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BEYOND THE LITERARY CANON: THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION

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Abstract

Popular literature is usually considered to be inferior and less literary in comparison to other literary genres on account of its subject matter, stereotyped structural conventions and predetermined appeal. Amidst the continual politics of the literary canon that excludes the genre from literary recognition; detective fiction has come a long way from its nascent days to its modern versions recreating itself with changing times and by drawing inspiration from contemporary life. Scholars of popular literature look forward to a phase when the established tradition of literary canon and scholarship would conveniently accommodate popular literature within the canonised literary construct in academic institutions. This paper aims to pave a new wave of scholarship to study detective fiction in an attempt to negate the politics of exclusion initiated by the grand literary canon and propose an alternative canon to situate and study detective fiction.

Keywords: literary canon, popular literature, detective fiction et.al

The term canon stands to accord a degree of excellence to works by demarcating between good and bad ones. Some works are considered serious, significant and excellent. These works enjoy the advantage and are inculcated into the educational framework of various academic institutions. The canonical status of a literary work mainly depends on this politics of inclusion and exclusion. Popular literature has been excluded from the canon for a long time. The term 'popular literature' applies to all those genres of fiction that has always been conveniently sidelined to the periphery of literary canon on grounds of being 'non-serious', inferior and not literary enough to deserve critical acclaim. Science fiction, horror fiction, fairy tales, detective fiction et.al are some of the most

widely read sub-genres of popular literature. These genres often find it hard to make its way to mainstream or 'high' literature, since they are considered unfit to conform to the notions of the grand literary canon. The principle reason behind this is the labeling of the genre as 'popular' which is almost taken to be equivalent to 'non-serious'. Valued on mere grounds of 'entertainment', the genre has much more to offer and deserves serious reading and interpretation.

David Carrier in his essay "ART AND ITS CANONS" writes; "Any tradition of art-making in which there are generally accepted distinctions between better and worse, and a body of much admired works, has a canon." (Carrier 525) The term canon comes from the Greek word 'kanon' meaning

a rule or a measuring stick. In its modern usage the English term stands to signify or measure the aesthetic relevance or appeal of a literary work. Carrier explains, "The canon, I argue, changes radically...Because this consensus changes, today the canon of earlier generations seems puzzling, mistaken or confused."(Carrier 524) So it is difficult to find answers to such questions as what is the process of canon formation or on what parameters does a work get entry into the canon?

Popular literature has always been conveniently sidelined as inferior. Most genres of fiction writing that comes under the umbrella term 'popular literature' are widely read outside the literary domain of academics. But it is argued that the genre lacks literariness and therefore distorts the literary aesthetics of readers. Early scholarship on popular literature initiated from the necessity to inquire the reasons behind the negligence of a genre that has captured the interest of readers worldwide. Over the last century particularly with the advent of culture studies and intra-disciplinary studies the prejudice against studying popular literature has become less pronounced. In most cases popular literature is ignored on grounds of a very casual mindset that reading a thriller or a sci-fi can be nothing more than a simple act of reading and enjoying. In a typical taken for granted mindset such works are believed to have limited scope of literary merit and thus most works of popular fiction remain under-valued. The elitist view of scholars of 'high' literature considers popular literature as a manifestation of popular culture or mass culture. For a long period of time, the elites have enjoyed exclusive rights over 'true' or standard culture and they dismissed mass culture as inferior. But by mid-twentieth century the discipline of culture studies emphasized more on popular culture and argued that the choice of the masses must be taken seriously.

