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Towards an Alternative Canon: Demystifying the Academia's War against Popular Literature

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Abstract

Popular literature has always had a chequered relationship with the academia. On one hand, readers across all spectrums have enjoyed and admired the formidable works of 'highbrow' fiction. Yet, all along, there has always been an urge to read lighter works which are all too often given the pejorative sobriquet of 'lowbrow' books. The academia thrives on creating canons, that sanctum sanctorum of texts and works of literature whose greatness and legacy remain intact and can never be called into question. This is cleverly done through the creation of the academic syllabus, a process that sifts the highbrow from the lowbrow. Recently however, texts which had hitherto been marginalised and relegated to the periphery are slowly making their way into the centre (canon). Such fictions are continually compelling the academia to reassess their criterion of greatness. This paper aims to defend popular literature and to ascertain why it is important to assimilate such works into the mainstream.

Keywords

academia, the canon, lowbrow literature, highbrow literature, institutional syllabus

1. Introduction: The Academic Canon

One of the more interesting words in the English language is the word 'canon,' for it can mean various things to various people. In its most obvious sense, the canon is a weapon of damage, used in large numbers throughout the bloody military history of humankind. It has killed people and helped armies walk over the corpses of their deceased counterparts. Today, humankind has invented other means of inflicting violence that are, presumably, much more potent than the canon. But the word has taken on a new avatar. Today the word is also increasingly being used in the world of academics, for very different reasons. Today it means the formation of literary canons, or rather benchmarks through which pieces of art and literature, are judged.

In one sense, the canon continues to kill. While it previously decimated armies, today the canon kills new potential from coming to the centre, for the canon *is* the centre, the establishment, that royalty of the academic domain. The literary canon is the guardian angel of the humanities, or at least it aspires to be so. It segregates great works from their less illustrious peers. The canon's greatest enemy, however, is the Popular enemy: the whole host of popular literature that continually threatens to come to the fore and redefine the notion of *greatness*. For some time now, the academic canon has been accused of enforcing the works of 'dead white men', often relegating other, more inclusive writing to the periphery. In this sense, the academia is a conservative, orthodox, right-wing organisation; while popular literature is the voice of the people, the non-conformists. It is the ivory-towered academia, an institution that has its roots in medieval Europe, that creates canons in all disciplines. However, as John Guillory has pointed out in his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, the 'canon' itself is an illusory term, for the texts that constitute it are neither unchangeable nor predetermined:

For the purposes of a sociologically informed history of canon formation, it is the category of "literature" which invites the closest scrutiny. That category organizes the literary curriculum in such a way as to create an illusion of a fixed and exclusive "canon", an illusion which is believed by the real history of literary curricula in the schools. For that very reason, calling the canon into question has failed to inaugurate a socio-historical inquiry into the category of literature, even while it has registered a crisis in the cultural capital so denominated. (Guillory, 2013, p. x)

Every piece of literature is a product of its age. In keeping with this view, therefore, the literary canon should be fluid and should mirror the socio-cultural realities of its age.

2. The Conundrum of Popular Fiction

Popular literature is the literature of the masses, the ordinary. It is free from the inflated sense of elevation and sophistication that can be found in highbrow literature. In one sense, popular literature thrives on creating narratives around topics that are in vogue amongst youngsters. Such works are usually easy to read and demand minimal cerebral effort. However, it is this sense of ordinariness that is popular fiction's biggest strength. The masses enjoy them and a demand is inevitably satisfied: the demand for entertaining reading material. Here, the popular novel is different from the 'literary' novel in the sense that the former aims to entertain readers through sheer storytelling and strong character-building. Literary novels on the contrary belong to the domain of 'highbrow' literature, with the deliberate employment of devices which are aimed to make them challenging and difficult to read. Such novels are usually discussed in college and university syllabi and are the posterchildren of the academia. A literary book should not thus be an easy read, but great books, no matter what their affiliation is with the canon, always leave a pleasant aftertaste. Perhaps the biggest indictment of the popular fiction can be found in J.A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, in which he describes the popular novel thus:

> A loose term for a novel which has a wide readership; it often carries slightly pejorative connotations which suggest a middle – or low-brow 'audience' and imply that such a novel may not possess much literary merit. Many a best seller, historical novel, novel of sensation, thriller and novel of adventure has been so described. (Cuddon, 2014, p. 548)

Cuddon then goes on to name a few popular novelists before concluding the entry saying: 'Such a list might be greatly extended.'

