



ISSN: 2249-894X  
 IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)  
 UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514  
 VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 8 | MAY - 2019



**KEYWORDS:** *Discrimination, Colonization, female subordination, patriarchal, canonical syllabus.*

## INTRODUCTION

The English Literature canon is an imperialistic construct with an underlying agenda of racism and gender based discrimination. The battles colonialism fought were not merely territorial, they were also textual. Colonization was as much a war for the hearts and minds of the colonized as it was for their lands. Victory in this war was largely won by the introduction of English Literature as an academic discipline at Indian Universities. English literature became a part of the curriculum in India decades before it was studied at a formal level at British Universities. The subjugation of India begun by Clive and Hastings was continued by Lord

## THE ENGLISH LITERATURE CANON, GENDER POLITICS AND FEMINIST SUBVERSIONS: A STUDY

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### ABSTRACT:

*This paper deals with the question of canon and gender politics, the canon not only relegates women writers of the very edges of the syllabus, but also undermines the female self-image. It reinforces an inferior identity and social position vis-à-vis the male. The use of English Literature as an academic subject formalized the process of canon formation, which had earlier been an informal construct. The canon not only asserted the moral; and cultural superiority of the colonizers over the colonized, but being hyper masculine and androcentric, also marginalized women.*

Dalhousie and completed by Messer's Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth.

The establishment of English Literature as an academic subject meant that choices had to be made about the writers to be taught. This formalized the process of canon formation, which had earlier been an informal construct. This English literature canon not only asserted the moral; and cultural superiority of the colonizers over the colonized, but being hyper masculine and androcentric, also marginalized women. Such a canon fitted in well an imperial ideology that valorized the Male Principle of aggression, assertion and adventure and devaluated Female values and qualities. As Edward has pointed out this analogy of male superiority and female subordination was extended by imperialism to the subject nations. So the Orient

was imaged as effeminate and powerless, while the West was masculine and powerful.

This was subordination at the socio-cultural and psychological level and hence more powerful and dangerous than mere political conquest. Frantz Fanon and Ngugi WaThiong'o have said that such subordination "Slave mentality"...survives the end of the Empire. The continuing adherence to the Imperialist English Literature Canon in post-colonial India is in keeping with the imaging of the self in the mirror of the West. This canon continues to proclaim the privileged position of English Literature and is thus demeaning to the self-esteem of the decolonized nation also being overwhelmingly male, it devaluates women.

It is interesting to note how this sexist and racist canon has been appropriated by the decolonized Indian male along with the

legitimizing authorizing powers such as a canon embodies. The mantle of the Dead White European Males (DWEMs) in the English Literature Canon has fallen on the alive brown Indian men. It is an empowerment by proxy. In this game of ideological and gender politics the female sex is the loser. In spite of the fact that the majority of the English Literature teachers and students at most universities (as indeed in most parts of the world) are women, they are reduced to a passive subjectposition, where they are unwitting consumers of a syllabus that either totally ignores them or at best allows them a tokenistic presence and thereby consigns them to the margins of the canonical order. Just as women are relegated to the periphery of the syllabus, so are relegated to the periphery of the syllabus so are the Blacks, Jews and Post-colonial writers. Their presence is possible only in the optional papers and not in the core of the canon.

To return more centrally to More insidiously the canon equates all things intellectual with men rather than woman. The feminine psyche when it is allowed to surface in the canon is a deliberately marked sensibility. The critical/authorizing/legitimizing materials on a Jane Austen's novel focus on her female sensibility. Her small, cameo-like world view is contrasted with the sweeping vision and vast canvas of the male novelists. Critical theorists would have us believe that it's a woman's world, a woman's interests who are portrayed in an Austen world. There is an unvoiced, but nevertheless implied aside that such a woman's world is not at par with and cannot be equated with the wider male world.

Such a canon notwithstanding, methodology can be used to subvert patriarchal critique and reduction of all things female. Subaltern feminist readings can be made to counter a patriarchal canon. Feminist's readings can correct the distorted patriarchal world view embodied by the canon. Austen's rationality, cool, analytical thinking, irony, distance and the objectivity with which she invests her novels can be focused upon in a feminist reading. This would correct the stereotypical notion that rationality, irony, objectivity and ability to think and analytically are male monopolies. Also where Austen is emotional, warm and nurturing in the novels should be highlighted as positive, desirable feminine qualities. This would explode the male purveyed myth of nurturing feminine attributes being intrinsically inferior to essentially aggressive male qualities. Then, George Eliot has been reduced in a different manner by the canon. She has been stripped of her femininity and turned into an honorary male. Hence being a mental, if not biological, man, she is allowed to write the male type of serious novels—novels where religion, philosophy and ethics can be discussed as opposed to frivolous female fripperies. Here the female reality, the biological gender is sought to be suppressed by a superimposed, male identity. Feminists could reclaim a write George Eliot's status to the female fold. Again, Virginia Woolf, the token woman in the modernist canon, is differently managed by patriarchy. In her case the hysteria, neurosis and other such female weakness are stressed- the so called negative attributes of highly-strung, blue stocking type of woman. Such women at best ended with broken marriages or at worst as suicide statistics. Here the pressures on women in modernist industrial societies, where they are expected to be economically independent, sexually liberated and at the same time conform to the societal expectations regarding "good" wives and mothers, can be focus of feminists readings.

Gender politics in a patriarchal canon surfaces even more sinisterly in texts written by men who are generally considered to be sensitive/ empathetic to women's needs/aspirations., i.e. Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare. The latent sexist biases of Shavian texts surface in a feminist reading of Man and Superman as do the traps such men set for women who are liberated, the earlier Suffragettes and now the Feminists. The sneaky, sneering at Anne Whitefield the undermining of women in the Hell Scene, the equating of women with the biological life force and that of men with the intellectual Creative force, is no less than Tennyson's often quoted line "she for the hearth and he for the field."

Shakespeare's fabled sensitivity towards his romantic heroines is challenged by a feminist reading of Merchant of Venice. Portia has been seen as a stifled feminist, oppressed by a patriarchy which reaches out from beyond earthly existence, to impose its will on her and to suppress her female sexuality. The sexist bias is even more evident in the portrayal of both Ophelia and Gertrude, both of whom are quite blatantly, and in very crude language denied the right to their own sexuality. Lady

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Macbeth is another much reviled woman character in Shakespeare, who becomes sympathetic if given a non- patriarchal reading.

### CONCLUSION

Gender politics and sexist biases can thus be countered by feminist readings. These act as awareness-raising devices and create a positive self-image among women students and correct sexist stereotypes among men students. This could well frustrate the insidious machinations of a patriarchal, canonical syllabus.

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