Teaching the Counter-Canon: Popular Literature in the Undergraduate Classroom

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Abstract

This paper purports to explore the contested critical premises of Popular Literature and examine its emergence as a subject of academic interest in English departments in India. Through a detailed analysis of the debates on what constituted the 'literary' and the 'popular' in the twentieth century, the paper attempts to investigate the specific implications of teaching popular literature to undergraduate students of English. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which popular literature unsettles received wisdom about 'literature' and enables students to question what they have always taken for granted, leading to a disruption of established hierarchies. Popular literature courses highlight the constructed-ness of literary history, thus alerting students of the exclusionary politics of the "canon". Incorporating popular literature in undergraduate courses, the article argues, radically revolutionizes prevalent pedagogic practices, thus creating the need for a new, student-centric learning environment.

Keywords: Popular literature, counter-canon, genre fiction, cultural studies, literary criticism

Introduction

The radical re-conceptualization of the curriculum with the implementation of the New Education Policy (NEP) across universities in the 2020s has rendered our teaching practices self-conscious. Hitherto unrealized dilemmas and contradictions have surfaced, leading to a deep critical engagement of faculty in teaching departments across India. The questions of what, why and how trouble us now as never before,

as we strive to rationalize the newly designed courses to students at the receiving end of the educational process. As teachers, we become implicated in this endless struggle of producing a discourse of self-justification, where we powerfully defend our choices and preferences in teaching. Devising a strong defence for literature teaching has always been a Herculean task, more so in a competitive environment where we anxiously debate concrete, tangible "outcomes" of the courses we offer. In the largely outcome-based educative experience that is currently being envisioned, popular literature is usually the common victim of a rigid curricular policing. In such endeavours, literature courses are tested for cultural values and civilizational ethos which, as is believed, they must serve to propagate. Inclusion of popular literature, albeit on the fringes of such ambitious programmes, is always conspicuously surrounded by intense dilemmas. What values, one might ask, does popular literature endorse? Is popular literature fit enough to qualify as an area deserving serious academic and scholarly interest? Is teaching pop-lit an early indication of the debasement of cultural tastes? Can Shakespeare, Milton and other 'great' writers coexist with the likes of Stephen King, Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle and Chetan Bhagat in the same programme?

Profound or Profane? In Search of a Definition of "Popular"

As a term qualifying culture or literature of a specific kind, "popular" has always challenged the limits of available terminology. The term encapsulates an entire range of literary genres, trends and practices, thus defying any monolithic interpretation. Understood in this sense, the term "popular" essentially engages with the plural and the diverse. It encompasses a set of non-totalizable, uncategorizable practices which demand a radical overhauling of prevalent definitions of the literary. Bethany Ogdon (2001), for instance, argues how Popular Culture courses are doomed by "definitional evasiveness" (p. 504). Popular literature has always tended to be dubbed as a form of "subliterature" where "the term suggested only that the object of study was a debased form of something better" (Cawelti, 1972, p. 116). Generally believed to be dealing with insubstantial, amorphous subject matter of the kind that is a travesty of the undisputed profundity of "high" literature, the popular apparently dealt with the banal, the mundane. In English departments across India, the term has come to be associated with the denunciatory appellation of "low" cultural production for long. Till the mid-twentieth

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

century, popular cultural forms were perceived as a residual category, as inferior forms of culture. Popular culture was mass-produced: it was a commercial culture as opposed to high culture that resulted out of an individual act of creation. Sisir Kumar Das (1996) reminds us in his insightful essay:

> The term 'popular literature', however, in current critical vocabulary means only contemporary popular works and that too in a derogatory sense. It is a cheap literature, unsure, if not totally devoid, of literary merit... All our critical assessments of popular literature, therefore, begins with a high-brow distinction between two categories of reading public; one, the minority that canonizes texts and formulates aesthetic codes; and the other, the majority who treats literature as an entertainment or as a substitute for a football match or a picnic or a drinking party. (p. 148)

An Unholy Alliance: The Popular in the Literature Classroom

Till very recently, teachers of undergraduate courses in English had very clear and infallible notions of what was considered to be literary; and, more importantly, what did not match the time-tested standards by which works of art in general and literature in particular came to be judged. In an academic set-up where English literature courses invariably trained students in a literary tradition that featured the greatest authors of all time and their most enduring works—"the best that has been thought and said in the world" as Matthew Arnold (1889, p. viii) (in) famously called it—popular literature had little or nothing to do with the overarching project of training in cultural and aesthetic values. Students in undergraduate and master's programmes are still bred on the notion that 'Literature' is a serious, sacrosanct affair, involving careful critique and meticulous analysis of ambitiously written texts. Reading popular literature, let alone teaching it to young students, is an avowed profanation of the very purpose of literary endeavour. It is believed that pop-lit has little or nothing to do with the grand-narrative of human life and the problems of existence.

