

## Canon is Written Back: A Feminist/Postcolonial Critique

Dr. MIRZA MUHAMMAD ZUBAIR BAIG  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Humanities,  
COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Lahore  
Pakistan

### **Abstract:**

*The canonical Western narratives are reductionist, essentialist and monolithic representation(s) of the colonized and women as erased beings. Their marked absence from these texts, looked at through feminist and postcolonial lenses, asks for “critical intelligence” that questions their absence, silence or erasure, and engages us in moral critique, challenges and critiques the reductionist, essentialist and monolithic representations of the othered beings. The feminist postcolonial rewritings have been contextualized by the canonical writing, and the rewriters are not unmindful of temporal issues of voice, absences and identity which they consciously try to right in the contemporary reworks.*

**Key words:** Canon, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Rewritings

### **1. Introduction**

The feminist postcolonial rewritings study absences in the Western canonical texts based on the assumption that they are an effort to right the absences in the canonical texts with room to spare for further rewriting. I also assume that there are still many erasures and gaps in these rewritings. The canonical texts have been rewritten in the present age, originally belong

to the Western mode of writing and thinking—a project of colonial, patriarchal and discursive power. These established texts, to take as an example, are Homer’s *The Odyssey* (circa 800 BC), Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). We find that Penelope in *The Odyssey*, Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* are reduced to sub-human level owing to their ethnicity and gender. In the pursuit of generalization, these writings in history present the ‘objectified’ and ‘othered’ images of the erased beings. These stereotypical and marginalized characters in the texts were the absences, silences and erasures, who could not find their voice, representation and space in the narrative and, now, ask for “critical intelligence”<sup>1</sup> on the part of feminist postcolonial researchers. The postcolonial and feminist rewritings are an attempt to redress these omissions and express hope for the oppressed. I present a critical review of such mis(sed)-representations, absences, lack of voice and identity by taking issues with matter of agency and authenticity, thus critiquing what has been inscribed in history as oppression.

## 2. Canon

In this part, I have tried to develop an understanding of the key terms “canon,” “canonical,” and “canonicity.” Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are the Western canonical texts which have been directly invoked by the rewriters. The rewritings have challenged the male/colonial traditions and subverted the institutionalized ideologies of classic writers like Homer, Daniel

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “Critical intelligence” does not only involve the comprehension of strategies used in a research but also the researcher’s “willingness and ability to debate the value of various ends of a practice” (p. 435). See Thomas A. Schwandt. Farewell to criteriology In: Clive Seale (ed.) *Social Research Methods: A Reader*. London: Routledge, (2004):432-436.

Defoe and Charlotte Bronte. To start with, I deal with the question of canon. I limit it to the Western white male, patriarchal and colonial canonicity which is questioned in the rewritings. The effort to explore the Western canon is because it represents Western political, colonial and discursive power. These canonical writings have survived over the ages and been celebrated over the centuries.

Here arises the need to look into the meanings of “canon” and analyze the assumptions on which the canon has retained its status-quo in literary tradition and remained unchallenged until recently. *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* defines “canon” as “a general rule or principle” ([1]) Etymologically, the word “canon” comes from the Greek word *kanon*, and George A. Kennedy defines it as “a straight rod or bar used by a weaver or carpenter, then a rule or model in law or in art” ([2], p. 106). Kennedy takes canon formation as “a natural human instinct” that works in order to “impose order on multiplicity” ([2], p. 105). In an urge to impose order on multiplicity, human beings have been categorized and hierarchized in the canonical writings which are representative of the privileged culture(s). This is a very strong reason why the rewritings try to give re-presentation to the absences in canonical texts and question their being left out in the classics. The question of new canon formation with new emerging cultures has either given birth to writing in imitation of the privileged canons or challenged them. Lillian S. Robinson defines “canon” as the work patterned on the “established standards of judgment and of taste” ([3], p. 2). Likewise, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* defines “canon” as “a generally accepted rule, standard or principle by which sth [something] is judged”[4]. Over the ages in history, these standards of judgment have been set to work by the literary patriarchs synonymous with colonizers. According to Robinson, the rationales for canonicity are “*particular* notions of literary quality, timelessness, universality, and other