The conundrum then is to measure the quality and greatness of a novel. It seems that mere entertainment is not enough for a novel to be deemed excellent, at least according to the ivory-towered academia. Such works which get categorised as popular novels never enjoy the prestige of their heavier, more illustrious counterparts. However, it has also been seen that some books have broken this notion quite emphatically. One such novel is Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009), a historical novel set during the tumultuous times of Henry VIII. It won Mantel the Man Booker Prize. The sequel *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), was also a masterpiece in its own right and its author was once again awarded the Booker Prize, thus becoming the first woman to win the award twice. But what also makes Mantel's feat unique is the affection her works have won from the common reader. Her success completely shatters Cuddon's notion that popular novels, in which he also categorises historical fiction, as incapable of having serious literary merit. Her books therefore can be difficult to categorise: they may be called literary novels which became popular or they can also be described as popular novels having serious literary elements. Therefore, we can locate the 'literary' in the 'popular' and vice versa.

However, what is perhaps even more problematic is Cuddon's assertion that popular novels have a 'low-brow audience.' During his heyday, Charles Dickens was a popular novelist, and he even conducted reading sessions where he read out parts of his books to enraptured audiences. He was perhaps the master of the *bildungsroman*, and indeed some of his best novels are incisive character studies with briskly moving plotlines. It is interesting to note that many of the devices employed by Dickens that made him such a popular novelist are also used by popular novelists today. Since he published the chapters to his novels on a weekly basis, many of them ended on the literary *cliffhanger*, a trick often found in the so-called popular thriller novels, compelling readers to jump on to the next chapter. Dickens included a plethora of characters in his novels. Similarly, many popular novelists such as J.K Rowling in her *Harry Potter* series and George R.R. Martin in his *A Song of Ice and Fire* series have created a myriad range of interesting characters. Like Dickens, these novelists have garnered admirers from all over the world as well. Nobody will deny that Dickens was a great novelist and he seems to enjoy a universal, grandfatherly reverence amongst English-speaking readers. Yet, if Dickens was so popular, then surely, he too was a lowbrow novelist writing for lowbrow audiences.

It is also a common misconception that popular novelists lack serious literary merit. C.S. Lewis was the author of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series of children's books, but in other circles, he is also a renowned literary critic, with his *A Preface to Paradise Lost* a staple read amongst new students of John Milton. J.R.R. Tolkien created Middle Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but he also translated the Old

English poem *Beowulf*, an edition which is often recommended to students of English in colleges and universities by their professors. Italian novelist Umberto Eco is another fine example of a noted intellectual and university professor who wrote popular novels. Indeed, professor David Lodge praised Eco's ability to make "difficult material accessible by playfulness, or splicing together popular and high culture" (Jaggi, 2002).

3. Popular Fiction *or* Reading Stories for Fun

One of the main reasons for the survival of literature is for its pure entertainment value. If literature ceases to entertain, it will cease to exist. We read fiction to immerse ourselves into other realms, to escape the mundane and the ordinary. We are living in a world today where everything is vying for our attention. We have music at our fingertips, and endless hours of movies and other digital content waiting for consumption. Throughout history, literature has had little didactic value. There were, of course, books written for instruction mainly on how women should behave and on economics, religion and warfare. But it will be foolish to deny that literature truly blossomed because people were entertained by it, and they were hungry for stories. Books have always been a source of entertainment.

Popular novelists are popular because they love their readers and the readers love them back. Such novelists fill an important gap: they satisfy the reader's need for a good story. Such books are easy to read and therefore inculcate a habit of reading among young people who have varying attention spans. Such writing is also indispensable for working professionals who are hard-pressed for time, and yet want to read during office lunch breaks. This is by no means a suggestion that 'highbrow' literature cannot be entertaining. Indeed, *Don Quixote* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are very entertaining, if somewhat verbose, examples of highly readable highbrow fiction. But it cannot be denied that eliciting pleasure from canonical literature can be a mentally rigorous experience.