Culture studies found its initial impetus in the study of popular culture. Pramod K. Nayar defines popular culture as "...the set of practices, artefacts and beliefs shared by masses, and is constituted by the everyday life of the masses: the food habits, fashion... the music, the reading habits..." (Nayar 6) The politics of popular culture

has its roots in elite considerations that reject the non-elite literary indulgences as tasteless and useless. Thus, popular fiction is degraded for being a distraction for readers of the less-intellectual, non-elite masses. But gradually scholars defended popular literature and questioned the grounds on which the genre is sidelined from academic canon. Detective Fiction one of the most widely read sub-genre of popular literature is often denigrated as pulp-fiction and therefore unsuitable for serious literary scholarship. Critics opine that reading detective stories leads to anything but aesthetic pleasure. This paper attempts to question the literary canon which regards popular fiction, particularly detective fiction as a disgraceful addiction and hence unfit to be inculcated into the canon. The paper tries to look beyond the canon to position detective fiction in an alternative canon on its own grounds.

A typical detective fiction story involves a crime, followed by its investigation wherein the detective disentangles the mystery with the aid of his or her extraordinary intelligence, superior reasoning faculty, shrewd observation and an inquisitive mind. In the introduction to the book, *Mayhem and Murder: Narrative Problems in the Detective Story* (1999), Heta Pyrhonen quotes Dennis Porter's description of a detective story as a "...textual 'machine for producing thrills' that evokes in readers pleasurable bodily sensations which they experience as an agreeable state of excitement, associated with either fear or anxiety and its release." (Pyrhonen 3). Detective stories are definitely entertaining and hence popular but this popularity does not account for its lack of literariness as claimed by the advocates of 'high' literature. One of the most common derogatory assumptions of critics is that because of its basic conventions and stereotyped narrative structure the genre offers nothing but thrill and excitement and therefore demands least effort from the reader to conceptualize the narratives which always ends in a predictable manner. But what do these formulaic fictions offer that has sustained their popularity?

Tzvetan Todorov makes an extensive discussion of the genre in his essay, "The Typology of Detective Fiction" (1977) to explain that a 'classical'

detective fiction narrative “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (Todorov 44). Of these two stories, the former emerges only at the end of story of investigation. However, investigating the crime and unmasking the criminal does not actually summarize the dynamics of a detective fiction narrative. Such narratives work on problem-solving principle. An act of crime or any mysterious activity that distorts the harmony of a particular environment is the epicenter of the problem. Thus, the narrative begins as an effect of the problem while the cause of it remains hidden. But a narrative is not just about one single story but is a collection of multiple stories which are interrelated and interdependent. In “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories”, Barbara Herrnstein Smith says, “For any given narrative, there are always *multiple* basic stories ... in accord with some set of principles, that reflect some set of interests, all of which are, by nature, variable and thus multiple.” (Smith 221) A detective fiction narrative is also a collection of multiple stories which are constructed in response to one another and are arrived at by virtue of a series of acts carried out by the main protagonists according to their respective interests. The narrative is provided with some hidden clues and hints that are intertwined with the central puzzle and are gradually unveiled to solve the mystery. This puzzle is almost always about the criminal’s hidden tale of crime. According to the conventions of the genre, the detective solves this puzzle and unmasks the criminal by drawing valid inference from various clues and hints hidden within the narrative. In this process the detective formulates the ‘story of investigation’. The guiding principle which holds the narrative together is that of concealment and cognizance. While the ‘story of crime’ is always concealed, the dynamics of the tale of investigation helps in the cognition of the ‘story of investigation’. Heta Pyrhonen explains that “the enmity between criminals and detectives largely consists of a series of writing and reading ‘contests’ triggered by a crime.” (Pyrhonen 5) So a classic detective fiction narrative can be read from different angles. It can be read as a tale of crime and a tale of detection, as a story of concealment and of cognition and also as a story of writing as done by

the criminal and as a story of reading as carried out by the detective.