The rise of criticism has led to the emergence of well-defined notions about what constitutes 'serious' or 'high' literature, leading to the ideological privileging of texts from the Great Tradition. If there is one thing that literary criticism has consistently attempted to do, it is the creation of neat boundaries between the literary and the non-literary, the great and the low. English departments have unquestioningly relied

on criticism's powerful verdict of literary value, which, in turn, has influenced their choices in syllabus designing and teaching. An author's presence on the literature syllabus is often consciously or unconsciously governed by factors like critical acceptance and reputation. The largely denunciatory approach adopted by criticism towards popular literature has also led to its marginalization in the academia. Edmund Wilson, in his essay, 'Why Do People Read Detective Stories?' (1945), made disparaging remarks about popular literature by labelling it as trivial and unnecessary. He argued that detective stories, in particular, worked by a strategy of the "concealment of their pointlessness"—by narrative strategies that prevent readers from noticing their insubstantiality. They were banal—light, shallow, incapable of engaging with the grand truths of human existence. They repelled him as a reader and he described their impact in the following terms:

> It is all like a sleight-of-hand trick in which the magician diverts your attention from the awkward or irrelevant movements that conceal the manipulation of the cards, and it may mildly entertain and astonish you, as such a sleight-of-hand performance may. (Wilson, 1945, para 5)

Popular Literature and the Fallacies of Criticism

The long-term engagement of literary criticism with the identification and endorsement of the 'truly great' works of art, as Leslie Fiedler (1975) argues, has led to the progressive 'ghettoization' of popular literature. In his classic essay, "Towards a Definition of Popular Literature", Fiedler attacks the self-appointed guardians of culture, who, by virtue of critical standards of their own creation, have excluded/banned popular works of art from libraries and classrooms. His scathing critique of institutionalized criticism is best embodied in the following statement: "At its worst, therefore, which is to say, at its most shamelessly elitist, such criticism has moved the theory that there is an inverse relationship between literary merit and marketplace success" (p. 29). For him, this form of marginalization amounted to a kind of "generic pre-censorship" or "pejorative pre-classification" (p. 32). A thorough reorientation of received notions of the literary and a critical rethinking of parameters by which students have been trained to judge literature could possibly be the first step ahead towards an inclusive approach.

Between the two schools of thought—one that disparaged popular literature as unworthy of literary merit and the other that celebrated its diversity, exists an interesting intermediary space that constitutes

writers, critics, and thinkers from the established literary tradition who were great 'addicts' rather than connoisseurs of pop-lit. For this group, popular literature, or genre fiction, to be more specific, were "guilty pleasures", a term I borrow from Arthur Krystal (2012)—the books that one loves reading but is embarrassed to be seen reading. In other words, although genre fiction was read and liked widely, readers rarely came forward to admit the fact and acknowledge its uniqueness. In his essay "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story by an Addict" the poet W.H. Auden (1948) refers to his practice of reading detective stories as a form of "addiction" (p. 406). He presents a structured defence of detective fiction and accords it a high status by comparing it with Greek tragedies: "A detective story probably should, and usually does, obey the classical unities" (p. 407).

Whereas some critics saw detective fiction as an addiction or a guilty pleasure, others saw it as a means of escape, offering a short-lived respite from the seriousness of more important works. Although George Orwell (1945) spoke favourably about genre fiction in his essay "Good Bad Books", he certainly did not accord them a very respectable status. To begin with, Orwell borrowed the term from G.K. Chesterton, and defined a "good bad book" as the kind of book that has no literary pretensions but which remains readable when more serious productions have perished. Orwell placed the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle in this category and suggested that intellectual refinement might at times be a disadvantage in such works.

Popular literature, for a very long time, remained a subject that one could be ashamed of. The question of 'respectability' for genre fiction remained a highly undetermined terrain. It was believed that writers of genre fiction dealt mostly with lawmen, criminals, private detectives, spies, aliens, ghosts and fallen heroines. Popular literature, as Arthur Krystal (2012) suggests, is read mostly for its racy plots. While reading genre fiction, readers mostly look for an interesting story, one they had not heard before. Rhetorical flourishes are kept to the minimum, and the author informs more than reflects. This form of writing is practical, commonsensical, and cuts down on unimportant details.

