

## Does Canon hinder Reading Habit?: An Analysis

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The dwindling interest among contemporary students to love literature and appreciate its manifold nuances is a serious concern amidst academic communities. Most students opting for literature read the prescribed texts only to clear examinations and, such an approach may be termed as “use and forget” syndrome because students easily forget what they read once exams are over. Recently the researcher conducted a survey in some of the colleges of Assam and interacted with the student community in an amicable ambience where different facets of the malady were unraveled. The present paper is based on the survey because one of the primary issues which emerged during the interactive sessions was the issue of censorship and how the students felt that their literary freedom was throttled by the existing syllabus of the university which at times forced them to read “uninteresting” texts. They felt that if they had but the power they would have changed the syllabus and included “interesting” texts with which they could connect themselves. In the innocuous responses of the students apart from censorship a host of other issues like canon formation, the future of the book, popular literature, attractive marketing strategy to promote a book, right of the reader etc. came to the foreground and made the exercise an enabling one. This made the researcher realize that the basic thing at stake was academic freedom and if it is not exigent to negotiate between the academic and the non-academic world of the students, at least to be critical about the patronizing attitude of stewardship and keep their vibes in mind before syllabus planning.

But what is academic freedom?

In an essay titled *Academic Freedom: Students Rights and Faculty Responsibilities*, David Moshman decisively raises a plethora of questions which opens up the field for wider investigation. He asks:

Is it the freedom of educational institutions from external constraints? Is it the freedom of faculty from external or institutional constraints? Is it the freedom of students from external, institutional or faculty constraints? ...And how can academic freedom be justified? Is it a constitutional right? A moral entitlement? Is it created by laws? By contracts? Is it a component of quality education? A spur to social progress? One possible answer is obvious and plausible: Academic freedom involves all of the above. But unless we can say more than this, such a broad and multifaceted notion of academic freedom is at best vague (Yudof 1987) and at worst incoherent (Byrne 1981). Although seeming to protect everyone and everything, it may, for that very reason, protect nothing (1994: 26).

No doubt the faculties and the students have to work within the institutional boundaries where they are bound to follow rules but rules cannot be the gauntlet if the students and the faculties are ingenious enough and can create an alternative space to address concerns like reading literature for love and loving texts included in the syllabus with an aptitude for dialogue and mutual understanding.

At the beginning of the students' meet a discussion about canon, canon formation and the change in the canon with the change of time, along with the difficulties to change it, how to define literature and the problems to pin it was thoroughly addressed. As the discussion progressed what came to the fore is that all students love literature but they do not study texts of the "classic writers" during their leisure time. Their world of reading was bifurcated into two: *got to read books* and *want to read books*. *Got to read books* consisted of those which they have to read willy-nilly to clear the examinations and the *want to read books* were those which they read for pleasure, books that appealed to them, books that they felt connected with.

The writer who emerged as the common preferred one for the students across a wide spectrum of writers such as John Grisham, Anne Rice, Dean R. Koontz, Anthony Burgess, John Steinbeck, and Jeffrey Archer, was Stephen King. It was King who had convincingly explored the hiatus between the *got to read* and *want to read* books in an article he wrote for the magazine *Seventeen* which is equally applicable for college students. He wonders,

First, why high school kids almost invariably hate the books they are assigned to read by their English teachers, and second, why English teachers almost invariably hate the books their students read in their spare time (1990: 240).

He goes on to talk about loving the "stuff" he picked to read: "My stuff was what I read for love. It was more current, more vivid, and spoke with greater urgency about the world around me, a world that simultaneously intrigued and frightened me" (1990: 241). This is indeed a very crucial point. After all do not we want this love of reading from our students? If they derive it from popular writers, should we strangle that or should we not try to build a bridge between the classics and the popular?

This experience made me foray into the world of the popular writers like King, Rice, Potter et al. so that I am equipped enough to continue with this investigation which by now became quite alluring. No doubt these writers did not conform to the world of high academic culture but they dealt with themes which appealed to the taste of the young students/readers enabling them to garner a huge mass of readership and fan following across the world. A book which helped me immensely towards this end was *Reading Stephen King: Issues of Censorship, Student Choice and Popular Literature* (1997) edited by Brenda Miller Power, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Kelly Chandler which provided me with the model and frame for my investigation. I decided to interact with my students regarding their reading habits, preference and created a reading club in my college where we regularly assembled without hampering our assigned class hours.

