

Rethinking Literary Canonization in Indian Languages: A Study of Historiography and Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

By concentrating on the functions of pedagogy and historiography in forming literary worth and cultural memory, this essay explores the process of literary canonization in Indian languages. It contends that the literary canon is a dynamic construct shaped by institutional, social, and historical circumstances rather than a static or impartial collection of works. The study demonstrates how literary history writers choose, arrange, and assess texts—often reflecting prevailing cultural and political viewpoints—through an examination of literary historiography. By including specific works into curriculum and teaching them as authoritative knowledge, pedagogy also plays a critical role in institutionalizing these decisions. The challenges to traditional canonization are also examined in this study, especially from the viewpoints of diversity, subaltern voices, and modernity, which challenge the exclusion of marginalized literatures including Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, and regional works. The study emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and adaptable understanding of the canon by addressing these challenging viewpoints. It also makes the case for the creation of a critical pedagogical framework that reconsiders the standards of literary worth and interpretation in addition to broadening the selection of texts. The study comes to the conclusion that rethinking literary canonization in Indian languages is crucial to developing a more representational and democratic literary culture that captures the richness and diversity of Indian society.

Keywords: literary canon, canonization, Indian languages, historiography, pedagogy, subaltern studies, plurality, literary criticism, cultural power, inclusive education

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INTRODUCTION

In modern literary studies, the issue of literary canonization has grown in significance, particularly in a linguistic and culturally varied nation like India. A collection of texts deemed significant, valuable, and deserving of study is commonly referred to as a literary canon. But contemporary research has demonstrated that canon creation is neither impartial nor solely artistic. Rather, it is influenced by educational decisions, institutional authority, and historical pressures. Literary canons are collections of works considered to be of significant cultural, historical, and educational value, as academics point out, but they are also greatly impacted by the viewpoints of critics, organizations, and social situations (PHI Learning, para. 1). It is vital to reconsider how literary traditions in Indian languages have been created, kept, and taught due to the dual nature of canonization. The language diversity and multi-layered cultural past of India make the problem of canon construction more complicated. India is home to a variety of literary traditions in classical, regional, and contemporary languages, each with its own historical evolution and aesthetic criteria. Literary canon formation, according to Sahdev Luhar, has changed from emphasizing universality-aesthetic values to viewing canon as an exercise of political power and social exclusion (Luhar, 2014, p. 12). This change demonstrates how canonization involves more than just picking the best works; it also involves choosing which voices to accept or exclude from literary debate. These canonical structures are shaped in large part by historiography. How works are read, classified, and valued over time is frequently determined by the production of literary history. Colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial frameworks have all impacted historiographical techniques in India, resulting in various interpretations of literary significance. For instance, nationalist historiography sought to use literature to create a cohesive cultural identity, whereas early colonial history frequently favoured certain languages and genres. However, cultural and educational policies have frequently been created by incremental and

ad hoc processes rather than cogent theoretical frameworks, as Indian historiography experts contend (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1983, p. 15). This implies that canon creation in India has often been disputed and uneven, reflecting larger sociopolitical factors. These canonical decisions are further reinforced and replicated by pedagogy. Which texts are taught and how they are interpreted are mostly determined by educational institutions, particularly universities and school curriculum. Once included into curricula, canonical books acquire authority and legitimacy, influencing future generations of readers and academics. According to Luhar (Luhar, 2014, p. 50), disputes about canon frequently mirror broader debates over power relations and the creation of knowledge systems within society. In this way, pedagogy serves as a vehicle for cultural selection and validation in addition to being a means of teaching literature.

Furthermore, the marginalization of numerous voices within the Indian literary canon—particularly those of Dalit, Adivasi, and regional writers—has been brought to light by current scholarship. Alternative literary traditions have been excluded as a result of canon creation, which frequently favours dominant languages and social groups. According to Sharma, institutional practices like publishing and curriculum design have led to the marginalization of subaltern voices in Indian literature (p. 142). Calls for a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to canonization that takes into account the variety of Indian literary cultures have resulted from this. Thus, a critical engagement with both pedagogy and historiography is necessary to reconsider literary canonization in Indian languages. It entails challenging established hierarchies, going back to forgotten literature, and recognizing how power shapes literary value. Scholars can advance toward a more inclusive and democratic understanding of the canon by including various viewpoints and acknowledging the diversity of Indian literary traditions. In addition to enhancing literary studies, this method guarantees that literary analysis is still pertinent to today's social and cultural realities.