Highbrow literature often demands a level of cerebral effort that is not always a worthwhile investment of energy. Readers are better off reading fiction which not only delights and entertains but also requires little mental investment from their end. Reading should not always necessarily be about intellectual stimulation; we may also choose pleasure and entertainment as our primary reading objectives. Sometimes, all we need is a cracking good read. A good piece of fiction allows us to glimpse into the lives of other people. It invites us to walk alongside the protagonists, as they fend off adversities and setbacks along the way. Their humbling experiences make us informed and empathetic individuals. We learn, as the characters learn, about the vicissitudes of life. A good book provides us with stories about other people, for every time we read, we look for stories. Even when reading formidable works of fiction, all we are looking for is a story to immerse ourselves in. A book that calls itself fiction but does not have a compelling story to tell is lying to the readers in the first place.

In the prologue to his book *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*: *The Story that Created Us*, renowned Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt reminds us of the importance of stories:

> Humans cannot live without stories. We surround ourselves with them; we make them up in our sleep; we tell them to our children; we pay to have them told to us. Some of us create them professionally. And a few of us – myself included – spend our entire adult lives trying to understand their beauty, power, and intelligence. (Greenblatt, 2017)

Popular novels are the lifeblood of literature; they are indispensable for the very purpose they serve: of introducing new readers into the world of texts and subtexts. These are the books that we read and recommend to friends. These are the books that spawn fan-followings and are carved into blockbuster movies. These are the books that remind us why we fell in love with reading in the first place. Almost all readers start their reading journeys with a popular novel which they go on to love immensely. Such pleasurable experiences spark in them a lifelong interest in reading. It is only after going through popular books that some readers muster the courage to delve into denser, more *literary* works. Popular novels are the rites of passage which a reader must pass through before they can start Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Proust's *The Way of the Swann's*.

4. The Necessity of 'Low-brow' Literature

It is interesting to think that the popular works of yesteryears are the masterpieces of today. Shakespeare was not a university scholar or a noted critic. He wrote plays for a living in a London with all its glory, squalor, and wretchedness. He enjoyed great popularity in his time and then disappeared after his death. It was not until Sir Nicholas Rowe's illustrated editions of Shakespeare's works in 1709 that people reinvigorated their interest in the creator of *Hamlet*. Since then, Shakespeare has again become a popular figure. He is not only read by college and university students but 'low-brow' audiences also know his name and go to the cinema to watch film adaptations of his plays. This is why Shakespeare is unique and enjoys universal reverence. On one hand, he is the favourite son of the English literary canon. On the other hand, he is also the creator of malleable and deeply human plays which make for universal adaptability.

It is also interesting to observe that many highbrow literary giants began their careers imitating the works of, the now perceived, 'low-brow' authors. A good example of such an artist is the Nobel Prize winner, T.S. Eliot. A pioneer of modernist poetry in the English language, Eliot began his career imitating the Georgian poets, who were very popular in the early twentieth century. The first collection of Georgian poetry came out in 1912. The British Parliament had passed the Education Act in 1870, which necessitated compulsory schooling for children until the ages of twelve, significantly raising literacy levels in the country. This meant that by the time the Georgian poets began publishing their first works, a whole generation of English people had already received the benefits of primary education and were thus able to enjoy poets such as A.E. Houseman, W.H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, Robert Graves, John Masefield and others. The Georgian poets wrote in a simple, everyday language, mostly dealing with nature and English rural life. One glance at the titles of their poetry makes it adequately clear: *The Cherry Tree*, *Sea Fever, Leisure*, *The West Wind*, *A Shropshire Lad* and so on.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, their poems became a favourite among the common readers who were also the targeted audience of these poets.

Today, however, it is an oft-overlooked fact that Eliot's early, undergraduate poems bear striking thematic and tonal resemblance to Georgian poetry. Poems such as 'On a Portrait', 'The moonflower opens to the moth', 'When we come across the hill' and others are no doubt Georgian in spirit. Let us take a look at T.S. Eliot's 'Before Morning':

While all the East was wearing red with gray,
The flowers at the window turned towards dawn,
Petal on petal, waiting for the day,
Fresh flowers, withered flowers, flowers of dawn.
This morning's flowers and the flowers of yesterday
Their fragrance drifts across the room at dawn,
Fragrance of bloom and fragrance of decay,
Fresh flowers, withered flowers, flowers of dawn.