Once the meeting of our reading club got underway the strict boundary line dividing teachers and students, where the relationship tends to get adversarial was replaced by one of friendship and respect. Without any qualms we critically discussed taboo subjects like homosexuality, how lot of great people in the past were homosexuals, after all as a teacher I firmly believed that the more students know about such issues, the less ignorant they will be, after all these issues are the realities of our humanity and there is more harm in hushing them. As Stephen King had very well pointed out, if censors did not censor his books youths would read them. If they did censor his books youths would read them in droves because they were told not to. We all know how negative censorship increases the market appeal of a book and its sell gets escalated and sometimes it is used as an effective strategy by authors and publishers.

Gradually students brought censored books to the open filed which they tended to hide in closed closets, books which they felt connected with their life and personal interest. Soon we had reading sessions where there was substantial amount of intellectual traffic, where students

debated and discussed important issues like racism, homophobia, power, corruption, fringe elements of society, center and margins and censored books of writers like King, Rice, Sparks were the springboards towards this end. As I managed to earn the faith and friendship of my students in the true sense very soon we spliced classic literature with the censored books, discussed how censorship is also subject to change and are very much embedded and emanates from a culture it is situated in. After all aren't books like *Lady Chatterley's Lovers*, *Arms and Man* etc. were once upon a time heavily censored? Slowly students discerned connections between their self-selected books and the books that are prescribed in their literature syllabus. An atmosphere of reciprocal reading emanated where students could understand their favourite book in terms of the one prescribed in the syllabus; sessions extended and expanded which included comparison of those books which was an emancipating experience.

Soon we started debating sessions where students debated about the issue of censorship, book banning and safe literature. No doubt I had to face tough situations when most students asked me why they can't have those texts of King, Rice et al whom they relish along with the prescribed ones in their syllabus. It was a legitimate and understandable question which I tackled well by saying that changes are evolving and in the postmodern era where there is a scrutiny of the age old customs *popular* texts will carve a niche in the literary canon. However, I also made them understand why the literary world is divided into two camps: the classic and the popular; nor is the division a new distinction. Way back in the 1880s, Henry James dismissed the popular female writers whose fictions competed with him by labeling them as "scribbling women." Although Jack London's works sold well, the critics called it "crude and uneven," terms that sound a lot like modern day criticism of writers like Stephen King. As literature professor Carroll Terrell has said, the "idea that a popular can't be a real artist or a best seller can't be literature is a mind-set many years in the making" (1990: 69). In fact, it's this longstanding tradition of debate – of what constitutes good literature and what should be taught in schools, colleges and universities – which have lent a critical edge to the entire field.

The electronic age has brought new censorship issues which demand a proactive stance by the educational institutions and teachers. Prior to this age it was quite easy to shield books which were considered to have a deleterious effect by denying them any place in the library, at times they made entry into reading world of the students and had an insidious existence but they failed to occupy a substantial space. However, in the contemporary electronic age where there is easy availability and accessibility of texts through the Internet it is foolhardy on our part to prevent the onslaught of censored books. After all there is no online guidance for students from teachers and librarians regarding their book selection which opens up a whole new area of concern. The rapid push in technology has made many educators' head spinning. The traditional preventive measures can no longer tackle the emerging scenario as was very well evident in the discussions with the students how censored books hold a prime position in their popularity chart.

The prime issue here is that of control, whereas earlier educators had some handle on the ideas that students were sharing with each other but once a computer is plugged into the Internet there certainly is not the same level of control. These are complex and bewildering issues with no easy and frame-fit answers. As Abigail C. Garthwait has very well pointed out in her article *Developing a Censorship Policy for the Electronic Age* where she argues: "No one wants their own children or those in their classrooms to be 'harmed,' but notions of what causes 'harm' may vary substantially. What one parent might consider harmful, another might dismiss. Can ideas be considered unhealthy? Just because a student reads deeply about socialist reform issues does not mean that she will become a machine-gun-toting anarchist" (1997: 188-189). The moot question is

will it not be an effective method to make the students informed and responsible readers by bringing those texts out of their closed closets to the open world of classroom discussions?