Historiography and the Construction of Literary Canons:

The process of writing, organizing, and interpreting literary history is known as historiography, and it is closely related to the creation of literary canons. Literary history actively chooses, organizes, and assesses historical materials in accordance with specific ideals and viewpoints rather than merely documenting them. In this way, history is crucial in deciding which literary works are forgotten or neglected and which are taught, honoured, and remembered as part of a canon. The process of selection, according to canon formation scholars, is essential to both literary criticism and historiography. Criticism entails the selection, restoration, and evaluation of works retrieved from the past, according to *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Gorak, 1997, p. 560). This insight emphasizes that canon development is a conscious process of selecting and appreciating particular works over others rather than an automatic or neutral collection of writings. As a result, historiography becomes a place where literary authority is created and cultural memory is shaped. The canon is widely recognized in contemporary literary theory as a cultural construct influenced by social and historical factors. It represents the values, beliefs, and power structures of particular eras rather than being a set or objective list of great works. According to current debates, the canon comprises works that are deemed 'great' or 'classic' by scholars and critics, but power, privilege, and social norms have an impact on its creation (Lee, 2025, para. 3). This realization is especially pertinent in the Indian context, where literary historiography has been greatly impacted by colonial and postcolonial histories.

When we examine how institutional and cultural power influence canon construction, the function of historiography becomes even more apparent. The canon must be understood in connection to the distribution of cultural capital, particularly within educational institutions, according to John Guillory's seminal work. He contends that canon creation is more about how schools control access to literacy and knowledge than it is about merely aesthetic judgment. According to this viewpoint, historiography and pedagogy are strongly related because the books used in literary histories are frequently taught in classrooms, strengthening their canonical standing. Numerous overlapping frameworks, such as colonial scholarship, nationalist movements, and regional literary traditions, have historically influenced literary historiography in India. Vernacular literatures were frequently marginalized while English and Sanskrit were given preference in colonial historiography. These structures have continued in subtle ways even after independence. Institutional frameworks have played a role in the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi literatures from mainstream curricula and national recognition, as noted by Sharma. This demonstrates how historiography contributes to processes of inclusion and exclusion that mirror larger societal injustices in addition to creating the canon.

The propensity of historiography to produce linear and simple accounts of literary evolution is another significant feature. Literary histories frequently highlight continuity and unity while ignoring diversity and conflict, portraying traditions as cohesive and progressive. The intricacy of literary creation in a

multilingual country like India, however, may be obscured by such narratives. Regional differences, oral traditions, and alternative literary methods that do not fit into prevailing historiographical models may be overlooked in the creation of a single, cohesive canon. However, history is dynamic; it is continuously updated and challenged. By rescuing lost texts and reinterpreting literary history from different viewpoints, such as feminist, Dalit, and postcolonial approaches, contemporary literary academics are increasingly challenging conventional canons. These initiatives show that canon development is a continuous process rather than a predetermined result. Scholars can create room for a more inclusive and pluralistic view of literature by challenging previous historiographical presumptions.

Pedagogy and Institutionalization of the Canon:

To comprehend how literary canons are created, institutionalized, and maintained across time, teaching plays a crucial role. While pedagogy makes sure that these choices are passed down, repeated, and normalized through educational systems, history chooses and arranges literary works. Schools, colleges, and universities serve as influential establishments where literary worth is both taught and validated. In this way, the classroom becomes an essential setting for the constant reproduction and reinforcement of the canon. John Guillory, one of the most important academics in this topic, contends that canon development should be viewed in terms of educational institutions rather than just aesthetic judgment. According to him, canon construction is directly related to the distribution of cultural capital in the schools, which regulate access to literacy (Guillory, 1993, p. ix). By focusing on institutional practices rather than individual works, this viewpoint demonstrates how classroom instruction has a significant impact on the formation of literary authority. The selection of books for curricula as well as their interpretation and worth are decided by educational establishments.

Literary works are also transformed into cultural values through pedagogy. Guillory goes on to say that canonical texts are the repositories of cultural values (Guillory, 1993, p. 22). This implies that texts that are taught frequently start to reflect a society's moral and cultural norms. These writings are elevated through exams, anthologies, and curriculum, whereas others are not recognized by academia. Therefore, by incorporating particular ideals into teaching methods, pedagogy actively creates the canon rather than only reflecting it. The employment of anthologies and required curricula is another way that the canon has been institutionalized. Researchers have observed that educational resources frequently serve as instruments of cultural selection, influencing students' perceptions of literature and its background. According to Aull (2012), the canon is frequently regarded in educational settings as a selection of values rather than of authors and texts (p. 497). This realization demonstrates how teaching moves the emphasis from literary diversity to normative frameworks that direct interpretation. As a result, in addition to being exposed to particular texts, pupils are also taught to consider them to be superior or emblematic.