We also notice a Georgian strain in another of Eliot's early poems, 'Song':

When we come home across the hill
No leaves were fallen from the trees;
The gentle fingers of the breeze
Had torn no quivering cobweb down.
The hedgerow bloomed with flowers still,
No withered petals lay beneath;
But the wild roses in your wreath
Were faded and the leaves were brown.

As can be seen therefore, despite Eliot's later propensity for writing 'highbrow' poems on the sterility and desolation of modern post-World War life, he nevertheless began his career with the Georgians as his ideal. There is also a strain of melancholy and loss in the above examples, an emotional dimension that he will explore later in his career.

Because the Georgians were so popular during their time, and because they lived amidst the dirt and soot of industrial England, the Georgians were a generation hungry to experience scenes of rustic life in the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Keats. The Georgian poets were thus the practitioners of the popular literature of their time. The books sold well. Their works were easy to read; they could be understood without any background knowledge and context. They did not begin their poems with epigraphs in Greek or Italian like Eliot and his friend Ezra Pound usually did. There is a certain delight in reading popular literature, for it serves as an easier, more inviting alternative to the canon. These works are written for the people, the readers, and they seldom feature in institutional syllabi. Georgian poetry has become a pejorative term today in literary circles, mainly because it was eclipsed by the modernists. Yet, their popularity during the first decades of the twentieth century is a testament to the

love and appreciation these poets garnered. Such fanfare is now usually reserved for popular authors. Popular literature therefore is a good stepping stone for new authors to hone their skills before they embark upon writing more refined works. As the example of T.S. Eliot shows, popular authors introduce new writers into the world of writing. This underlines the necessity of popular writing, which is often treated unfairly by the wide academic community.

5. The Politics of Syllabus-formation

The academia has traditionally been a right-wing institution, signifying orthodoxy and conservativeness. Popular literature on the contrary belongs to the masses: it is written for the pleasure of the readers. In this sense, popular literature, and by extension, popular culture is the voice of the people; the anti-establishment bubble. The differences in their literary outlook can also be gleaned through this perspective: the academic canon usually consists of classical literatures which have stood the test of time. Popular fiction on the contrary is an attempt at forming what Nancy Fraser calls 'subaltern counterpublics' (Note 1): a chance to heed the voiceless, with themes of gender, sexuality, race, and history usually found in such works. Popular fiction thus is an *alternative* canon.

The canon, therefore, is a creation of the academia, an institution that thrives on engendering political and cultural narratives through the creation of the syllabi. The academic institutions and their syllabi, therefore, create and propagate the canon. More importantly, the academia consists of academics from elite institutions who dictate the literary mores of the world. It is these academics who create the canon. This is done chiefly through the creation of the academic syllabi which determines the intellectual makeup of students. From this perspective, the literary syllabus is a potent institutional weapon, for it not only restricts the reading patterns of the students but also determines *what* they shall read and at which stage of their academic development. As Guillory (2013) explains, the academia wants to create, and withhold, epistemological capital:

> The literary syllabus is the institutional form by means of which… knowledge is disseminated, and it constitutes capital in two senses: First, it is linguistic capital the means by which one attains a socially credentialed and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as "Standard English." And second, it is symbolic capital, a kind of knowledge-capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles the possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person. (Guillory, 2013, p. ix)

This is initiated right from the outset when a child goes to school. The academia lets the students decide the course, but they are not allowed a chance to choose their syllabus. It is already pre-decided for them. The basic premise of official education therefore is twofold. By going to school and thus participating in the schooling process, the students are automatically indoctrinated into the syllabus. In a malleable stage in their lives, they imbibe everything the syllabus has for them, a process that continues well into higher education. This helps them come into possession of the official methods of reading and writing. Next, the student, by rigorously learning the syllabus, becomes eligible to receive certificates and

degrees which he might 'produce upon request' to a prospective employer. This forms the basis of his symbolic capital, enabling the individual to enjoy the cultural (social respect) and material (salary, incentives, bonuses) rewards of his education; rewards which are only conferred to those individuals stamped 'well-educated' by the academic institutions. By effect then, individuals who have not gone through this process are excluded of these material benefits irrespective of their intellectual capabilities simply because they have not completed a wide spectrum of pre-decided syllabi by an academic institution on a given course.

