation she claims, "More than one hundred women philosophers satisfy one or more of these criteria" (Waithe 31). Moreover, the process of canon formation is contestable as it encompasses ideological biases, political affiliations, and the values of elite European white male. Consequently, the power politics involves to marginalize and exclude the interests of minorities.

Revisionist Thought on Canon Formation

There is a much ongoing debates between the challengers and defenders of traditional standard canon. Defenders of traditional canon argues for the high artistic and intellectual quality of canonical works, their aesthetic power, and appeal to widely shared human concerns and values. Challengers, on the contrary, aims to transform existing power structures via not merely opening but replacing standard canon by marginalized and excluded. Revisionists without taking any stand with defenders or challengers, re-vision to investigate historical, material, and institutional processes that construct the literary canon. Revisionist thought is evident in views presented by Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Richard Ohmann.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith in a similar fashion to Harold Bloom contest for the traditional aesthetic values for canon formation. But she goes a step further and examines the process through which artistic value is granted. Her views concern with what she termed as "aesthetic axiology", and highlights general logic of categories such as "value," "aesthetic," and "taste." Rather than seeing these categories as static, she portrays them as dynamic and further "contingent." These categories according to her are universal but not static, as they involve complex social processes in their creation. She claims:

> The specific "existence" of an object or event (literary work), its integrity, coherence, and boundaries, the category of entities to which it "belongs," and its specific "features," "qualities," or "properties" are all the variable products of the subject's engagement with his or her environment under a particular set of conditions (Vincent B. et al. 1914).

She postulates that "art" has a purpose to shape human relation to it, and interrogates the dynamic nature of this relation (based on value, taste, and aesthetic pleasure) as "contingent," because the interaction constantly changes and cannot be known in advance.

Discussions on canon formation are dominated by established standards of literary evaluation based on autonomous artistic merits. The revisionist approach, as presented by Smith, contradicts such established standards and inspects those institutions that are considered peripheral in the discussion of literary merits. Richard Ohmann revisions the process of canon formation in the context of American fiction via focusing on aspects of distribution and marketing. He contests that attributes like editing, marketing, advertising, and reviewing make complex institutional channels that determine the reception of books in the market, consequently "preselect" works as "precanonical." He validates the role of advertising for "aesthetic judgment" that is inflected by capitalist criteria. He further claims, "if a novel did not become a best-seller within three or four weeks of publication, it was unlikely to reach a large readership later on" (Vincent B. et al. 1882). Accordingly, the aesthetic judgment does not merely contain artistic value, rather it shapes modern capitalist class division. The common working class (literary agents, editors, critics, reviewers, taste-making intellectuals, professors, students, etc.), people having literary social affinities, influences more to determine literary merit, but have a "marginal position with respect to capital"

from that of "ruling class" (intellectuals who manage class affairs and its institution (writers)) (Vincent B. et al. 1890).

Discourse of Canon

Our contemporary discussions on canon formation should avoid biases while taking different approaches into account. The discourse of canon validates several such approaches i.e. extensional and intentional which are further characterized by collective and distributive modalities. Earl R. Anderson claims, "literary scholars tend to define the canon extensionally, in terms of examples and specimens, rather than intensionally, in terms of the attributes of a canonical work" (1442). Extensional approach appeals to the inclusiveness and further proposes every literary work as a member of category called "literature" via avoiding questions of good, bad, or best.

Extensional model with its distributive form is more scientific than others modes of discourse, but conceptual grounds of canon in this mode are "logically impossible" even though "all modern discourse about literary canon takes place within this modality" (Anderson 1443). According to Zanetti and Anderson, canon formation should concern more with "attributes" of canonicity rather than "specimens", and claims, "the idea of a literary canon can have validity only if defined in terms of its attributes, as Aristotle defines tragedy and epic in poetics" (Anderson 1443).

The discourse of canon contains mixed modalities that exist simultaneously at same moment. Anderson highlights four modalities in the discourse: "the extensional distributive one of logical positivism," "the extensional-collective one of nominalism," "the intensional-distributive one of Aristotle," and "intensional-collective one of Plato" (1443). Consequently, at the level of discourse, canon formation provides a perspective that exhibits the co-existence of mixed modalities. He further claims:

> From the perspective of discourse analysis, (co-existence) make perfect sense and illustrate our capacity to discourse in all four modes. The traditions of philosophy have historically privileged one or another of these modalities: the extensional-distributive in favor at present. But because all four coexist in ordinary language and in human thinking, it is unlikely that any one will reign forever (Anderson 1443).

The priority of one modality over another problematize the very nature of discourse. It further leads to the question of exclusion that is pertinent to canon formation. The perspective of discourse makes us aware to avoid presuppositions before engaging in discussions of canon formation.

Conclusion

To sum up, the politics of canon formation is not limited merely to the politics of inclusion and exclusion, and it is rather grounded in material, ideological, and socio-cultural realities, which determine a relationship with literature and literary texts. The term canon and its praxis exhibit binary formation. Similarly, the process of canon formation is simultaneously a process of identity formation, characterized by binarism and the construction of marginalized other. Canon formation presents a complex phenomenon of social interaction, which requires revisioning to expose the politics behind accumulative consensus of critics arrived at in accordance with the market pressures. The discourse of canon formation interrogates as well as unsettles inherent binaries therein via challenging the privileging of one particular thought/idea over the other in the course of discussion and debate pertaining to the formation of canon.

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