The exponentially growing number of popular books has now led academicians and students to take cognizance of this plural body of texts. Consequently, serious writers have begun employing devices and techniques used by genre writers in their works. Contemporary times have witnessed a gradual blurring of boundaries between literary

fiction and genre fiction, paving the way for its acceptance in English departments as a subject of serious academic engagement. It is now unchallenged that the professed artlessness of genre writers is one that involves tremendous efforts, and is best understood as a form of alternative aesthetics, leaving immense scope for critical reflection. The unassuming writing style which apparently creates an impression of superfluousness is achieved with great practice.

Teaching the Counter-Canon

The timely invasion of popular literature in the academia has triggered a subversive function by unsettling established hierarchies. Contesting the elitism of English departments and transcending disciplinary boundaries, it has facilitated the emergence of novel parameters of looking at Literary Studies. In his well-known essay, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies", Stuart Hall (2019) argues that the major problem with the discipline of Cultural Studies is "the difficulty of instituting a genuine cultural and critical practice…which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges" (p. 85). By refraining from subscribing to norms by which canonical literature is governed, popular literature has revolutionized the way we think about a conventional classroom and curricular set-up. It prompts us to radically rethink and revise our pedagogical practices to accommodate the trivial and the non-serious. It blatantly challenges hegemonic critical apparatuses and discourses by defying interpretation in any straightforwardly "literary" terms. It pushes the limits of critical/ theoretical paradigms and prompts the guardians of the Humanities to contrive unconventional patterns of analysis and interpretation of the mundane, the banal, the residual. In particular, it entails a novel approach that is student-centric, thus reversing the equation where the teacher prescribes and the student passively reads. By radically re-designating authority, it also aims at decentring conventional academic practices. Anna Creadick (2013) compellingly asserts,

> Does teaching popular culture bring students into our classes? Yes, it does. But more to the point, it brings the classes to our students. Popular culture delivers….when popular culture enters the classroom, students' lives can merge with their studies, and the effect is powerful…these are the things they do without thinking, the things about which they are not supposed to think. These are not-thinking spaces which are often pleasurable because they (we) don't think about them... (pp. 15-16)

Reading the popular transforms subconscious everyday practices of students into conscious acts. They start becoming aware of their implicated-ness in a set of everyday practices that carry deeper connotations about various aspects of the human condition. It instils self-reflexivity about what has always been taken for granted as secondary.

To begin tracing the popular in the literary practices of an age is also to begin questioning the politics of literary historiography. David Perkins (1992), in his book *Is Literary History Possible?* exposes the pitfalls of literary history by suggesting how personal preferences and prejudices of historiographers erroneously lead to erasures and silences. By reassuring readers of a neatly contrived, orderly distribution of texts and trends, literary history curbs diversity and imposes uniformity on the patterns of literary and cultural evolution. Seen from this perspective, making popular literary cultures visible to students is in itself a counter-canonical endeavour, involving the interrogation of established methods of imparting teaching in literature. In their Introduction to the book *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces*, the editors Prem Kumari Srivastava and Mona Sinha (2022) argue how research on popular literature might lead to the creation of a "meta-canon" which transcends the forcibly imposed limits on literary developments:

> A literary canon often functions as both repository and confirmation of literariness. This is also true that establishing, maintaining and building the canon has become for better or worse, one of the chief functions of academia and academics… But a presumable breakthrough is found in the current popular commercial fiction tradition, an opening up of new insights and creation of a kind of meta-canon without limits, forever changing, challenging the established authority and subverting the status quo in an act of non-conformity. (pp. 25-26)

In Indian academia, popular literary texts are handcuffed by the coercive imposition of a critical practice that strives to appropriate them as interpretable, and thus bring them closer to conventional literary studies. Arriving at a working methodology for reading and teaching popular texts might be difficult, both because of their remarkable diversity and the acute paucity of critical and theoretical terminology, as Lev Grossman (2012) emphasizes ("Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle", para 15). The lack of training in the interpretation of such texts and their parallel existence on programmes that feature predominantly canonical literary works makes teaching a daunting task.