The problem with this line of education is that the syllabus can be manipulated by individuals with vested interests. Certain episodes from subjects such as History, Political Science and Literature can be highly contentious, and syllabus makers are not always willing to let both narratives pan out. So even though the institutional syllabus forms an integral part of a student's development, gaps always remain in his or her learning. In a subject such as literature, these gaps can then be filled by popular fiction, works that defy the academia's criterion of literary standard. The syllabus is a weapon of cultural appropriation, a means by which the 'highbrow' is first defined, then sifted and finally segregated from the popular ('low-brow'). The academic syllabus creates hierarchies within texts, and people, influencing our perception about the books we see around us and the people who read such books. A syllabus is necessary, but it is also constricted in its very concept, for no syllabus is truly complete or comprehensive. The syllabus is restrictive not only because it only includes texts which fit the timeframe of any given course but also because such texts function as political and cultural vectors of desired ideological notions.

6. Academic Snobbishness and 'Pretentious Literature'

The academia has always had a clear stance on the kinds of literature can be included in the literary syllabus, and by extension, the canon. The canon is a collection of texts which constitute the crème-de-la-crème of highbrow literary production. These texts have been the benchmarks of greatness in literary consciousness, and educational institutions have regularly included them in their syllabi. Such texts are usually phallogocentric; have a traditional omniscient third-person narrator, and are mostly written by 'dead white men'. Later, the modernists with their stream of consciousness and postmodernists with their surrealism took literature to new heights of pretentiousness.

One of the reasons why an author such as James Joyce will never enjoy a wide readership is because he was too preoccupied with his technique. Joyce was a self-indulgent author who took the stream of consciousness technique to its extremes, making his longer works unreadable. Joyce will be discussed in university classes and students will write lengthy papers on his works. But novels such as *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake*, which he took seventeen years to write, will never be *loved* by a wide readership. Joyce belongs to a category of authors who take great joy in writing pretentious literature, that brainchild of literature which the academia lauds the most. Pretentious literature is usually a work written in multiple languages (*Finnegan's Wake*); English poems which have epigraphs written in the

Greek language without the poet feeling the need to translate them (*Sweeney Among the Nightingales*); or in which the author addresses the reader directly (*If on a winter's night a traveller*).

Indeed, one of the hallmarks of pretentious literature is language games in which authors 'play' with their books. Italian novelist Umberto Eco is a good example in this context. As a semiotician, Eco thrived at creating literary equivalents of the jigsaw puzzle. His books were widely criticised for their pseudo-intellectualism, with renowned author Salman Rushdie lampooning *Foucault's Pendulum* back in 1989 for being too pretentious, calling it a "fiction about the creation of a piece of junk fiction." He concluded in true Brontëan fashion: "Reader: I hated it" (Jaggi, 2002). Others too were not so accommodating. In a 1995 review of Eco's novel *The Island of the Day Before*, the critic Will Self observed:

> And, in truth, there is no plot to be had in this novel. The device of the doppelganger that Eco employs…has, to my mind, no real significance, except to underscore what a rag-bag affair it is; and despite the lapidary feel of the prose itself, such is the sheer density of neologism and wilfully obscure locution that he employs the sense is of being forced to stare at unpleasant flock wallpaper (Self, 1995).

Eco, according to Will Self, is "perverse and tendentious", a writer of "superficially 'intellectual' books that…convince a great number of people they are reading something with a certain cachet. This is a loathsome confidence trick" (Jaggi, 2002). So, what Self is essentially pointing out is the pretentiousness that is evident in much of highbrow postmodern works of literature. Questions were also raised on how many people actually *read* Eco's books as it became a fashion statement to be buying them.

Some authors are, of course, different. Despite experimenting widely with their works, they never let their style become an impediment to pleasurable reading. Gabriel García Márquez comes readily to mind in this respect. Seeped in magic realism, his novels can be chaotic and dense, but his lyrical prose ensures that we never stop enjoying them. Márquez was perhaps one of the few highbrow authors who foresaw the necessity to engage his readers. He understood the importance of combining plot, characterisation, and good writing, which contribute to a smooth narrative flow. The popular novelist is also accused of being greedy as he hopes to sell his books in large numbers. But, so did some renowned poster-children of the academia: most notably Charles Dickens. In truth, Dickens wrote his novel *Hard Times* (which is markedly different from his other books), to increase the circulation of his weekly magazine *Household Words*.