qualities” ([3], p. 7, stress added). “Literary quality,” “timelessness,” and “universality” are the fallacies which resisted the alternative narrative mode(s) of the classic texts. The criterion of judging this particularity ensured the hegemony of the West over the subdued cultures and of patriarchy over women. These criteria declared classic works as writings of “excellence” by “excellent” literary patriarchs and divided literature into “major” and “minor” writings. In the start, the writers from former colonies and women folk were relegated to the status of “minor(s)” on the pretext that “a particular author does not meet generally accepted criteria of excellence” ([3], p. 3). The classic texts, the “major” writings scribed on this set pattern, may be regarded as “canonical” in the sense that “all have had significant impact on the culture as a whole” ([3], p. 5). “Major” literature was widely read and accepted in the “great” literary tradition while those works which “deviated” from these standards and guidelines were positioned as “minor(s).”

The “generally accepted” criterion reflects the pervasiveness and impact of (Western) canonical writings in the colonized cultures. The notion of “the Great Stories” imported from Arundhati Roy’s novel, *The God of Small Things*, can help us understand the internalization of the classic stories. These canonized stories are well-known, well-received and believed to be true and handed down generation after generation. They are indicative of “false consciousness” structured by the discursive power of social structures. They resist the process of “defamiliarization” which Hans Bertens refers to as “a renewed and fresh way of looking at the world” ([5], p. 36). According to this interpretation, the process of “defamiliarization” calls for rewriting of these “Great stories.” Such a new and/or alternative writing would create the possibility of genuine rendering of the real “inside” story from the perspective(s) of the “othered.” It is expected that rewriting in this manner is likely to betray the secret of absences, silences and erasures by

de-scribing the “false consciousness” built over generations. Arundhati Roy claims:

[ . . . ] the secret of the *Great Stories* is that they have *no secrets*. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and *inhabit comfortably* [ . . . ]. They are as familiar as the *house* you live in [ . . . ]. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you won't. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again. ([6], p. 229, my emphases)

The rewriters with the desire “to know [‘the Great Stories’] again” with the difference disturb the homeliness, comfort and familiarity of the reader as, under the garb of “no secrets,” these stories retain a lot of erasures, gaps, omissions and silences. It is stepping out of the comfort zone(s) of unquestioned beliefs— removing the blinders of what Megan Boler terms as “inscribed habits of inattention” ([7], p. 16). These rewritings are not merely Lefevere's reading of the slavish rewriting (translation) of the “canonized” Greek classics in the past as Jeremy Munday quotes ([8], p. 129). Rather, they are the reworking beyond the norms for transformational purposes. Therefore, I focus on the re-constructed individuals in the rewritings based on the postcolonial and feminist narrative(s), taking up the issues of absences, voice and identity.

Rewriting of the canonical texts negotiates the power relations between the erased subjectivities of women or the colonized—silenced because of the “epistemic violence” rendered by the colonial and patriarchal (masculinist discourse) in the writings—and the colonizers or patriarchs. Spivak's term “epistemic violence” refers to the analyses of colonial discourse which, in Robert J.C. Young's interpretation, reveal that “history is not simply the disinterested production of facts, but is rather a process of ‘epistemic violence’” ([9], p. 200). In this way, rewritings problematize “historical truths.”

While projecting the white colonial/patriarchal European epistemology in the classic writings, the “epistemic violence” in the texts left the silenced voices, the unrepresentable(s) in “great” literary texts, unattended. They find articulation in the rewritings’ space carved out for resistance. As an ideology is a complex matrix of social practices that cannot be ignored, the post-text context in the rewritings is an attempt to (re)right canonical imperialist/patriarchal assumptions by revisiting the classic texts and thus highlighting the ideological processes [Althusser in my mind] manifested in the language of both texts. This context in the rewritings questions the bias and narrates what went wrong in the texts. It considers how these writers deal with stereotypical assumptions, cope with socially determined traditional roles and verify if their choices result in the articulation of an alternative discourse that decolonizes the canonized text(s). These writings as alternative realities engage writers in re-imagining and re-telling the classic myths/texts. Such a non-canonical revision of the canonical/standard reading of the texts forces us to re-consider the process of reading and writing. This is an attempt to work on the dark or shady areas of the text and inscribe the “silenced voices” back into existence. I associate this revisioning with the process of decolonizing the canonized text and it stands in contrast with what Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes as the “worst excesses of colonialism” ([10], p. 1) and patriarchal system which conditioned the ‘othered.’ Linda Tuhiwai Smith studies Edward Said’s position about the marginalized in relation to the European Imperialist forces. She recommends that the colonized people need to address their othering by “rewriting and rightrighting our (their) position in history” ([10], p. 28). It is like speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves or more appropriately giving space to those in texts who were formerly erased on designs in the discursive empire of the texts:

The reach of imperialism into ‘our heads’ challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our

minds, to recover ourselves , to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity. ([10], p. 23)

The discursive nature of the empire situates the colonized on the margins, and thus puts them under the control of hierarchical structure of discourse. However, their remaining at the margins gives the marginalized self a certain freedom of articulation and, once decentered, they get a space to reclaim their identities. They, perhaps, also develop “a sense of authentic humanity” as claimed by Smith. The center is associated with the canonical texts. Therefore, rewriting is a process of writing back to the center from the margins. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson consider that the de-scribing Empire is not a project of “historical recuperation” on the plea that “the hegemony of Europe and its legacy of division and racism are alive” ([11], p.9). These remarks underscore that rewriting should not be categorically and unidirectionally directed towards historical “epistemic violence”; it should rather embody a futuristic vision and engage with the forthcoming writings as well. Rewritings are not merely meant to re-right history but work on the present modes of colonization/imperialism, the probability of challenging their new representations and seeking resistance against/emancipation from these hegemonic reinscriptions for a safer future.

Rewriting is writing back to the canonical discourses where women/post-colonial writers have found a site for resistance, re-presentation, and revision of patriarchal/colonial writings. The erased voice in the rewritings negotiates the once-masculine power of the gaze (eye/I), and it permits new possibilities for the reader to identify with the canonized characters. The rewritings attempt to give agency to the feminist/colonized discourse and resist bondage to masculinist/colonial master narratives.

Literary canon for me is metonymy for empire. In metonymy, the part represents the whole, so I equate the hegemony of Western canonical texts in literature over the

“minor” literature with the domination of English Empire over the dominated cultures. The feminist and postcolonial alternatives to the accepted canon stand against the apparently systematic neglect of women and the colonized experience in the literary canon. The purpose of rewritings as alternative study of history ‘preserved’ in classic writings is to awaken and enrich our understanding of what has been going on in the texts. In order to notice the systematic neglect of women’s experiences, I here build on Jessica Munns’ (2001) article “Canon Fodder: Women Studies and the (British) Literary Canon.” She quotes the example of poignant myth of Judith Shakespeare from Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) where, instead of getting a chance to work in theatre like Shakespeare, she is seduced by an actor and commits suicide over the consequent pregnancy. This myth studies why the erasures in the classic texts could not be challenged by the generations of women after Judith Shakespeare. Like Judith Shakespeare, the women writers could not get the window of opportunity to excel in patriarchal system. In contrast with the likes of Shakespeare (metonymy for male writers), the writing talents of many Judith Shakespeares committed symbolic suicide. Jessica Munns’ solution to counter the canonical writings is similar to the project of rewritings. She encourages the women writers, the present day Judith Shakespeares “to set up alternative canons, or overshadow the existing canon [ . . . ] it has been the combination of *new works* and *new methods* that have destabilized the traditional (male) canon” ([12], pp. 18-19, stress added).