Because of geographical and linguistic diversity, teaching is much more complicated in the Indian environment. Unfair representation in the canon results from educational institutions' frequent preference for some languages over others, such as English or prominent regional languages. Because books from marginalized populations or lesser-known languages are rarely incorporated in mainstream curriculum, this process perpetuates existing hierarchies. A canon that represents institutional choices rather than the complete diversity of literary production is created as a result of this selective inclusion being accepted over time. Additionally, teaching helps to standardize interpretation. The meanings of texts can become fixed and constrained when they are taught in systematic ways, which are frequently dictated by test patterns and assigned readings. This limits the dynamic character of literary interaction and lessens the potential of alternate readings. In this way, institutional pedagogy can guarantee continuity while constraining innovation by simultaneously preserving and restricting literature. But teaching can also be a location of resistance and change, rather than just a means of reproduction. By incorporating various voices, alternative texts, and critical viewpoints into the classroom, modern educators and academics are challenging traditional canons more and more. For instance, postcolonial, feminist, and Dalit pedagogies aim to challenge prevailing narratives and broaden the canon. These initiatives show that the canon's institutionalization is malleable and can be changed with deliberate educational engagement.

Challenges to Canonization: Plurality, Subaltern Voices, and Modernity

Following In light of India's linguistic and socially varied literary traditions, the notion of a fixed literary canon has come under increased scrutiny in recent years. The recognition of plurality, or the existence of various literary voices, traditions, and forms that are difficult to reduce to a single standard, is one of the main obstacles to canonization. The attempt to establish a single canon frequently leads to exclusion rather than representation in a nation like India, where literature is created in numerous languages and

influenced by a variety of cultural experiences. Therefore, canon development must be viewed as a dynamic and contested process rather than a stable and universal structure, according to modern literary theory. The advent of subaltern studies and postcolonial critique, especially via the work of scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, poses a serious threat to conventional canonization. Spivak notably questioned whether the subaltern can speak—that is, whether marginalized groups can actually express themselves inside dominant discourses. According to her view, the marginalization of the disadvantaged persists because their voices are frequently not heard directly but are instead filtered through elite discourses. The subaltern is often spoken for rather than being given the opportunity to speak for themselves, as critics describe, which upholds mechanisms of inequality within academic and literary systems. This realization highlights a significant flaw in canonical literature: it frequently depicts oppressed groups without providing them with true agency or voice.

Examining the omission of Dalit and Adivasi literature from India's mainstream literary canons makes the problem even more apparent. Caste, class, and institutional authority have historically shaped canon development, favouring powerful social groups. The institutional marginalization of subaltern voices through curriculum omissions and publishing gatekeeping has been a recurring aspect of literary canon construction in India, as noted by Sharma. Literary worth and recognition are shaped by deeper social inequalities, which are reflected in this exclusion, which is not coincidental. As a result, despite their cultural and historical value, many influential literary traditions are still excluded from the official canon. The idea of modernity, which has changed literary creation, dissemination, and interpretation, presents another significant obstacle to canonization. New media, writing styles, and modes of expression that may not always fit into established canonical frameworks are brought about by modernity. For example, the formal frameworks that have traditionally characterized canonical texts are frequently resisted by oral storytelling, folk traditions, and regional literatures. In this way, modernism both reveals the shortcomings of established canons and pushes the frontiers of literary.

Furthermore, postcolonial historians have demonstrated how colonial legacies and Eurocentric standards frequently influence literary canons. Certain genres, languages, and literary forms were given preference in India's colonial educational systems; many of these practices still have an impact on modern curriculum. These inherited foundations have not been completely dissolved even after independence. As a result, rather than providing an inclusive depiction of many literary traditions, contemporary Indian literary canons frequently show a blend of colonial influence and regional hierarchy. The idea of a single authoritative account of literary history is likewise called into question by the concept of diversity. Modern academia advocates for the presence of several canons that represent various linguistic, geographical, and social viewpoints rather than a single, cohesive canon. This method acknowledges that literary merit is context-dependent and influenced by particular historical and cultural circumstances rather than being universal. Scholars can transcend inflexible hierarchies and make room for different voices and modes of expression by embracing diversity. Counter-canonical activities, which deliberately recover, study, and teach marginalized literature, have emerged as a result of these difficulties. In order to challenge conventional canons and provide more inclusive frameworks, feminist, Dalit, and regional literary movements have been essential. These initiatives demonstrate that canonization is a continuous negotiation influenced by shifting intellectual and social contexts rather than a closed process.