The academia loves difficult authors because it gives them an inflated sense of importance. As an institution, it will become irrelevant if the pyrotechnics employed by Joyce and his ilk become intelligible to everyone, as it happens in the case of popular-fiction writers. One of the attractions of reading Joyce or other pretentious authors is the 'awe factor' that comes with such an effort. It advertises the reader's own sense of accomplishment at having been able to tackle the author's difficult writing. Reading a text such as *Ulysses* or *Foucault's Pendulum* therefore becomes much more than

reading. The reader invests his ego in the effort, an acknowledgement of having accepted the author's arduous challenge. There is of course no doubting the greatness of these texts, for they have stretched the limits of literary experiment. Postmodern fiction is rife with such examples. However, not everyone is willing to expend the intense cerebral and intellectual energy required for such an effort, despite the greatness of this literature. But the academia looks down upon such simpletons who cannot enjoy Joyce and William Faulkner. Like any centre of power, it aims to remain above the level of the middle-brow, common reader. As an analogy, it is just like the monarchy considering itself superior to the common folk. Readers with middle, or lowbrow affiliations, do not care about the academia or its canon; to them reading is simply a pleasurable experience. It is such people the academia abhors and detests. Such readers neither care about the academia's hold over literary capital nor do they worry about the benchmarks of greatness set by the canon.

7. Conclusion: Reconfiguring the Canon

More recently, publishers have realised the importance of inclusivity in the publishing industry. The #MeToo movement of 2017 has opened the floodgates of discussion on women's oppression and sexual harassment. It is a phenomenon that spread on social media, which is, once again, a vehicle of mass-expression. Therefore, we see a surge in feminist novels. Texts such as Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2019) reimagine the Homeric *Odyssey* by giving voice to a peripheral female character. The academia worldwide is becoming more sensitive to the issues surrounding gender and sexuality. The academic institutions have also followed suit, introducing papers not only on gender studies but also on popular literature in their college and university syllabus. The intention behind the creation of a canon should be to inculcate the pieces of literature which reflect the socio-cultural realities of the age. To this end, whether it be the syllabus or the canon, it is possible to create change. The popular has always been powerful, and now even the ivory-towered academia is beginning to take note.

It is heartening to see new forms of inclusivity in the publishing and academic industry. For example, the University of Calcutta, in its new revamped choice-based English Honours syllabus, has introduced a whole paper on Popular Literature. The list of works students plough through include the English translation of Sukumar Ray's *Abol Tabol*, nonsense rhymes reminiscent of Lewis Carroll; *Tintin in Tibet*, as a foray into graphic novels and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Today, these texts sit proudly alongside heavy canonical favourites such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*. Owing to such changes, students will now be exposed to a wider array of literature which will shape their perception of 'literary greatness' in a positive sense. As Guillory (2013) explains: "Literary works must be seen… as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation, or more simply, in the way in which they are taught" (Guillory, 2013, p. ix). By including popular literature in the literary syllabi, the canon is reconfiguring and realigning itself to the socio-cultural needs of our age.

Publishers are also beginning to acknowledge the importance of inclusivity in the publishing industry.

Bernardine Evaristo became the first black British woman novelist to be awarded the Booker Prize in 2019. Her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* is a good example of the new genre of intersectionality, which merges the myriad issues of race, gender, sexuality, and history. We perceive a change in the air, with publishers willing to be more experimental in their approach to publishing. Similarly, authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have introduced a new generation of African fiction which have reinvigorated our interest in that continent's literary productions. Previously suppressed and unheard voices, are finally having their say. Perhaps the biggest victory for the advocates of popular fiction is the fact that people who share Cuddon's perspective on the lowness of such works are beginning to dwindle. Today's popular novelists are creating 'modern masterpieces' which are seriously challenging the notion of literary greatness. With such a change in attitude, we can afford to be optimistic about the future of popular fiction. It is necessary to assimilate the popular into the mainstream, a realisation that is shaping the new reality of the literary canon.

Note 1. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* (1990)

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