

Dalit Canon Formation and the African American Experience

Kotti Sree Ramesh and D. Jyothirmai

ABSTRACT

What is a canon? Should Dalit literature, or for that matter, should subaltern literatures have an exclusive canon? Or, should they aspire to gain space in an established canon? What is it that these literatures aspire towards as far as canon is concerned? In this paper, I will deliberate on the need for a distinct canon for Dalit literature with the African American social experience as a model. "Canon" in literary criticism means a body of literary work that is traditionally regarded as worthy of study, and hence over a period of time, have acquired certain value to be established as a classic. Traditional critics argue that these classics have stood the test of time, based on their inherent greatness and other universal aesthetic criteria and include a long line of works that T. S. Eliot calls the "tradition". Even though Eliot (1988) speaks of individual talent and texts that have the power to modify the tradition, it is only texts that *conform* to the tradition that actually fit into the tradition. Hence, it is doubtful if Eliot's "tradition" has any place for subaltern or hyphenated literatures such as African American, Caribbean, Black-British and Dalit Literatures. As such, the notion of canon has been under attack from feminists, minority literatures and social historians, who consider it as the preserve of white, male and bourgeoisie dominance. Hence in the twentieth century, many critics mistrust the idea of canon. They argue that a number of "great" texts of minority groups and women do not find place in the canon as they were excluded on the basis of class, caste, race or gender.

Key words: Canon formation, Dalit canon, African American experience, feminist literature, subaltern literatures and religious canon

INTRODUCTION

What is a canon? Should Dalit literature, or for that matter, should subaltern literatures form an exclusive canon? Or should they aspire to gain space in the

established canon? What is it that these literatures aspire towards, as far as canon is concerned? Unless the word canon is understood and properly qualified, it will be difficult to understand how African American literature informs Dalit, or subaltern literatures. Let us consider the origin of the word canon. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) describes it as “a rule, law or decree laid down by an ecclesiastical council” (ratified by the Pope or the King). However, in the familiar sense of the word “canon” came to signify a list of texts, or authors, more specifically books of the Bible, by early theologians. It was therefore a collection of books, or authors of the Bible, accepted by the Christian church as genuine and inspired. This implied a principle of rigorous selection by which some authors or texts were deemed worthier of preservation than others. In the course of time, the biblical canon closed forever with texts that “measured up” to the standards of the religious community. In the case of the biblical canon, the “measurement” was based on the distinction between the orthodox and the heretical.

Literary scholars presume that a similar process takes place in the selection of classics, leading to the formation of a canon. Hence, canon in literary criticism has come to mean a body of literary work, traditionally regarded as the most important, significant and worthy of study. It includes those works, especially of Western literature, considered to be of the highest quality and most enduring value such as the Classics. Traditional or conservative critics argue that these Classics have stood the test of time as a result of their inherent greatness as well as other universal aesthetic criteria, and include a long line of works that T. S. Eliot (1988) calls the “tradition”, which has the power to direct the present. Even though Eliot (1988) speaks of individual talent and texts that have the power to modify the tradition, canon often includes only those texts that *conform or adjust* with the tradition, and not those which challenge the tradition. Hence, it is doubtful whether Eliot’s “tradition” has any place for subaltern or hyphenated literatures such as African American, Caribbean or even Black British literatures, not to mention Eliot’s penchant for racist beliefs and anti-Semitism. Not surprisingly, the notion of canon was under attack from feminists, minority literatures and social historians, who saw it as the preserve of white, male, and bourgeoisie dominance. Hence, the subaltern scholarship suspects a dominant ideological agenda behind the canon. They argue that a number of “great” texts of minority groups including women, do not find place in the canon as they were excluded on the basis of class, caste, race or gender.