Prior to this, I want to discuss the factors that held the Western canon in place for generations and why the marginalized could not destabilize the existing canon. One reason pointed out in the myth of Judith Shakespeare is the lack of opportunity for the marginalized individuals. Linda Hutcheon quotes Derrida’s position that “the authority of representation constraints us, imposing itself on our thought

through a whole dense, enigmatic and heavily stratified history. It programs us and precedes us.” He contests that “this does not mean that it cannot be challenged and subverted—but just that the subversion will be from within” ([13], 147). I associate the gaps, silences, erasures, absences and omissions in the canonical texts to the phrase ‘subversion from within’ as these gaps carry the potential for deconstruction, rewriting and subversion of the standard narrative(s). If there are still certain gaps in the rewritings, what is the status of such texts then? The constraints imposed by the authority of (canonical) representation engage me with Harold Bloom’s idea of “the anxiety of influence.”

### **3. Rewritings as Counter-Canonical Texts**

In this section, I discuss the interrelatedness of Western canonical texts and rewritings. I also discuss the motives that triggered the revisiting of these standardized Western narratives. As the rewritings are the belated reappearances of Western classics, they may also be called post-Western canonical texts. What interrelates these rewritings is the focus on the canonicity of writings and the question of rewritings as righting of erased subjectivities, silenced/unheard voices and marginalized identities.

To take an example, Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1987), are based on two canonized adventure stories, Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Here personae have been specifically Western males with a telling absence of the female. Therefore, the narrative voices of women and the colonized are missing in the narration. They could not partake of adventures portrayed as man’s domain only in these classics. *The Penelopiad* (2005) addresses the character of Penelope and her maids in *The Odyssey* where Penelope takes the subject position and fights her case for justice against the historical and canonical

representation. *Foe*, “*kunstlerroman*”<sup>2</sup> of Susan, refers to Susan—an absence in *Robinson Crusoe*. Her character proposes how (re)writing is difficult and not less dangerous than the white male’s adventurism. Susan Barton rewrites the story of her own adventure to confront Foe, a white male metropolitan writer, a representative of white hegemonic Western discourse that misportrays her. Her writing adventure is also an attempt to intervene in the writing practice that was reserved for (white) male writers only. In the face of absence of female tradition of narrativized adventures, her narrative/rewriting reflects the challenges posed to agency, authenticity and the inscription of the self. The third rewriting *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1968) by Jean Rhys, “*bildungsroman*”<sup>3</sup> of a Creole girl, is based on Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, *bildungsroman* of an English girl, Jane Eyre.

#### 4. Harold Bloom and Rewritings

The question of authority of representation raises different issues. Apparently, this authority has shifted from the Western patriarchs and colonial writers to the postcolonial and feminist rewriters. Whether the Western ways of representation have still programmed the rewritings to an extent or not, I still wonder if the rewriters could successfully decolonize their minds from the reach of colonial and patriarchal imperialism. The followers of the realist tradition have always looked up to the literary fathers and their classic works for writing. In order

---

<sup>2</sup> “*Kunstlerroman*” is a German word which means a novel that deals with the “struggles or strivings of an artist or writer” (p. 167). In the novel *Foe*, the woman character and the narrator, Susan, experiences difficulties in writing as a woman in the metropolitan city England. See David Mikics *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> “*Bildungsroman*” is a German word which means a novel (*Roman*) which deals with “the development of the self through knowledge”(p. 40). See David Mikics: *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007.

to determine the relationship between the writing and rewriting, or writer and rewriter, Harold Bloom's proposition, "the anxiety of influence" is useful. In Bloom's view, the anxiety is in the mind of the successors who are awed by the writings of the predecessors. He notes that the successors misinterpret the work of the (literary) fathers in order to make room for their creativity. From the marginal's point of view, fathers' interpretations are misinterpretations. In canonical context, rewriting can be the misinterpretation of the father's interpretation. According to the postcolonial and feminist theories, in the rewritings, the successors hold the predecessors accountable for the misinterpretation of reality and erasures of the 'others.' Though his concept encompasses poetry as a genre, it can be applied in case of re-/writings. According to Harold Bloom as interpreted by P. V. Zima:

the *strong poet* adapts the texts of his precursor or literary 'father' to his own aesthetic needs in order to escape the paralyzing influence of the paternal genius. 'To live', Bloom claims, 'the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision (misreading), which is the rewriting of the father.' ([14], p. 153)

In order to make erasures in the texts livable, rewriting, according to Bloom, becomes necessity. What can be interesting to notice is to look for the "paralyzing influence of the paternal genius," if any. Here the question arises if the rewritings are misinterpreting or violating the "law of father." Bloom explains it as "a primal fixation upon a precursor" ([14], p. 156). It means that symbolically the new writer is un/consciously mesmerized by the great image of a literary father. The new artist cannot simply do away with the powerful influence of this image while creating something fresh. Bloom's idea of misrepresentation can be equated with literary theorist T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" where the individual talent writes joining in the tradition of the predecessors. In studying the rewritings, we can see if the

rewriters are showing “the anxiety of influence” or actually subverting this influence.

