

Narrative Equity: Balancing Established Literary Authority with Diverse and Digital Voices in Literature Education

Dr. Jaya P S

1. Introduction

Historically, literature syllabi in Higher Education have centred on canonical works, that is, those written by established authors belonging to dominant cultures. These texts are lauded for their poetic language, rich imagery, and emotional depth and qualities aligned with romantic ideals of truth, beauty and imagination as central to human experience. Canonical texts are considered as repositories of powerful knowledge, conceptual frameworks highlighting the enabling potential of deep, structured understanding rather than institutional dominance. Shakespeare, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley endure not merely because they are imposed upon, but because they appeal deeply to our sense of beauty, human dignity, and shared tradition. Moreover, they function as reference points within literary discourse, marking achievements that unite readers across generations. Their canonical status denotes a collective consensus of sustained value and allows for the suspension of scepticism about their worth.

While the beginning of the 21st Century saw it as vitally important to expand literature syllabi to embrace marginalized, contemporary, and digital texts, the complete neglect of canonical literature, forfeiting the intellectual and cultural capital these enduring works provide was considered risky. As the domination of the canon in curricula put emphasis on monolithic, widely recognized texts, it often excluded diverse or non-traditional narratives. The curriculum allowed instructor-chosen texts only and reinforced the literary touchstones. Such curricula largely prioritized formalist analysis and aesthetic value, reinforcing the canon's fortress role in higher education. These historically prioritized texts, deemed timeless, influential, and structurally rich, came at the expense of broader representation, limiting exposure to diverse voices and forms.

Diversity, not universality, is the new norm. Contemporary literature increasingly blends genres such as romance, fantasy, climate thrillers, and historical science-fiction, prompting reconsideration of literary merit beyond traditional categories. The end of 20th Century had already seen inclusion of Caribbean, African, and Asian writers, pushing the European syllabi beyond the traditional canon. Digital platforms now have enabled cross-cultural narratives to gain access to the mainstream. Graphic narratives and digital literature are analysed in scholarly journals, confirming the academic embrace of digital forms. In countries like India, frameworks are being developed to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion into both curriculum and evaluation mechanisms. Moreover, from interactive digital displays to inclusive hybrid classrooms, institutions are harnessing technology to foster engagement and accessibility. Virtual exchange programs allow students to interact cross-culturally online, enriching literature studies with global dimensions.

Institutions increasingly analyse student engagement data to tailor coursework, refine curricula, and offer timely support. There is a shift toward skills mastery over classroom presence, with micro-degrees and stackable credentials gaining traction, signalling flexibility in curricular certification. With this paradigm shift in classrooms, education systems drop prestige hierarchies to support diverse types of learning. While the outcome of the transformation is yet to measure, the higher education scenario is changing and challenging.

The Canonical Core

Canonical literature, texts widely recognized for their enduring artistic, cultural, and historical value, has always held a central place in the study of English literature at the higher-education level, especially in erstwhile colonies like India. Despite growing critiques advocating for diversification and decolonization of the literary curriculum, till the last decade of the twentieth century, canonical works remained foundational due to their recognized role in shaping critical thinking, linguistic mastery, and cultural literacy.

One of the primary strengths of teaching canonical texts is said to be their provision of a shared cultural and literary framework. These works form a common reference pool through which students and teachers can engage in deep textual analysis and dialogue. For many institutions, a predetermined set of essential works helps develop a shared set of references and cultural understandings, fostering coherence in academic discourse.

Canonical texts are often chosen for their rich thematic complexity and layered symbolism. Engaging with them demands critical thinking and analytical skills. Students are supposed to interpret symbolism, explore historical context, and analyse narrative techniques. As such, analysing literary texts helps sharpen the ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives and enhance critical thinking. Likewise, exploring language structures in canonical literature can improve writing skills as students learn from esteemed authors' techniques.

Another key advantage is linguistic enrichment. Literary texts immerse learners in authentic language, familiarizing them with idiomatic expressions, varied syntactic structures, and rhetorical flourishes uncommon in generic language instruction. This exposure fosters both comprehension and expressive depth, nurturing communicative competence and stylistic versatility among students.

