

Does Roald Dahl deserve cancellation? - A look at the role of cancel culture in contemporary attempts at canon revision by Akshata Setlur  
(5th May 2023)

A few months ago, I was texting with my highly-educated distant relative who was interested to know my take on the Roald Dahl controversy. The controversy revolved around the question of whether it was alright to change the language of Dahl's books and remove the anti-Semitic, racist, and sexist words and phrases from them. This "language review," as it has been labeled, was conducted by the Roald Dahl Story Company in collaboration with Inclusive Minds, an organization that "works with the children's book world to support them in authentic representation" (Inclusive Minds). To impress my highly-educated distant relative, I replied with a confidence I did not know I possessed. I said fanfiction has been following such a revisionist approach for ages by providing a platform for writers to take the mostly white and straight story-lines of literary classics and draw new curvy and colorful ones by reimagining canon characters in lgbtqia+ pairings. I have seen several fanfics focusing on Harry Potter X Draco Malfoy and even oddly Harry Potter X Tom Riddle pairings (though I haven't read these because I am a Dramione shipper). But our conversation got me thinking about how the revisions of Dahl's books and fanfiction writing are two very different ways of revising the canon. Then, I further spiraled into thinking about the role of cancel culture in canon revision in contemporary times.

What is the "canon" and why does it need "revision"?

According to Thompson "The literary canon can be narrowly defined as that which is accepted as authentic... but it is usually defined more broadly as that which is assumed to be 'good' literature, in fact, the 'best' literature: that which is worth preserving and passing on from one generation to the next" (60). Thus, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Dickens have all written canonical works of literature that have survived the test of time and are still taught and appreciated in classrooms. The problem with the canon is that it privileges a white, male, and straight European perspective towards the world because it is majorly written by white, male, and straight Europeans. Feminist thinkers have thus advocated a revision of the canon by bringing the voices of people who are not necessarily white, male, straight, and European to the

forefront. These voices can belong to underrepresented writers and fictional characters, or both. For example, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exemplifies the writer's efforts to revise the canonical work of Mahabharata by foregrounding the experiences of a female protagonist - Draupadi. Another way of reimagining the canon is by coming up with unconventional interpretations of existing works. For instance, writing slash fanfics is a way of reinterpreting and reworking canonical works that are almost always heteronormative. Similarly, finding homoerotic connotations in male-male friendships like those of Jay-Veeru in *Sholay* and Maverick-Goose in the *Top Gun* franchise is another way of revising the canon.

### *Dostana* and growing pains

A couple of days ago, I was having lunch with my friends and we were watching the Priyanka Chopra, Abhishek Bachchan, and John Abraham starrer *Dostana*. This film has a reputation of canonical proportions in the genre of the Bollywood rom-com. The lunch was a sentimental gathering because our MA course had ended, and most of us were packing to leave for our respective homes. So, we picked this fluffy film to ease the pain of our impending separation and uncertain future. However, our decision proved counterproductive because this film is mainly about friendship and the struggles of growing up. *Dostana* was released fifteen years ago (in 2008). It's about two straight men who pretend to be a gay couple so that they can live as flatmates with a woman. They keep up this pretense because she follows a strict policy of not having straight men as flatmates. As students who have almost graduated from an MA course in English and Cultural Studies, we reckoned we were highly woke. So, we criticized Karan Johar for producing a film with such an absurd premise, had heated debates on the "problematic" representations of homosexuality in *Dostana*, and promptly vowed to dislike his films for all eternity. We canceled Karan Johar and his *Dostana*.

### Cancel culture - a thorn in the way of revising the canon

One of the issues surrounding canon revision in contemporary times is cancel culture. Ng defines it as the "withdrawal of any kind of support for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic" (621). People can be canceled. Karan Johar has himself been a victim of cancel culture when we canceled him a few days ago and earlier when the nepotism debate catapulted to new heights during the Sushant Singh Rajput investigation.

Even films can be canceled. Apart from our cancellation of the entire film catalog of Dharma Productions, this is exemplified by the recent case of the *Pathaan* in which an actor's dress triggered masses to cancel her and the film before it was released. However, cancel culture has a reverse effect in India. This is because, rather than discouraging disengagement with an offensive person or an offensive film, it builds curiosity and thus unintentionally promotes engagement (Chawla). Case in point, *Pathaan*, which went on to become the highest-grossing Bollywood film of all time. Therefore, cancel culture is a complex phenomenon, intersecting with multiple cultural understandings and notions, and can have unintended consequences. But how is it relevant to the revision of the canon? I believe it is a thorn in the way of revising the canon.