DEFINING THE CANON

Much of twentieth century subaltern scholarship is filled with this polemical discourse that argues against the western notions of canon formation. However, thanks to the efforts of liberal critics such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak

and Homi Bhabha, many texts which were excluded and marginalized earlier, have found place in the canon. This is possible only because unlike the biblical canon, the literary canon is never closed. However, the process of exclusion or marginalization is not as rigorous as it is argued to be. The long history of canon formation proves that in its course, many texts have been added and subtracted, depending on the dominant ideology of the period. Hence, texts produced by minority groups, women, African American and Dalits could be accommodated only in the recent times and not earlier. For example, there is no substantial “written and published” literature by women before 1750 for obvious reasons. At the time, women in general were denied education and access to publication network. Similar reasons attest for the non-availability of Dalit writings in the pre-colonial era; Dalits were also excluded from social positions which made possible a life of literary production. Marginalized and excluded, they were denied access to literacy and publishable forms of composition. The same is the case with the African-Americans. Frederick Douglass, who escaped from slavery following the emancipation of slaves after the American Civil war and eventually went on to serve as a United States Marshall, wrote three autobiographies which have become seminal texts of African American literature. In his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass (1881 rev.1892), records with pain the denial of literacy and of course the birth of the African American literary tradition. As an African American slave, when Frederick Douglass was taught the rudiments of reading and writing by his master’s wife, his white master forbade her from giving him further instruction:

. . . if you give a nigger an inch he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself. (p. 58-59)

This example foregrounds the fact that reading and writing was regulated in societies. Consequently, social institutions regulated the selection and prescription of texts as well.

However, the rise of minority literatures led to intense debates on whether these literatures should have a separate but parallel canon, or whether they should be part of a single central canon. The debate about separate or central canon opens up another debate about aesthetics and equal representation. Finally, it boils down to some fundamental questions—who makes the canon, or, how is the canon

formed? A canon is not *what* is listed, but *who* reads, and *who* writes, and in what social circumstances, and what kinds of texts are written and for what audiences. Anne duCille(1993) argues that we should not forget that canons or traditions are “made, not born; constructed, not spawned”.

AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A text cannot be proclaimed as being a “classic” by an individual. It needs a social context, or institutional backing; it also needs to be re-introduced to the coming generations to ensure its preservation. Any argument on behalf of a Dalit canon brings in a comparison with the African American experience. Both communities have produced what is often called “poetics of liberation”. If the African American suffering dates back to colonial America, the suffering of the Dalits in India is timeless. If one overlooks the legal interpretations of slavery and untouchability, there are numerous similarities between these two communities with regard to the denial of literacy, humanity and segregation. Given the European enlightenment stress on writing as the most visible sign of the ability to reason, literature presented a way for Africans in America to prove their ability as humans and demonstrate a capacity for artistic creation and imaginative thought. Even as slaves, the African American community viewed written communication—reading, writing and print—as the technology of power. Writing therefore became the vehicle in the fight against slavery and institutionalized racism, and to seek equal status as U.S. citizens. Writing was simultaneously seen as an act of defiance and a rejection of oppression in the African American context. A similar story is scripted in the Dalit context in India. Let us take two unique (unique because neither of them have models to copy from) forms of writing that these communities have invented to re-present their experiences—slave narratives and Dalit autobiographies. These were non-literary forms of writing, which arose in a specific socio-historical context as part of the communities’ struggle against oppression. Unlike conventional genres, which due to their long history bring their weight and influence on canon formation, these forms were unique in their form.

Slave narratives were produced under highly charged historical circumstances of documenting the physical and spiritual horrors of their authors’ lives. Produced initially as a collaborative work of runaway slaves and white abolitionists, these narratives were published by the abolitionist press and promoted to serve the immediate social function of creating awareness among the Northern Whites. As an essential part of the anti-slavery movement, these narratives drew on Biblical allusions and imagery, the rhetoric of abolitionism, the traditions of the captivity

narrative and spiritual autobiography in appealing to their (often white) audiences. Each narrative told a story of self-discovery of a character that reinvented himself/herself - perhaps the underlying theme of all American and African American literature.

There were numerous accounts of slavery, written or told as narratives by former slaves in the first half of nineteenth century America. From 1760-1947, more than 200 book-length slave narratives were published in the United States and England alone. According to Marion Starling (1998), there are more than 6000 such narratives in existence, which often went through multiple editions and sometimes sold thousands of copies in the United States and throughout Europe. The best known among them was Frederick Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), which has been described by Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.(1987) as an archetypal narrative. Needless to say that Douglass's narrative is now recognized as a canonical text in African/American literature. As an international best seller, it served the purpose of social awakening. Its narrative patterns and images can not only be traced in other slave narratives, but also in diverse writings such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison.

