The South Asian American Canon

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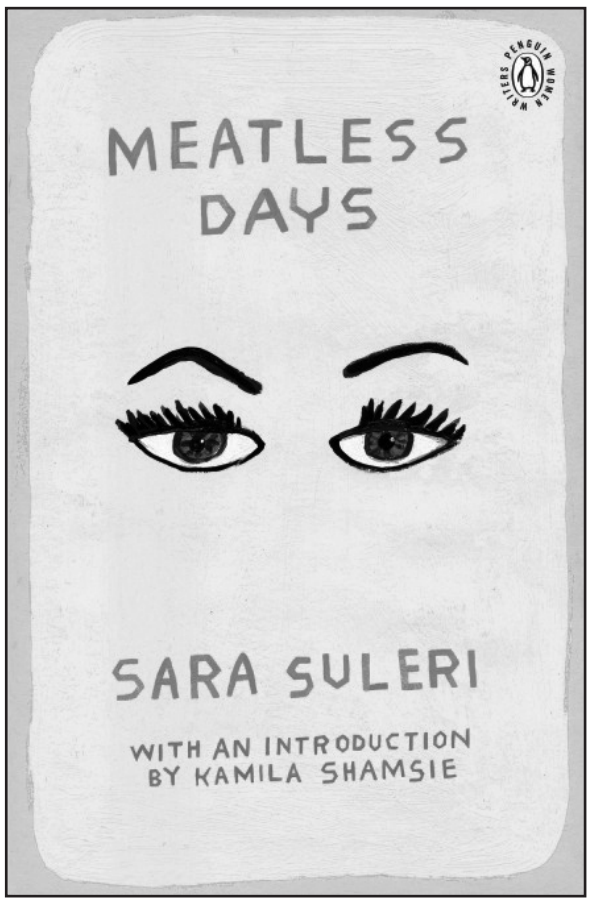
A canon in literature typically refers to a privileged body of works. It denotes works that are accorded special status by scholars and critics with respect to a given author, culture, community, and/or time period. In American literature, the term "canon" is typically invoked in reference to the writings of a select group of authors. This group may include names of figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Emily Dickenson, and Toni Morrison. The writings of these authors are considered canonical not just because they are exemplary in terms of their aesthetic and social worth, but also because they exude qualities often hailed as quintessentially American. Emerson's romanticism is distinctively American. As the critic Harold Bloom declares, his legacy is inescapable and has inspired generations of American romantic writers, who have either battled or embraced his credo. Similarly, Morrison is canonical not only on account of her place in modern and contemporary African American writing, but also because of her influence over American traditions of feminist writing. A canonical work is thus one that withstands the test of time, is culturally influential, and has a wide readership within a given socio-cultural setting. However, it is worth noting that not all works that fulfill these criteria are canonized. This is because canonized works often reflect — and are a product of — a given culture's dominant ideology. Indeed, despite the fact that Americans today come from diverse backgrounds of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality religion, and socio-economic status, American literary canons have still largely remained dominated by a white male heteronormative presence. Nonetheless, there have been efforts in recent times to expand and redefine canons through the addition of voices that have been traditionally overlooked and whose inclusion could more accurately reflect the diverse composition of the American society.

South Asian American writers are perhaps amongst the newest additions to the multiethnic American literary scene. Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, and Bharati Mukherjee are names in a growing list of South Asian American writers who, in recent years, have gained immense popularity among readers of American literature. These writers have written about vastly different things, highlighted starkly different socio-cultural outlooks and point of views, and have chosen to express their ideas through a range of different genres including poetry, short stories, essays, drama, and novels. Yet, they have often been united in using their craft to highlight the diverse experiences of South Asians in North America. A central idea that most of their writings have communicated is that South Asians are not a homogenous identity group. Writers such as Lahiri and Ali, for instance, have brought to attention how starkly different the experiences of a first generation South Asian in the US are from the experiences of those belonging to the second or the third generation. Reading their works may also allow a glimpse into what it means to be an Indian immigrant in the US. In contrast, Ondaatje highlights the lives of South Asians in Canada, and his fictions also provide insights into the unique experiences of Sri Lankan expats and immigrants. Alexander's poetic voice, as different from the others, lends itself to the lives of yet another South Asian immigrant community who have had very distinct experiences. In *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009), she grapples with envisioning an Asian American aesthetics that would not typecast her experiences through labels like minority, but would uniquely give voice to her persona as someone from India who immigrated to the US via Sudan.

When thinking about influential American writers, Bloom has often imagined a composite literary persona. In his view, when writers write, they do so in relation to their precursors. Of course, in some cases, this could be a relationship of acknowledgement, where a writer owes their gratitude to a literary ancestor. Whereas in other cases, it may be a relationship of negation — where the writer rebels against the conventions set by a precursor. Bloom observes that Emerson and Dickinson may be very different authors, but one can often trace elements of "Emerson's tough hopefulness" in Dickinson's "iron-sealed guarantees about the permanence of loss." There is also an undefined fraternity between Melville and Emerson, despite the former's declaration that "I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow." The question then is can South Asian American writers ever be a part of this collective? Does one really need to be a participant in this fraternity to be recognized as influential within American literary traditions? Or are we at a time when we need to rethink our approach to understanding the grand tapestry of American literature?