Canonical texts serve as portals into the socio-cultural, political, and intellectual contexts of their eras, thereby illuminating the historical evolution of literature and society. Studies on curricula across universities endorse retaining canonical works for their rich potential in scholarly and pedagogical practice, especially when used to deepen understanding of historical contexts and their relevance to contemporary issues. They lend themselves to close reading which is a critical method focusing on detailed interpretation of language, structure, and rhetorical devices in a text. This approach, deeply rooted in New Criticism, emphasizes interpretation through careful attention to individual words, syntax, and form. Canonical works, with their formal complexity and linguistic nuance, are ideal for cultivating this rigorous interpretative skill.

While evolving pedagogical paradigms rightly encourage inclusivity and decolonization, canonical texts are still vindicated as they offer enduring value, particularly when integrated thoughtfully and alongside diverse voices.

Critique of Canonical Dominance in Literature Education

The canon often functions as a tool of exclusion. The process of selection has historically prioritized privileged, predominantly white and male voices, excluding women, the working class, racially discriminated, and other marginalized groups. This dynamic reinforces existing power hierarchies and positions canonical authority as both culturally and socially restrictive.

Canonical texts are embedded within the structures of educational institutions, where they reinforce traditional authority and norms. The prioritization of canonical works acts as cultural gatekeeping. The canon's longstanding focus on Western, particularly European, narratives has marginalized global traditions. Postcolonial critics argue that this limits exposure to the full diversity of world literature and reinforces imperialistic cultural biases.

Feminist writers highlight the systemic exclusion of women writers. Even revered female authors are often omitted from canonical lists despite their historical influence. Feminist scholars argue canon construction has long been rooted in male-dominated evaluative criteria, erasing diverse female perspectives. When educators include non-canonical authors, it often results in tokenism - framing authors as representatives of entire cultures or experiences, rather than recognizing the complexity of their work. This simplification does little to dismantle structural inequalities in literary education.

Contemporary debates are sharply polarized. Traditionalists argue for the enduring aesthetic and educational value of canonical works, while liberal and progressive critics view the canon as elitist, sexist, and ethnocentric, a barrier to equitable and democratic education. Educational scholarship shows that canonical literature can place undue emotional burdens on educators and students from non-dominant backgrounds.

Moreover, traditionally celebrated ideals of characters in canonical literature such as unyielding virtue, coherent identity, and moral clarity have been challenged by contemporary theoretical frameworks, revealing character traits as psychologically fragmented, socially constructed, and ideologically conditioned. University question papers have almost invariably required candidates to analyse characterisation. Psychoanalytic theory and its later developments, challenges the notion of unified character. Postmodern theory also rejects the idea of a singular, coherent self.

In India, innovative curriculum models now embed the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) value proposition into both course content and assessment strategies. These frameworks ensure that learners experience equitable and inclusive academic spaces, a shift that is both context sensitive and globally relevant.

Embracing the Marginalized: Inclusivity on Focus

Reorienting higher education syllabi to embrace marginalized voices is both a moral necessity and an educational need. By weaving diverse texts, inclusive pedagogies, and student voices into curriculum design, institutions can foster deeper engagement, cultural empathy, and equitable learning outcomes. Canonical texts continue to offer value, but when thoughtfully contextualized alongside broader perspectives, curricula become dynamic spaces for transformative education.

The latter part of the 20th century brought greater awareness of the limitations of the traditional canon. Syllabi began to include works by writers from historically marginalized communities like women, racially disadvantaged and LGBTQ+ authors, thereby enriching perspectives and contributing to a more equitable literary dialogue.

This shift aligned with pedagogical theories that highlight the importance of representation to foster belonging and legitimacy among diverse student populations, though some critique the anti-canonical turn as sometimes driven by political origin rather than merit. In a globally interconnected and socially conscious era, higher education must transcend traditional curricular norms to foster truly inclusive learning environments. Literature curricula now face a growing imperative to include marginalized voices and experiences, both to reflect societal diversity and nurture equitable academic engagement.

Decolonizing syllabi is not merely an act of diversity for its own sake; rather, it is foundational to dismantling systemic biases inherent in literary education and empowering learners through broader cultural perspectives. When a story like Kunjaman's "Don't Call me Panan" is included in the literature syllabus in Kerala, it not only champions the 'dalit voice matters' campaign, but also emphasizes the importance of inclusive and contemporary narratives in academic syllabi.