Focusing on the formula based narratives of the genre will reveal that the act of narration is different from those stories which incorporate a sequential telling of events. When we speak about discourse in a detective fiction narrative, it is interesting to note how the author carries out narration to create the right atmosphere of suspense. As the dynamics of the story primarily rests on the reader’s expectation of resolution of the suspense, the author opts for various narrative strategies to generate suspense and the desired reading effect upon the reader. French literary theorist Gerard Genette has paved some new directions in the study of narratives. His theoretical postulations as explained in *Narrative Discourse: An essay in Method* (1980) helps to understand how narration in detective novels is modulated to create suspense. In such stories the author dexterously modulates narrative information according to the demand of the plot in order to create the anticipated suspense in the narrative. The author does not follow a strict chronological narrative pattern and might choose to reveal some information at some suitable time or even withhold some for the right denouement. Infact, such works often incorporate ‘anachrony’; a term used by Genette to refer to inconsistency in discourse order. Often the author prefers to disrupt the order between the occurrence of an incident in the story and disclosure of the same in the discourse of the narrative. While investigating the detective might discover a vital clue but chooses to disclose it later. In this way the author regulates the order of narration to build suspense.

In order to influence the reader with a desired point of view the author can modulate the flow of narrative data and make the narrator speak with a certain perspective. While speaking about narrative mood, Genette explains that in order to create the right pitch of mood the author controls the manner in which the narrator maintains a degree of distance or proximity with the narrative information that he provides or is rather made to provide. In this way the author also determines the perspective of the narrator. In the initial stages of a detective fiction narrative the reader is provided

with less information or details about the crime or the criminal in a 'less direct way'; whereas in the later stages of the narrative or towards the end, the narrator provides all information with full precision and details to explain the act of crime and expose the criminal. So in order to create a definite mood the author maintains a desired degree of detachment or involvement between the narrator and what he narrates. This degree of restraint or liberation with which 'narrative information' is delivered shapes the narrative mood for the reader. According to Genette this aspect is also associated with the perspective of the narrator and says:

The narrative can choose to regulate the information it delivers, not with a sort of even screening, but according to the capacities of knowledge of one or another participant in the story (a character or a group of characters), with the narrative adopting or seeming to adopt what we ordinarily call the participant's "vision" or "point of view"; the narrative seems in that case (continuing the spatial metaphor) to take on, with regard to the story, one or another *perspective*. (Genette 162)

However, in a detective fiction narrative things are a bit complicated since most narratives conventionally follow a format of dual-narrators. One of them who initiate the narration is the detective's assistant or ally, and the other is the detective himself. In such narratives the detective-narrator has '*zero focalization*' (Genette 189) when the final denouement is reached since he is the omniscient narrator- the all knowing figure who throws light upon the cause, agent and context of the crime with all necessary details. In such stories, vital information is withheld from other characters within the story as well as from the reader who is outside the story. The detective-narrator by virtue of his intelligence gathers hints and clues to solve the mystery and then undertakes the task of disseminating all facts. Here the detective enjoys double-authority. He not only carries out the investigation but is also empowered to deliver the final act of narration when the role of the other narrator (Watson, Topshie et.al) almost diminishes. Moreover, it is the prerogative of the detective-

narrator to decide if the other narrator or any other character can be a co-sharer of this information and if it is shared; the detective also decides how much should be shared. In these narratives the detective-narrator is the omniscient narrator who not only provides logical explanation to his findings but is also able to explain the thoughts and gestures of the criminal. In this way the author not only creates the right pitch of narrative mood but also maintains it until the final moment of denouement.

Thus, the formulaic structural patterns of a detective fiction narrative create magic owing to such narrative strategies incorporated to balance the dynamics between story and discourse. A theoretical framework helps to understand the machination that goes behind each narrative in order to generate the desired narrative mood. Thus the 'suspense' and 'thrill' experienced by reader is not a general after-effect of reading thrillers but depends on the author's skills of composition. This paper emphasizes how the narrative conventions of the genre challenge the proponents of the 'canon' who speak of the genre's lack of 'literariness' and artistic niche. Such claims have been highly misleading in assessing the true merit of the genre. Hence, detective fiction deserves serious academic consideration on grounds of its own intellectual expertise. Infact, to assess the true implications of popular literature, the genre deserves serious reading and interpretation from various theoretical postulations. Thus the paper paves a new wave of scholarship to study detective fiction in attempt to negate the politics of exclusion initiated by the grand literary canon and proposes an alternative canon to situate and study detective fiction.

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