If Douglass's *Narrative* performed its social function of creating awareness about the ills of slavery, how is it that it came to be canonized? Here comes the question that we began with. Any text, in order to be canonized, needs the backing of a social institution, and that institution according to John Guillory (1995), is the school. Academic institutions are historically considered as major social institutions that are endowed with the task of dissemination and preservation of written works. Schools, Guillory adds, are assigned "the general function of distributing various kinds of knowledge, including the knowledge of *how* to read and write as well as *what* to read and write" (p. 240). "Indeed, the problem of the canon", he says, "is a problem of syllabus and curriculum, the institutional forms by which works are preserved as *great* works" (p. 240). School or academic institutions, being part of the larger social order, are permitted to function in such a way so as to meet the latter's demands. However, if one has to speak of canonicity, John Guillory asserts, "the judgments of the larger literary culture (the community of readers and writers) must be seconded by the teachers" (246). Herein lies the reason for Douglass's narrative to outlive its immediate social function and be canonized as a seminal text of African American writing.

The historical reasons that produced Douglass's *Narrative* continued into the twentieth century; and by canonizing Douglass, the academic institutions (mostly

American) are only trying to reflect the social order. Even though, the objective of Douglass's *Narrative* was fulfilled with the abolition of slavery, African Americans struggled for more than a century to become equal citizens of the U.S. The significant motive that defined African American life and the association it made between literacy and freedom is traced in Douglass's *Narrative*. For him, learning to read was a decisive political act and literacy was the pathway from slavery to freedom. The society in general, and the academic institutions in particular, cannot ignore such key motifs, and hence the text needs to be re-introduced to generations of readers.

Further, according to canon builders, *Narrative* articulates all the key issues of slavery, racial identity, freedom and integration of African American life, and appeals to the American ideals in a lucid literary style. White America's celebration of multicultural life, democratic ideals, freedom of speech requires such texts to be promoted and made part of the canon. Often quoted for its sense of cadence, flair for the dramatic and taut narrative style which give it a lean modern feel, this text has been prescribed and thus canonized in African American and American literature courses across American universities. The attention the text received in African American scholarship reflects the prevailing forms of cultural authority. Professor Henry Louis Gates (1987), refers to Chapter One of Douglass' *Narrative* that makes the text a pioneer in African American literary tradition:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, springtime, or fall-time....My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather. My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early

age. (p. 15)¹

Professor Gates (p.10) points out the system of binary opposites that deconstructs the symbolic code imposed by the master over slave, other over self, lord over bondsman, culture over nature, patrilineality over matrilineality (the slave would often only know who his mother was), day over night (which the slave metaphorically owned) and cyclical time over linear time (the slave was not permitted to know his birth date). It is this symbolic code of binary opposites, which made this text an archetype for not only slave chronicles but also for other genres in African American Literature.

DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND CANON FORMATION

Like the slave narratives in African American literature, the Dalit autobiographies are also a unique product of specific socio-historical circumstances in India. Produced during the time of Dalit awakening in the 1980s, according to Guy Poitevin (2002), these autobiographies are more a social phenomenon than a literary event: a socio-cultural action in the form of literary performance. They are unlike the traditional autobiographies that are written by individuals at the end of their lives, looking back on life with cool composure. The Dalit narrator autobiographer never steps out of his/her historical circumstances, family and community, but constantly speaks for them. If he/she comes out as an individual to speak as part of the structural requirement of the autobiography, it is only to reflect the deplorable conditions that the family/community is forced to live in as humans. Speaking from and for the community, the narrator is in continuous dialogue with the rest of the Hindu society. These texts challenge the Varna system that effectively established, what Ambedkar termed, the “graded inequality”.

Dalit autobiographies started taking shape when conventional forms of writing such as poetry proved insufficient to convey the ageless pain of the Dalits. Though the earliest expression of Dalit pain and suffering is found in poetry, autobiography as a form was found more suitable than poetry to portray the “graded inequality” nurtured and established by the Indian caste system. The literary form of autobiography permitted the ageless, “unspeakable” truths of Dalit lives to be narrated vividly. These autobiographies also helped to characterize the term “Dalit”, and expose the instruments of ostracism and its complex effect on those communities. According to Poitevin (2002), these autobiographies could also portray other socially weak categories that were culturally stigmatized and

¹ "Douglass: Narrative", *Microsoft® Encarta® Africana Third Edition*. © 1998-2000 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

socially boycotted, such as nomadic tribes and wandering communities; female popular comedians; children, especially orphan and street children; those born out of wedlock or from inter-caste marriages; vagrants (those with neither hearth nor home) and the physically handicapped - all often treated as non-humans. Like the slave narratives, these autobiographies represented an attempt to stress upon the narrators' own humanity and the inhumanity of the caste system that marginalized her/him.