While canonical texts remain relevant, curricular spaces must also accommodate literature from authors of the unprivileged strata of society to enhance engagement and representation. For instance, incorporating specific poems by the trans poet Xan Forest Phillips such as "Social Death", "an Address" and "Black Heroism Is Unskilled Labor", alongside canonical works fosters a dialogic approach to literary study. Phillips's poems confront themes of Black embodiment, historical trauma, and systemic erasure, prompting juxtaposition with the thematic universes of poets like Wordsworth, Keats or Arnold. Such pairing invites critical comparison and enriches students' understanding of both the traditional and the marginalized literary traditions. Phillips's vibrant imagery and layered perspectives offer a powerful counterpoint to canonical ideals of coherence, moral universality, or formal detachment. In "Edmonia Lewis and I Weather the Storm", for instance, Phillips writes: "The places where Edmonia's bones were fractured still hold violent reverberations ... She is digging me out of my misery with her fugitive hands." This demonstrates how marginalized voices offer emotional immediacy, embodied history, and poetic complexity, qualities that enrich and contest canonical notions of formality or aesthetic distance.

Integration of Social Media Narratives

In the contemporary era, higher education syllabi increasingly incorporate forms of literature that emerge through social media - blogs, vlogs, digital storytelling, and memes - reflecting how students

consume and produce narratives today. Research demonstrates that social media platforms foster effective student engagement, prompt participation, and provide channels for real-time feedback.

Social media literature spans a range of formats, from digital poetry, micro-stories, memes, and talks on TED to Instagram reels. These forms represent contemporary modes of storytelling that reflect diverse voices and everyday experiences. These illustrate how literature evolves in online spaces. Digital storytelling methods, for example, have been shown to empower students to share identity-driven narratives, thereby cultivating inclusion and self-efficacy, underscoring the power of student-centred methods in inclusive education. Many students connect emotionally with digital literature because of its brevity, relevance, and self-expressive potential.

Social media enables teaching of literature to become borderless and interactive, bridging cultural and geographical divides. YouTube supports multimodal learning incorporating performances, author interviews, and dramatic re-enactments to make texts more vivid and engaging. Students value social media for collaboration, discussion, and content sharing within learning contexts. Empirical studies find a positive correlation between social media use and student engagement and creativity, especially when driven by intrinsic motivation.

Academics often perceive social media as disruptive, blurring personal and professional boundaries, and cite time constraints, privacy concerns, and assessment difficulties as barriers to its adoption. Systematic feedback highlights varied outcomes, especially during the pandemic, noting benefits like resource availability and peer support, but also institutional and socioeconomic barriers to effective integration.

Undoubtedly, contextualization of canonical and non-canonical voices together help students critically interpret canonical works in dialogue with contemporary and non-Western voices. Needless to say, caution is to be exercised in curriculum designing integrating social media literature. Curriculum redesign is to be done within an integrative framework for social justice, aiming not just for content diversity but for transformative learning outcomes and fairer societal impact. Inclusive curriculum design is a continuous process. Regular feedback from students and educators can be solicited to keep the materials dynamic and responsive.

In Kerala, undergraduate students are now required to interact with the distinctive social media initiative Dakshina, an immersive digital portal that showcases the ethos and lifestyle of Sarang, as part of their academic engagement. In Palakkad district, Kerala State, India lies Sarang, the renowned alternative forest school established in 1982 by Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi Sarang. Rejecting standardized curricula, Sarang focuses on organic farming, artistry, environmental stewardship, and holistic life skills in an experiential setting. Dakshina is a social media channel maintained by the founders' family and former students. Dakshina documents rituals and culinary traditions passed down across generations. A key example is, Urumboottal, the ritual of feeding ants sweetened double-boiled rice during Onam, is captured visually and shared widely. These videos serve as digital recordings of cultural practices, ensuring such knowledge remains accessible and alive.

Through the inclusion of Dakshina in syllabus, students are exposed to curricula that teach through lived experience and community, inviting them to expand their understanding of education

itself. Dakshina's short, visually compelling videos featuring home-grown food, forest landscapes, and traditional architecture engage multiple senses and make abstract ideas tangible. The aesthetically edited chapters transform lessons from the textual to the visceral. Voiceovers by founder Vijayalakshmi Sarang, paired with candid visuals of daily practices and rituals, create a sense of presence and intimacy. Students gain empathetic insight into learning as a lived, communal practice rather than a distant academic abstraction. Integrating this social media handle into the curriculum enriches academic inquiry in powerful ways. It brings narrative authenticity, deepens cultural understanding, develops digital and visual literacy, and bridges past pedagogy with contemporary storytelling. This integration creates a more immersive, inclusive, and reflective learning experience, equipping students to engage with knowledge not just intellectually, but emotionally and experientially.