Undergraduate students are on the threshold of reaching the age of maturity and the position of the teacher in this regard is very crucial because she has to strike a meaningful balance between student control and freedom. Ownership does not have a clear-cut meaning in the real life situation and “will vary according to the social, political and cultural contexts of our schools and classrooms, which means that the meaning of ownership will be a function of *what* we teach, *where* we teach, *how* we teach, and *whom* we teach” (Marling, 1997: 80). Bringing popular literature into classroom discussion also has a flip side: What if students only want to read them and give no heed to the *classics*? Will that mean limiting them as readers which will have a deleterious effect on their growth? Won't such a move in the long run replace one sort of norms with some other without questioning the static power equation? What role is the teacher supposed to play in allowing choice versus guiding the reading choices of students when the reading material might seem poorly written, unchallenging, or even gratuitously graphic and violent?

The point I want to stress is that as teacher and instructor we should strike a subtle balance between providing choice to students and giving them our guidance while exercising their choice. After all choice is the most excellent thing because it moves our students towards independence, towards agency, towards exercising their will, finding and loving their own questions, interests, answers and pathways. But in providing too much choice we renege on our adult responsibility to lend children our expertise and to assist students in ever more competent performances and widely considered experience. Choice is not an either/or issue and the need of the hour is an intelligent balance and negotiation between shared and independent reading, a constant dialectic between guidance, preparation, and opportunities to fly on one's own. And it is in this context that the collective reading sessions became pretty handy and effective. The shared experience helped towards the growth of my students as readers as they added new strategies and moves to their reading repertoire.

As teachers it is not the part of our job to defend the tastes of our students' reading but it is our job to try and understand their tastes, so that we are well informed to build upon them and enhance their understanding of what reading and responding can be. An example which I want to highlight in this regard is Stephen King. Some critics have argued that those aspects of Stephen King's writing which trouble us most are the things which trouble us most in our society. Noted King scholar Michael Collings writes:

“King is perhaps not a horror writer at all. His monsters, when they occur, often function more metaphorically than literally. Even if no one believes in haunted hotels ... or vampires, one must believe – because the evidence is all around us, on every street, in every newspaper, on every television news broadcast – in educational systems that destroy rather than build; in parents who destroy their children; in cancer, that insidious disease that systematically destroys living tissue; and in political negligence that destroys society and civility. In all but a few of King's works these are the real monsters; and humans appear as their avatars” (Beahm, 1992: 209-210).

Perhaps by tapping into what appeals to students in King's work, we may begin to get at in our classrooms some of those “larger monsters” of popular culture and societal ills that his novels encourage us to face.

Nowadays “popular culture” is gradually making its inroads to the so called high academic culture of the university. True it has not been able to gain a considerable niche; yet one can discern the reevaluation of the canon. In the Postmodern age where fixities are constantly questioned, where New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have irrefutably pointed to the textuality of history, where we in the academics know very well how once popular writers like Shakespeare, Dickens etc. have become the classics of today – it is unfounded that changes cannot be initiated.

Most parents and teachers do not want youth to have an open-mind, to exercise choice; they incorrectly construe that by reading controversial books they will go astray but such books are actually the most valuable ones because they make students think. It is always an enabling experience to make students think about life, the values that they adhere to, whether they are right or they need to be changed; to be precise whether students agree or disagree with a book it helps them understand things. Books can become dangerous when someone is not knowledgeable and critical but if one is not so then books will generally make one worldlier and appreciate the subtle nuances of life. The given analysis is not exhaustive enough but in the near future I want to embark on an empirical research on a broad basis with effective methods and tools. It’s high time that we need to discuss and debate the issues of censorship, students’ academic rights and the effective ways to give space to popular literature inside the classroom and “recognize that as teachers of literature we are not merely inheritors of our cultural tradition, but potential creators of it as well” (Chandler, 1997: 14).

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