Scholars insist that older models of evaluating American literature through more local and nationalist lenses are inadequate to truly engage the complex literary genealogies of South Asian American writing.

Writers such as Ali, Alexander, and Mukherjee have established deep roots in the American tradition and have felt a profound connection with some of its greatest literary figures. Ali often turns to Dickinson in his darkest hours of grief. In "Amherst to Kashmir," she becomes a source of solace and emotional fortitude for the poet as he confronts the memories of his mother's death and the loss of his homeland Kashmir. Similarly, Alexander embraces Whitman as her guide in the new world: "I could not have come to America without Walt Whitman." Poems from "Leaves of Grass," which Alexander remembers reading originally in Malayalam as a young girl in Kerala, become not just points of contact between her and the poet, but also links that allow her to connect her



past with the present. Mukherjee often pays tribute to Jewish American writers like Henry Roth and Bernard Malamud, whose early twentieth century narratives of assimilation become models for her stories about immigrants in the US.

Despite such ties to America, South Asian American writers often reminisce about lost homelands. Ali, for instance, famously describes himself as a triple exile from Kashmir to New Delhi to the United States. As such, often in the same breath, he evokes the names of Dickinson, Mirza Ghalib, and Begum Akhtar, in an effort to reclaim a poetic space that would not just give visibility to his life as an exile in America but that would also accommodate his memories of lost homelands and half-forgotten cultures. Another figure who remarkably weaves multiple histories and geographies in her writing is the Pakistani American writer and scholar Sara Suleri. In her famous novel, *Meatless Days* (1989), she seamlessly moves between multiple locations in Pakistan, England, and the United States — "moving from the 1947 creation of Pakistan to contemporary reunions with family members, or re-memoryings of dead family members, unfolding in her adoptive home of New Haven."

The phrase South Asian diasporic "anxiety of influence" has often been used by critics in tracing a South Asian literary genealogy in North America. As writers, South Asians have often defined themselves in relation to one another. But like in most other cases, this has simultaneously been a relationship of negation and acceptance. Mukherjee, for instance, has discussed, in a series of position pieces, the ambiguous influence of V. S. Naipaul over her literary journey. During her initial years as a writer, she saw herself as a "pale and immature reflection" of him as she relied on a distinctly Naipaulian vocabulary to talk about exile and immigration. However, eventually she disavows Naipaul's "state of the art" expatriation, claiming that it ceased to inspire her. Salman Rushdie is another major influence on writers like Mukherjee. Mukherjee has, on many occasions, positioned herself in relation to Rushdie while simultaneously maintaining a safe distance. While, she has claimed to "admire… Rushdie enormously," she has also declared her own style to be very different from

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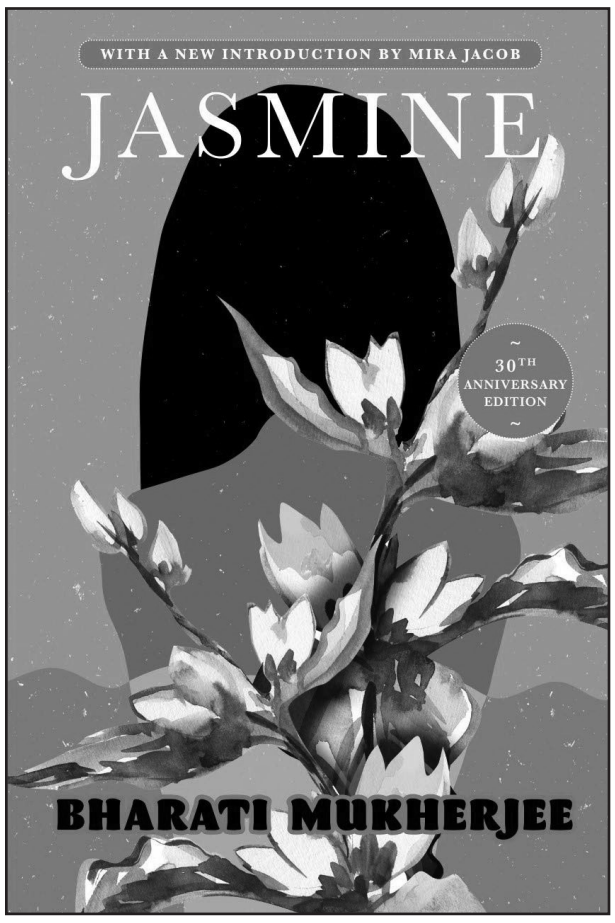
his. Mukherjee herself has been the source of both admiration and ambiguity. Alexander, for instance, has expressed that as an inexperienced writer, she often idolized and looked up to older writers like Mukherjee for creative inspiration. However, despite the admiration, Alexander has also highlighted certain points of departure between the two: "But … she has this model of jettisoning the past … whereas for me, that doesn't make sense at all; in fact, I have, if anything, tried to remember." Similarly, one cannot imagine Lahiri's portrayal of strong South Asian women or her sophisticated treatment of the Bengali-American cultural heritage without looking back at the original models represented in Mukherjee's novels like *Jasmine* (1989) or *Desirable Daughters* (2002). Nonetheless, Lahiri also makes a concerted effort to separate her legacy from those aspects of Mukherjee's writings that have been criticized as controversial and Orientalizing.