Social media's educational validity is questioned, especially when used informally or without supportive pedagogical frameworks. Additionally, cyber bullying can undermine the positive impact of social media on academic engagement and creativity. To harness the potential of social media and mitigate its risks, educators should establish clear guidelines. Digital literacy sessions with an emphasis on critical evaluation of content, ethical sharing and safe online interaction will support the system. Offering professional development courses for instructors to adapt pedagogy for social media integration will help prevent student distraction. Involvement of students in the process of designing reading lists helps faculty critically assess and diversify their course materials across race, gender, and socioeconomic background.

Conclusion

Maintaining canonical texts with marginalized works while giving space for digital texts, framing them contextually to uphold academic rigour is a laborious task. Though this multifaceted approach promises a richer, more inclusive curriculum, it inherently demands sustained effort in curricular design, pedagogical strategy, and critical framing.

While canonical literature is sometimes critiqued for its exclusivity, it remains valuable when engaged critically. The canon offers an enduring tradition that students can both inherit and interrogate. As critics advocate for a more inclusive curriculum, canonical texts remain useful when taught alongside marginalized voices, enabling students to question, contrast, and expand their literary horizons.

While canonical texts can offer foundational insights and shared cultural reference points, their unchecked dominance in curricula undermines diversity, critical engagement, and inclusivity. The future of literature education lies in balancing aesthetic rigour with representational breadth, recognizing canon as one of many evolving dialogues rather than a static ideal.

The literature syllabus in higher education is shifting from canonical exclusivity to inclusive representation, and now toward culturally relevant, digital-age content. While incorporating social media literature presents clear pedagogical advantages, it also comes with notable challenges. Thoughtful integration is essential to ensure that modern syllabi remain both rigorous and student-centred.

Integrating social media literature into literature curricula offers exciting avenues to enrich inclusivity and engagement. By treating digital narratives as legitimate texts, fostering critical media

literacy, centring student voice, and embracing multiple modalities, literature education can become more reflective of contemporary literary landscapes, and of diverse student identities.

Decolonizing the literature curriculum is fundamentally about questioning and reconfiguring inherited hierarchies of knowledge, not eradicating established works. Indeed, educational initiatives emphasize that canonical texts may remain part of the curriculum, so long as they are framed critically and placed in dialogue with marginalized voices. Students should be encouraged to engage with them alongside marginalized writers, with attention to the social, cultural, and political dynamics that have bolstered their dominance. It involves bringing the marginalised voices into dialogue with dominant knowledge, re-evaluating the canon and reinscribing the indigenous and the erased. It demands institutional transformation that extends beyond classroom discussions to systemic shifts in academic structures.

Incorporating marginalized voices and social media texts alongside canonical materials within academic curricula enriches the depth, relevance, and inclusivity of student learning. Emerging scholarship emphasizes that when learners see themselves represented in the materials they study, they are more likely to engage actively with the content and feel empowered to succeed. Simultaneously, including historically marginalized narratives and contemporary digital forms broadens perspective, encourages critical engagement, and challenges entrenched biases, fostering a more equitable educational environment. From a pedagogical standpoint, social media - blogs, tweets, and digital storytelling - provides compelling multimodal arenas for students to engage writing practices, authorial voice, and audience awareness in meaningful, real-world contexts. Therefore, exposing students to a curriculum that balances classical works with diverse and digital texts not only upholds academic austerity, but also equips learners with critical literacy skills essential for navigating complex cultural and media landscapes.

References

1. Aston, Robert J. *The Role of the Literary Canon in the Teaching of Literature*. Routledge, 2020.
2. Dakshina. Preserving traditional values & culture [Home page]. Dakshina by Sarang. <https://dakshinasarang.com/>
3. Phillips, X. F. Social Death, an Address. In Poem-a-Day. Academy of American Poets. from <https://poets.org/poem/social-death-address>, 2019
4. Phillips, X. F. Black Heroism Is Unskilled Labor. Poem-a-Day. Academy of American Poets. from <https://poets.org/poem/black-heroism-unskilled-labor>, 2021.