Toward a Critical and Inclusive Pedagogical Canon:

emphasis Scholars and educators are reconsidering the necessity of a more inclusive and critical pedagogical canon in light of the growing criticism of established literary canons. Such a canon profoundly challenges the definition, instruction, and institutionalization of literary worth rather than merely adding more texts to the list. To guarantee that literature represents a wider and more representative range of experiences, a critical educational approach becomes crucial in the context of Indian languages, where there is an enormous diversity of voices, cultures, and histories. One of the main tenets of reconsidering the pedagogical canon is that it is created by institutional activities rather than being fixed. The allocation of cultural capital within educational systems, which regulate access to literacy and define what is deemed useful information, is strongly related to canon construction, according to John Guillory (Guillory, 1993). This realization emphasizes how deeply ingrained power systems are in the canon; as a result, any effort to make it inclusive must address these underlying disparities. In addition to questioning which texts are taught, a critical pedagogy must also consider who determines the writings' worth and objectives. In this regard, academics have stressed that adding underrepresented authors is not the only way to update the canon. The canon is increasingly being discussed in educational discourse as a selection of values rather than of authors and texts, as Laura Aull points out (Aull, 2012, p. 497). This suggests that a more thorough modification of the standards used to assess literature is necessary for inclusion. Incorporating Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, or regional voices is insufficient; the teaching framework

itself needs to change to acknowledge various modes of expression, knowledge systems, and literary aesthetics.

The concept of various literacies must also be addressed in a critical and inclusive pedagogical canon. According to recent research, children require new approaches to reading and comprehending texts as literature grows more varied. According to Frank, the creation of a new canon needs to be connected to changing educational objectives and the literacies needed to interact with contemporary and varied texts. This suggests that in order to encourage students to critically assess texts as well as the social and historical contexts that shape them, teaching strategies must change in tandem with the canon. This strategy is especially crucial in the Indian setting since socioeconomic variety and language plurality influence literary traditions. Regional literatures, oral traditions, and neglected narratives must be given room in a critical pedagogical canon that transcends the dominance of a few languages or literary genres. In order to reflect the richness of Indian literary traditions, curricula, textbooks, and classroom practices must be rethought. By doing this, schooling can stop perpetuating current hierarchies and instead become a vehicle for democratizing literary knowledge. The emphasis on critical involvement as opposed to passive acceptance is another essential component of an inclusive pedagogical canon. Canonical writings should be taught to students as products of certain historical and cultural contexts rather than as indisputable authorities. The canon has always been contested and formed by procedures of selection and exclusion, according to canon studies experts. Understanding this contentious nature enables students to investigate alternate viewpoints and challenge prevailing narratives.

A critical pedagogical canon must, however, strike a balance between coherence and inclusivity. The idea is to change the canon into a more adaptable and dynamic framework rather than completely forsake it. This entails combining written and oral traditions, mainstream and marginal voices, and classical and current literature in ways that promote conversation rather than hierarchy. This method guarantees that the canon maintains its significance while also adjusting to evolving social and cultural circumstances. Additionally, teachers play a critical part in this process. Teachers serve as intermediaries between texts and pupils, influencing how literature is seen and appreciated. Teachers must actively foster inclusive and reflective learning environments and be conscious of their own prejudices in order to implement a critical pedagogy. This includes promoting conversations about topics that are frequently included in literary texts, such as caste, gender, language, and power.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, research on literary canonization in Indian languages shows that the canon is a dynamic process influenced by institutional power, education, and historiography rather than a static or impartial compilation of great works. The analysis demonstrates that literary history is crucial in the selection and arrangement of texts, and educational systems support these decisions by endorsing particular works as important and authoritative. Therefore, rather than being solely based on aesthetic judgment, canon development frequently reflects larger social, cultural, and political institutions. The study also draws attention to the shortcomings of conventional canons, particularly in a multilingual and socially diverse setting like India. The need to challenge established hierarchies and broaden the spectrum of literary representation is demonstrated by the exclusion of marginalized voices, such as those found in Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, and regional literatures. Rethinking both pedagogical methodologies and historiographical practices is necessary in light of contemporary issues including multiplicity, modernity, and subaltern viewpoints. A more inclusive and critical view of the canon is crucial going ahead. This entails changing the standards and approaches used to teach and value literature in addition to incorporating new books. Scholars and educators can develop a more democratic and significant literary framework by embracing variety, promoting critical engagement, and acknowledging various literary traditions. In the end, reconsidering canonization in Indian languages enables literature to more accurately capture the complexity of society and continue to be relevant in evolving scholarly and cultural contexts.

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