South Asian American writers have carved a unique space of authenticity and belonging in the literary landscapes of North America. They have produced writings that have demonstrated how South Asians, as an ethnic group, are distinct from other Asian American groups. They have also given visibility to the diversity that exists internally within the different communities of South Asians in North America. Perhaps most importantly, their stories have shown how South Asians often negotiate multiple identities, languages, times, histories, memories, geographies, and even homelands in making their immigrant



and expatriate spaces in America productive, habitable, and fulfilling. While South Asian writers have enjoyed both critical acclaim and popularity among American readers, their contributions have often been overlooked in critical discourses on canonical American literatures. Only recently, have some scholars such as Gayatri Gopinath and Vijay Mishra begun organizing and systematizing South Asian American writing as a field of study. These scholars have insisted that older models of evaluating American literature through more local and nationalist lenses are inadequate and will likely fail to truly engage the complex literary genealogies of South Asian American writing. Rather, they have urged the need for scholarly models which would approach this tradition of writing through a broader "transnational — and transatlantic — frame."

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#OKBloomer: Contesting the American Canon

Dana C. McClain

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I noticed more book lists popping up online and on social media that offered recommendations of what to read during a time of anxiety and isolation. With titles like "Your Coronavirus Reading List," the lists featured blends of classic and contemporary titles, fiction and nonfiction, works that would help the reader process current events and works that would help the reader escape. From Bill Gates to *The New York Times* to The Perpetual Page-Turner, many people had thoughts on what to read during the crisis. Each list was as unique as the individual(s) who composed it and the strange times in which were living.

Unexpectedly, reading these lists made me think of the recent publication of *The American Canon: Literary Genius from Emerson to Pynchon*, a collection of Harold Bloom's essays on American literature edited by David Mikics. Bloom's tome may seem like a vastly different entity than the COVID-19 reading lists. Written by a critical colossus and clocking in at 400+ pages, *The American Canon* has a scholarly and material heft that far surpasses the modest articles from the internet, where, as we know, *anybody* can publish. The tenor of each work is also quite different. While the COVID-19 reading lists are worded as gentle suggestions (i.e., "10 Books Worth Adding to Your COVID-19 Reading List"), *The American Canon* oozes authority, down to the assertive "the" in the title, indicating that Mikics and the publishers would have us believe that Bloom's American canon is *the* American canon.

No one can deny Bloom's influence on literary studies. Better known for his work on literature from across the pond, Bloom has also written extensively about American writers. Mikics asserts that Bloom's American canon — centered on the American Romantics, namely, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, and Elizabeth Bishop — has dominated the academy for decades, and it is true that American students are fed a steady diet of Bloom's Western and American canons. However, Bloom's largely white male canon has also been heavily criticized, and a lot of great work has been done to de-center the canon, such as recovering more women and minority writers, as well as literature from neglected time periods and regions. My area of expertise, American novels published before 1800, is excluded from Bloom's canon, although recently some authors have achieved more recognition via the claim that they anticipate the themes and quality of canonized writers. For example, Charles Brockden Brown is styled the predecessor of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Susanna Rowson the originator of the American sentimental tradition that peaked with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). My point is that as a literary scholar you always know where you are in relation to the canon: entrenched within it, on the margins looking in, or completely outside. Bloom's American canon has become so ubiquitous that it seems akin to the Greek goddess Athena, a being that emerged fully formed instead of created and sustained by actual people for personal and political reasons.

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Here is where I think the phenomena of the COVID-19 reading list can help us understand the purpose of a work like *The American Canon*. Just as the COVID-19 lists were formed in response to a crisis, so too have canons been developed out of a sense of urgency and need. Far from an objective evaluation of literary texts, a canon is a rhetorical task, an argument *for* something and *against* something else.

Case in point: in the Introduction, Mikics explains that Bloom's canon was a reaction to T. S. Eliot's. "At Yale in the 1950s, Eliot's judgments were largely sacrosanct," Mikics writes. "He had deemed Romantics dangerous eccentrics, Emerson and Whitman bad influences. Bloom was ready to fight back. By the 1980s…Bloom's new anti-Eliot canon had won out." Thus, Bloom's impetus to create a new canon came from a sense of discontent over what was currently being taught, a reaction against criticism that "dismayed" him.

Decades later, this new collection of Bloom's work represents a different American canon than the one that triumphed in the 1980s. Composed during the Trump presidency, the book seems to be, in part, a response to these alarming times. In the chapter on Emerson, for instance, Bloom writes, "Emerson, in this time of Trump, should be cited upon the limitations of all American politics whatsoever." He believes that certain American writers are critical to understanding and changing the country's current situation. If Trump

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