

Harold Bloom and the Western Canon in the Indian Context

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In 1994, Bloom published *The Western Canon*, a survey of the major literary works of Europe and the Americas since the fourteenth century, focusing on twenty six works he considered sublime and representative of their nations and of the Western canon. Besides analyses of the canon's various representative works, the major concern of the volume is reclaiming literature from those he refers to as the "School of resentment", the mostly academic critics who espouse a social purpose in reading. Bloom believes that the goals of reading must be solitary, aesthetic pleasure and self-insight rather than the "forces of resentments" goal of improvement of one's society, which he casts as an absurd aim. In a poor country like India, Justice Markandaya Katju observes that, are for social purpose alone can be acceptable today. Artists and writers must join the ranks of those who are struggling for a better India. They must inspire the people through their writings against oppression and injustice. However, today there is hardly any good art and literature. Where is the Sharat Chandra or Premchand or Faiz of today asks Katju? Where is the Kabir or Dickens of today? There seems to be an artistic and literary vacuum. Everything seems to have become commercialised. Writers write not to highlight the plight of the masses but to earn some money. Hence, in a country like India which is going through a period of social change, Harold Bloom is not relevant. India is passing through transitional period, transition from feudal agricultural society to modern industrial society. We are presently neither totally modern. We are somewhere in between. The transition period is a very painful and agonizing period in history.

The term *Western Canon* denotes a collection of books and, more broadly, music and art that have been the most important and influential in shaping western culture. As such, it includes the greatest works of artistic merit. Such a canon is important to the development of high culture. In practice, debates and attempts to define the canon in lists are essentially restricted to literature, including poetry, fiction and drama; biographical and autobiographical writings; philosophy; and history. A few accessible books on the sciences and mathematics are also included.

The process of list making-defining the boundaries of the canon-is endless. The philosopher John Searle has said: “In my experience there never was, in fact, a fixed ‘canon’; there was rather a certain set of tentative judgements about what book importance and quality had. Such judgements are always subject to revision, and in fact they were constantly being revised.” (88)

One of the notable attempts at compiling an authoritative canon in the English-speaking world was the *Great Books of the Western World* program. This program, developed in the middle third of the 20th century, grew out of the curriculum at the University of Chicago. University president Robert Hutchins and his collaborator Mortimer Adler developed a program that offered reading lists, books, and organizational strategies for reading clubs to the general public.

At earlier attempt, the Harvard Classics (1909), was promulgated by Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot, whose thesis was the same as Carlyle’s: a great University is a collection of books.

There has been an ongoing, intensely political debate over the nature and status of the canon since at least the 1960s, much of which is rooted in critical theory, feminism, critical race theory, and Marxist attacks against capitalism and classical liberal principles. In the United States, in particular the canon has been attacked as a compendium of books written mainly by “dead European men”, that does not represent the viewpoints of many in contemporary societies around the world. Allan Bloom in his 1987 book *The closing of the American Mind*, has disagreed strongly. The Yale University Professor of Humanities Harold Bloom has also argued strongly in favour of the canon, and in general the canon remains as a represented idea in many institutions, though its implications continue to be debated.

In 1994, Bloom published *The Western Canon*, a survey of the major literary works of Europe and the Americas since the fourteenth century, focusing on 26 works he considered sublime and representative of their nations and of the Western canon. Besides analyses of the canon’s various representative works, the major concern of the volume is reclaiming literature from those he refers to as the “School of resentment”, the mostly academic critics who espouse a social purpose in reading. Bloom believes that the goals of reading must be solitary, aesthetic pleasure and self-insight rather than the “forces of resentments” goal of improvement of one’s society, which he casts as an absurd aim, wiring: “The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the

oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools”.(83) His position is that politics have no place in literary criticism: a feminist or Marxist reading of *Hamlet* would tell us something about feminism and Marxism, he says, but probably nothing about *Hamlet* itself.

In addition to the amount of influence one writer has had on later writers, Bloom introduces the concept of “canonical strangeness” as a benchmark of a literary work’s merit. The *Western Canon* also included a list – which aroused more widespread interest than anything else in the volume – of all the Western works from antiquity to the present that Bloom considered either permanent members of the canon of literary classics, or (among more recent works) candidates for that status. Bloom has said that he made the list off the top of his head at his editor’s request, and that he does not stand by it. The notoriety surrounding *The Western Canon* turned Bloom into something of a celebrity.

Defenders maintain that those who undermine the canon do so out of primarily political interests, and that such criticisms are misguided and or disingenuous. As John Searle has written:

There is a certain irony in this (i.e., politicized objections to the canon) in that earlier student generations, my own for example, found the critical tradition that runs from Socrates through the *Federalist Papers*, through the writings of Mills and Marx, down to the twentieth century, to be liberating from the stuffy conventions of traditional American politics and pieties. Precisely by inculcating a critical attitude, the “canon” served to demythologize the conventional pieties of the American bourgeoisie and provided the student with a perspective from which to critically analyze American culture and institutions. Ironically, the same tradition is now regarded as oppressive. The texts once served an unmasking function; now we are told that it is the texts which must be unmasked.