The problem with cancel culture is that it does not aim to revise the canon, negotiate with it and come up with new solutions to its issues, it aims to give up on the possibility of finding any solutions at all. Cancel culture does not reflect engagement with the political arena of popular culture, it espouses a refusal to engage with it. It operates based on an all-or-none principle that rejects the presence of gray areas. For instance, the revision of Roald Dahl's books involves the erasure or cancellation of their problematic elements to make them better suited to contemporary consumption. The main idea driving it is, "remove the anti-semitic expression here and change the sexist representation of women there so that our children don't grow up becoming anti-Semitic and sexist." However, such an approach doesn't consider that if one does not want their children to become anti-semitic and sexist, one has to teach their children what anti-semitism and sexism mean in the first place. If I were to teach my hypothetical child not to say certain offensive words, I would have to say these words so that they can learn to identify them and then I would have to teach them such words are problematic.

Sexism, racism, anti-semitism, and the whole family of problematic isms won't vanish if we simply cancel/erase/not pay attention to the people and the works we think propagate them. They can only be uprooted when we learn to do two things: a. recognize these problematic isms in our behaviors and that of others, and b. talk about them with empathy and mature understanding. Cancel culture seems to only meet the criteria of recognizing these problematic isms in others, and this is the main problem. It is a classic case of the self-serving bias: we praise ourselves for being woke enough to spot problematic representations in popular culture artifacts but blame

others for subscribing to offensive ideas without realizing how we ourselves propagate them. Thus, a better way to approach the novels of Roald Dahl would be to leave them as they are and promote discussions and debates surrounding the problems in classrooms, libraries, and during bedside story-time sessions.

Can *Dostana* also be progressive film and can Roald Dahl also be a radical feminist?

While watching *Dostana*, we surprisingly found ourselves liking the love interest of Priyanka Chopra's character, played by a dashing Bobby Deol. He was a single father who made the mature decision of not proposing to his lover because his young son was not ready to welcome her into the family. In our estimate, this made him a caring father who wounded (if not killed) the norms of hegemonic masculinity with kindness by placing his son's interests before his own. Bobby Deol's character problematizes (a word we love to use as students of Cultural Studies that basically means "complicates") the question of whether this film is problematic.

Similarly, I remember reading a short story by Roald Dahl titled "The Way Up to Heaven." In this story, a wife takes revenge upon her husband's habit of aggravating her fear of missing trains or planes by leaving him to die trapped in a broken elevator. This story opens into a morally gray expanse of interpretations. A radically feminist reading of this story would imply that Roald Dahl has sketched the wife's character to be agentic and powerful, resisting the abusive treatment of her husband. A sexist reading would label the wife as an evil witch who killed her husband out of anger over a small and silly issue. Since, as suggested by postmodernist thinkers, there are millions of interpreting this story, can we say with certainty that Roald Dahl is *only* a sexist and thus deserves our cancellation? As illustrated by this example, he could be a *radical feminist* as well, for all we know. Therefore, people and their works can neither be wholly offensive nor fully progressive. We need to learn how to locate the gray areas of interpretations if ever we wish to revise the canon.

In a country like India, where "wokeness" is just taking root in the internet and influencing young minds like mine and my friends', I think we need to ask some questions. Who gets to decide what is problematic and what is not? Who gets to correct "problematic" narratives, and

how? Who gets to decide who is canceled over offensive behavior? We live in a world where JK Rowling gets canceled over her transphobic comments, and at the same time, in the several worlds of Harry Potter fanfiction, a version of Harry Potter keeps falling in love with a version of Draco Malfoy (or Tom Riddle, depending on your preference). It will be fruitful to see the bigger picture and embrace its vastness and complexity instead of being stuck in yeses and nos and whites and blacks of cancel culture.

#### Works Cited

Chawla, Palak. "Calls for boycott: Cancel culture in India." *Media India Group*, 20 June 2021, <https://mediaindia.eu/culture/cancel-culture-in-india/>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

Inclusive Minds. "About Inclusive Minds." *Inclusive Minds*, 2023, <https://www.inclusiveminds.com/about>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

Ng, Eve. "No Grand Pronouncements Here...: Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation." *Television and New Media*, vol. 21, no. 6, 2020, pp. 621-627. *SAGE Journals*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1527476420918828>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

Thompson, Ann. "The literary canon and the classic text." *King Lear: The Critics Debate*, by Ann Thompson and Ann Thompson, Palgrave, London, 1988, pp. 60-66.