Harold Bloom states that “the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call “poetic misprision” ([15], p. xxiii). He associates and interprets “poetic misprision” as “poetic influence,” an act of creative correction ([15], p. 30). The strong misreading emerges out of “profound act of reading” a literary work. He acknowledges that Keats’s Odes, Sonnets and his two *Hyperions* owe to the “profound” reading of Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. Bloom’s point affirms that the poet, the successor (the rewriter) misreads the literary ‘father’ in order to fulfill his aesthetic needs. This misreading, for the sake of creativity, should not be taken as distorted reading of the predecessor; it is more close to the term ‘adaptation’. So, for the sake of understanding, it would be more appropriate to say that the rewriter/poet adapts the writings of the literary patriarchs for his/her aesthetic needs and creates something out of the anxiety of influence. T.S. Eliot does not see that following the tradition essentially means surrendering novelty; he envisages the possibility of novelty by following tradition. The new work alters the way in which the past is seen. He talks of developing canon and procuring the consciousness of the past. The historical sense which is “a sense of the timeless” ([16], p. 367) as well as of the temporal makes a writer traditional.

## **5. Conclusion**

The rewritings are an attempt to deconstruct the canonical understanding of the colonized and the women. The newly formed binary oppositions in the renarrativized texts need to be located and addressed. The reversal of binaries in the rewritings can help the stereotyped women characters but their narrative has a very limited scope and mandate. The process of othering not only arises out of the gender-polarity but also

because of the same gender. However, after rewriting, the stereotyped characters do not essentially remain just the “same” ([17], p.86) to use Homi K Bhabha’s words. Now, they are partly understandable and differently knowable to the readers. The feminist postcolonial writers should work to enhance the mandate of rewriting and be consistent with their philosophical and theoretical undertakings.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article is based on author’s PhD dissertation.

### **REFERENCES**

1. John Sinclair, ed. *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publisher, 2001.
2. George A. Kennedy. “The Origin of the Concept of a Canon and Its Application to the Greek and Latin Classics.” *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*. Ed. Jan Gorak. New York and London: Routledge, (2001): 105–116.
3. Lillian S. Robinson. “Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon.” *In the Canon Mouth: Dispatches from the Culture Wars*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, (1997): 1–22.
4. Sally Wehmeier, ed. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
5. Hans Bertens. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Routledge: London, 2001.
6. Arundhati Roy. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Indiaink, 1997.

7. Megan Boler. "Feeling Power: Theorizing Emotions and Social Control in Education." *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education*. New York & London: Routledge, 2005.
8. Jeremy Munday. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.
9. Robert J.C. Young. "Spivak: Decolonization, Deconstruction," *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. London & New York: Routledge, (2004): 199–218.
10. Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
11. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson. "Introduction: The Textuality of Empire." *De-scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality*. Eds. Chris Tiffin, and Alan Lawson. London: Routledge, (1994): 1–10.
12. Jessica Munns. "Canon Fodder: Women Studies and the (British) Literary Canon." *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*. Ed. Jan Gorak. New York & London: Garland, (2001): 17–27.
13. Linda Hutcheon. "Postmodernism and Feminisms." *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Ed. Terence Hawkes. London and New York: Routledge, (2002): 137–164.
14. P. V. Zima, and Rainer Emig. (trans.). *Deconstruction and Critical Theory*. London and New York: Continuum, 2002.
15. Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
16. T. S. Eliot. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Eds. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou. Edinburgh University Press, (1998): 366–371.

17. Homi K Bhabha. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, (1994):85–92.