India faces gigantic problems today. In some states, farmers and weavers are committing suicide. Prices of essential commodities are skyrocketing. Unemployment has become massive and chronic. Water and electricity shortage is widespread. Corruption and fraud are everywhere. Medical treatment has become prohibitively expensive. Housing is scarce. The educational system has gone haywire. Law and order has collapsed in many areas, where criminals call the shots.

In a poor country like India, Justice Markandaya Katju observes that, art for social purpose alone can be acceptable today. Artists and writers must join the ranks of those who are struggling for a better India. They must inspire the people through their writings against oppression and injustice.

However, today there is hardly any good art and literature. Where is the Sarat Chandra or Premchand or Faiz of today, asks Katju? Where is the Kabir or Dickens of today? There seems to be an artistic and literary vacuum. Everything seems to have become commercialised. Writers write not to highlight the plight of the masses but to earn some money.

Some Hindi writers complain that Hindi magazines are closing down. Have these people wondered why? Evidently no one is interested in reading what he or she writes because they do not depict the people's sufferings, and do not inspire people to struggle for a better life.

When Gorky stepped out on the streets of Russia, he would be mobbed. He was so loved by the people as he wrote about their lives and championed their cause. Can a Hindi writer today make a similar claim? Katju asks. When writers get out of touch with the people and live in a world of their own, no one will want to read them, Katju laments.

Today the people in India are thirsty for good literature. If someone writes about the people's problems, it will be popular. But are our writers doing this? Art and literature must serve the people. Writers must have genuine sympathy for the people and depict their sufferings. They must inspire people to struggle for a better life, a life that can be really called human existence, and to create a better world, free of injustices, social and economic. Only then will people respect them.

The concept of 'art for social purpose' in its active sense, that is, in the sense of using art and literature to reform society, is largely of recent origin. It could hardly arise prior to the Industrial Revolution because up to the feudal age the thought that men could improve or change their social conditions by their own effort was rare. The belief then was that whatever has existed or will exist in future is ordained by God or Destiny and man has no role in it. Katju firmly believes that now that the scientific age has dawned, and human beings can change their social condition by their own efforts, art, too, should help in the endeavour. In poor countries like India, art for art's sake amounts to escapism.

Hence, in a country like India which is going through a period of social change, Harold Bloom is not relevant. India is passing through transitional period, from feudal agricultural society to modern industrial society. We are presently neither totally modern. We are somewhere in between. The transition period is a very painful and agonizing period in history. If one reads the history of Europe from the 16th to 19th centuries it is possible to understand that it is a very horrible period which Europe went through. It was only after going this ordeal that the modern society emerged in Europe. India is presently going through such difficult times. We are going

through a very painful period in our history. The duty of all Indians is to help in shortening this transitional period, in reducing this pain, although we cannot totally eliminate it because there is going to be turmoil in this period. The vested interests in the old feudal order will not give up their parochial agenda without a fierce struggle. There is going to be plenty of difficulties. The writers must endeavour to explain to the Indian people about the transition period, and try to reduce the pain and shorten the transitional period.

According to P. Sainath at least 17,368 Indian farmers killed themselves in 2009, the worst figure for farm suicides in six years, according to data of the National Crime Records Bureaus (NCRB). This is an increase of 1,172 over the 2008 count of 16,196. It brings the total farm suicides since 1997 to 2,16,500. The share of the Big 5 States, or ‘suicide belt’ – Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh – in 2009 remained very high at 10,765, or around 62 percent of the total, though falling nearly five percentage points from 2008. Maharashtra remained the worst State for farm suicides for the tenth successive year, reporting 2,872. Though that is a fall of 930, it is still 590 more than in Karnataka, second worst, which logged 2,282 farm suicides. He states that, “That these numbers are rising even as the farmer population shrinks, confirms the agrarian crisis is still burning”. (121)

Maharashtra has logged 44,276 farm suicides since 1997, over a fifth of the total 2,16,500. Karnataka saw the highest increase of 545 in 2009, Andhra Pradesh recorded 2,414 farm suicides – 309 more than in 2008. Madhya Pradesh (1,395) and Chhatisgarh (1,802) saw smaller increases of 16 and 29. Outside the Big 5, Tamil Nadu doubled its tally with 1,060, against 512 in 2008. In all, 18 of 28 States reported higher farm suicide numbers in 2009. Some, like Jammu and Kashmir or Uttarakhand, saw a negligible rise. Rajasthan, Kerala and Jharkhand saw increases of 55, 76 and 93. Assam and West Bengal saw higher rises of 144 and 295. NCRB farm data now exist for 13 years. In the first seven, 1997-2003, there were 1,13,872 farm suicides, and average of 16,267 a year.

In the next six years 1,02,628 farmers took their lives at an average of 17,105 a year. This means, on average, around 47 farmers – or almost one every 30 minutes – killed themselves each day between 2004 and 2009.

Not a single novel published in the last two decades has dealt with this. It is high time Indian fiction in English dealt with such socio-economic issues. This is the crying need of the hour.

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