To combat this gap, teachers in English departments effortlessly apply conventional critical/theoretical apparatuses to make them accessible to students. A quick glance at the objectives of popular literature courses offered at the undergraduate level underscores the dilemmas of the teaching establishment in handling such texts. The 'Speculative Fiction and Detective Literature' course (Paper-D17, Semester 6) offered at the University of Delhi (2019) endorses misplaced goals—"encourage students to explore the meaning of hitherto naturalized terms such as 'crime' and 'human/humanity'"—whereby the old critical standards are recreated for a supposedly unconventional course. Unsurprisingly, the course offered at Jamia Millia Islamia (CBC Paper-I, 'Popular Literature and Culture') recreates popular literature in the moulds of canonical British literature by suggesting:

> This paper intends to introduce the intertextual relationship between literature and various mediums of creative expression. The course will seek to help students understand the literary and aesthetic outputs in the realms of popular culture. This paper will also seek to apprise the students about the "mirroring" nature of literature, its relation with life and culture. (Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, 2019)

The urge to appropriate popular texts, that are by nature resistant to traditional approaches, to labels endorsed by Western high criticism, as reflected in "creative expression", "literary and aesthetic outputs" and "mirroring nature of literature", with its undisputable evocation of the Aristotelian notion of mimesis defeats the very purpose of the popular. The topics suggested for background prose readings and class presentations for a popular literature course in Sambalpur University (2019) includes 'Coming of Age', 'Caste, Gender and Identity', 'Ethics and Education in Children's Literature', blatantly rendering the works of Lewis Carroll, Agatha Christie and Shyam Selvadurai in terms of 'high' literature. In this context, John G. Cawelti (1972) aptly notes how "students of popular culture have simply applied to a wider range of materials the historical and critical methods of traditional humanistic scholarship" (p. 115).

The recent move towards making English literature syllabi cosmopolitan and culturally inclusive has led academics to accommodate the popular within programmes and schemes that were originally meant to treat British and American literature as infallible. While they are in superficial conformity with changing trends, they categorically fail to address

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

contextual, regionally-specific concerns through popular literature courses. Some of the common choices in universities of Odisha, West Bengal, Kashmir, and Delhi are authors like Conan Doyle, Lewis Carroll and Agatha Christie, attesting to the indomitable essence of Englishness that literature courses in India serve to propagate. The deliberate choice of English authors engages in a covert agenda of maintenance of hierarchies and preferences—the contrary of what a popular literature course is expected to do. Such courses rarely include writers from Australia, African and Asian countries. As an apologetic stance, they compensate for their elitism by accommodating at least one Indian author—Chetan Bhagat in most cases. These courses ignore the existence of a rich repository of popular, non-serious writing in the Indian languages, meant mostly for a low-brow readership. The complete absence of writers from the *bhashas* remains an unpardonable lacuna in such courses. The only exception could be the course offered at the University of Calcutta (ENG-H-DSC, Semester-4, 2024), where Sukumar Ray's *Nonsense Rhymes (Abol Tabol*) is taught. Ray's masterful use of veiled satire as a defining device in what became known as nonsensical, absurdist verse, could be an ideal choice for students from Bengal. Embodying subversive tendencies, the quatrains obliquely comment on the mismanaged state of affairs in colonial India. The themes, structuring devices, and contested publication histories of such texts could constitute an intellectually engaging and intriguing subject for a popular literature curriculum. A text like Devaki Nandan Khatri's celebrated *Chandrakanta,* that skilfully integrates the conventions of fantasy and adventure, hardly features on the popular literature syllabi of north-Indian universities. A novel noted for its centrality in the burgeoning reading culture of the Hindi public sphere, as critics like Francesca Orsini (2009, pp. 198-99) have noted, could bring the students of popular literature courses closer to the worlds they inhabit. The propagation of the view that the best, if not the only, popular literature is produced in the West restricts an inclusive approach which pop-lit courses profess to embody. The inescapable burden of internalizing worlds and ethos populated by characters who they cannot relate to and situations far removed from their immediate contexts estranges students to popular literature classes in Indian universities. In order to minimize this alienation, popular literature courses must be compulsively grounded in the everyday realities of students.

Conclusion

To creatively correspond to the pressing need for innovation in higher education, Literary Studies must absolve itself of the age-old obsession with the demarcation of boundaries between trends/genres/practices that make the field a closed compartment. Teaching, like genuine criticism, should celebrate the rich diversity of literature by recognizing the efforts of genre writers whose unnoticed but nevertheless assertive presence on the periphery has raised pertinent questions on the integrity of the canon. Teaching should primarily aim at the promotion of inclusiveness in matters related to literature and culture. It is high time students of English departments looked at the coexistence of the serious and the popular and the ways they borrow from each other, forming a plural cultural mosaic. As arbiters of "good" literature, English teachers have an immediate role to accomplish. They must intervene into students' reading practices by an intentional blurring of boundaries between serious, "literary" and relatively non-serious, "casual" reading. An inclusive approach for the study of literature necessitates the problematization of traditional assessments of literary merit and hierarchies to admit hybridity and heterogeneity.

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