EXAMPLE OF SHARAN KUMAR LIMBALE'S *AKKARMASHI (THE OUTCASTE)*

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a Dalit writer of Maharashtra, describes in his autobiography how the oppressive caste system made him an "outcaste" or *akkarmashi* (illegitimate offspring) of a high caste Hindu father and a Dalit mother, similar to Douglass's narrative:

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore, I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. My grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am a Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who *am I*? To whom is my umbilical cord connected? (p. 38-39)

Like in the case of Frederick Douglass, the narrator's birth was the result of a "rape" permitted by an oppressive master-slave relationship and exploitative upper and lower caste relationship. Both were discarded after their birth by the fathers. Literacy and freedom, the key motif of the slave narratives, hence became the significant expression in all Dalit writings. Following Ambedkar's firm directive to "take education", Dalit autobiographies narrated the extraordinary efforts made by their narrators to attend school against all odds, which was seen as the most significant expression of social protest and personal assertion. In his Introduction to *The Outcaste*, the English translation of *Akkarmashi*, Professor G. N. Devy (2003) describes these autobiographies as "epiphanies, expression of never before mentioned intensity" (p. xxiii). Dalit autobiography, he adds, brought to Marathi literature (I would like to say Indian Literature) a larger canvas for the depiction of the social, cultural and political processes of marginalization (p. xxiii).

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* was translated into English and published by Oxford University Press, a mainstream international publisher. Professor G.

N. Devy, a reputed scholar of Indian aesthetics, wrote an introduction to the OUP edition of *Akkarmashi*, which is indicative of the process of canonization. It is a fact that a good number of autobiographies preceded *Akkarmashi*, but according to Professor Devy (2003), this text “came to be recognized as a contemporary classic immediately after its publication” (p. xxiv). He continues:

It is this depth of his response that makes Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* stand out in the genre of Dalit autobiography. And it is for the same reason, that this philosophically potent and *poetically powerful narrative* makes the readers introspect deeply, which is what all *great literary* works must do (p. xxvi).

Citing *Akkarmashi* is not to make value judgment or to be oblivious of other equally powerful autobiographies (for instance, Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, Arjun Dangle’s *Poisoned Bread*, Bama’s *Karukku*), or to valorize this particular text. It is only to recognize the process of canonization. Indeed, a majority of autobiographies are produced in vernacular languages, which may not be accessible to other language readers, and even if they are translated, the quality of translation may not be at par with the writing itself. John Guillory (1995) says, “it is perhaps more important to see how the things they say came to be said than it is to discover the secret of their canonicity” (p. 244).

CONCLUSION

As such, these autobiographies are very influential in all Dalit genres. The autobiographies have not only challenged the hegemonic conventions and value systems, but are very vocal in demanding a revision of Indian aesthetics and literary theories. Like the slave narratives, the Dalit autobiographies have an edge over other literary forms for their “authenticity” of experience, and hence will remain relevant until they achieve a structural transformation of the caste-ridden Indian society. The socio-historical forces that made the autobiographies possible will ensure their position in the canon of Dalit as well as Indian literatures.

Moreover, it is to be understood that literary works make a tradition not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and ground their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers with whom they feel a kinship. It is needless to assert that the African American slave narratives did indeed influence the Dalit autobiographies. In fact, it is through this mode of literary revision and influence that a tradition emerges and defines itself. I would like to conclude with a final word from Guillory (1995), “The canon is itself a historical event; it belongs to the history of the school.” (p. 244). As a social institution, the school (academia) has every reason to make autobiographies a part of the canon.

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Professor Kotti Sree Ramesh, a former Fulbright scholar at Harvard and Dr. D. Jyothirmai, Associate Professor have been teaching English literature at Adikavi Nannaya University since 12 and 11 years respectively. They are interested in postcolonial, African American, African and South Asian literatures.

ramesh.khotti@fulbrightmail.org

jyotirmai.dakkumala@gmail.com