

Alternative Literary Canon: Its Need and Functions in the Present Times

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Is there any fixed (universal) criterion for determining the canonicity of a literary work? – The response to this query is probably ‘No’. Any attempt of establishing a ‘fixed’ standard for literary canonicity is contingent to the ‘race’, ‘milieu’, and ‘moment’ – a kind of temporal fixity. It should be noted here that these three determiners for the fixity of canonicity in each nation pass through the different socio-cultural temperaments at a given time. This clearly suggests that each nation has its own ‘race’, ‘milieu’, and ‘moment’ and thus the fixity of a literary standard does not have any universality. In his work *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010), John McLeod remarks that “the texts studied as Commonwealth literature written ostensibly in English, they were to be evaluated *in relation to* English literature, with the same criteria used to account for the literary value of the age-old English ‘classics’” (*original emphasis*).¹ He goes on stating that the English canon “functioned as a means of measuring its value.”² This observation of McLeod is indeed suggestive of the fact that in spite of a commonness of language, a text which has altogether different setting, a different group of people as a stock for its characters, and a different set of social and cultural traditions, would certainly differ from the text written in the European setting. The criterion for canonicity of one literature cannot be applied to another literature.³

The paper is divided into two parts: the first talks of the conception of ‘alternative literary canon’, its need and functions. It views the post-1980s Indian English fiction as an alternative canon. The second part survey the oppositional east-west critical tradition. It proposes alternative reading practices that may lead out from the complexities created by the existing traditions.

I

The postcolonial hurricane that blew through the Indian subcontinent in 1980s, considerably after Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), made Indian scholars aware of the need for an ‘alternative’ literary canon. The alternative literary canon suggests a tendency to ‘alter’ the Western literary practices with the ‘native’ traditions. The phrase ‘native tradition’ does not merely imply the reading of a text from the point of view of the classical Indian Aesthetics and the ancient critical traditions of ‘*tika*’. It suggests the appraisal of a literary text focusing on the

social, cultural, psychic, ethnic, and political conditions of a nation, India. The reasons for the need of alternative literary canon are several – Indian scholars wanted to: (a) subordinate English literature in the Indian subcontinent, in the same way as “in sphere of politics, economics, and mass media, Britain and other European imperial powers have been superseded or have been relegated to a relatively minor place in international affairs”⁴; (b) deconstruct the cultural hegemony maintained by “the West through consigning postcolonial literatures as isolated national off-shoots of English literature as per the western standards”⁵, and (c) rewrite the literary text in such a way that it can deconstruct the popular myths about the essentialist notion of literature.⁶ An alternative literary canon does not merely imply the practice of replacing one set of literary works with another. It is more profoundly a set of focused reading practices which are inhabited in institutional structures such as educational curricula and publishing networks. It involves recognition and articulation of these practices and institutions. Such insurgence will result not only in the replacement of Eurocentric literary texts with indigenous texts, or, in redeployment of hierarchical values in them, but it will also result in the construction of indigenous and independent canon and alternative reading practices.

Indian English fiction of post-1980s has emerged as an alternative literary canon. This alternative canon has three-fold functions to serve: it has to (a) confront the essentialist European construction of Other countries, (b) displace the political, racist, and sexist ideologies of Euro-American writing, and (c) emerge as a potent ‘counter-canon’ to authenticate native Indian culture, traditions, and, voices in the form of ‘writing back’. The anti-imperial consciousness made the scholars read Indian English literature in terms of colonialism and its aftermath. Though these scholars have acknowledged literary independence of Indian English literature for last few decades, they hesitate terming it as an “alternative” literary canon. It is now high time to perceive it as an “alternative” literary canon.

An important point to discuss here is that how the post-1980s Indian English fiction is an alternative canon – what makes it ‘alternative’ and how? The rest of discussion that follows illustrates this query in detail. However, in simple terms, one can sum up the makers of ‘alternative’ literary canon of the post-1980s in this way:

First, the break from the Western pattern of fiction writing in the post-1980s era makes the Indian English Fiction an alternative canon (to the English fiction). The term ‘alternative’,

here, also extends its meaning to connote the sense of 'independence'. Essentially 'novel' or 'fiction' as a genre has its roots in the Western paradigm. Indian literature has borrowed the novel form from the Western literature(s). Indian writers imitated the Western pattern of writing a novel. Hence, the Western novel has worked as a role model for the Indian writers up to 1980. Of course, the Western writers have deeply influenced the Indian writers (during their education, in their practice of creative writing, and in their goals as writer), the post-1980s Indian English fiction shows 'decolonizing' of Indian mind. The post-1980s Indian English fiction is marked with a different set of patterns. In the words of Viney Kirpal, who uses the phrase 'the Third World Novel' to designate the contemporary fiction, the post-1980s Indian English fiction differs from the Western fiction in five ways: (a) "the loose, circular, episodic, loop-like narrative technique"; (b) "the plotlessness of these novels from the Western point of view"; (c) the use of language which is regional, ritualistic, proverbial, metaphoric, and therefore quite distinct from language in the English novel"; (d) the use of myths as "value-endowed paradigms" of reality; and (e) "illustrational" or "archetypal" rather than "representational" characterization.⁷

Secondly, the veering from the pre-1980s Indian fiction makes the post-1980s Indian English fiction an alternative literary canon. A question that may arise here is that can a change in the style of writing qualify to be an alternative canon? Well, the style of writing reflects substantive cultural content; the change in the style of writing in the post-1980s Indian English fiction demonstrates a marked change in the selection of the cultural material and the focal point of the narrative. The style of writing is not a simple narrative phenomenon but it has the potential of being a landmark in the history of narrative. The post-1980s Indian English fiction seems to be a new wave in the field of literature which differs from the earlier fiction on the basis of writing style, their reach, their focal points, etc. Earlier though the subject matter was essentially Indian, its treatment had some western touches in it. The earlier novelist extended the Indian tradition of the story-telling by incorporating the western mode of fiction writing into their texts. Their contact with the west has broadened the range of their themes and thereby they appropriated the fiction as per the taste of the western reader. One reason for such condition was that there was a small group of readers who can read English in India, the larger and biggest group was that of foreigners. Hence, it was the task of the early Indian English fiction to be the comparable to their standards. But now in India itself, there is a huge group of the readers who can read, write, comment on the fiction, so the post-1980s Indian English no longer needs to be appropriated as per the western taste. The earlier fiction

reached out to the Indian masses, whereas the post-1980s fiction made a considerable impact on the whole world. The representation of the nation in the earlier novel was village-centric backgrounding the freedom movement of the Gandhian era, whereas the post-1980s fiction is city-centric having metropolitan and cosmopolitan backgrounds of the post-Nehruvian era. Jon Mee, in his “After Midnight: The Novel in the 1980s and 1990s”, in this regards acknowledges that “the 1980s witnessed a second coming for the Indian novel in English. The appearance of *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 brought about a renaissance in Indian writing in English which has outdone that of the 1930s.”⁸ Amit Chaudhari also voices the same idea when he says:

In the past eighteen years, after the publication of *Midnight’s Children* and the rise of the Indian novel in English, Indian fiction in English has not only come to seem central to the idea of Indian literature in the mind of both the popular media and the academic intelligentsia, but has also edged out from every day consciousness those indigenous languages and their modern traditions that seemed so important a few decades ago, and were so crucial to the evolution of modern Indian identity or identities.⁹

The outlooks of Mee and Chaudhari clarify one major point that the publication of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 makes the real start of “Indian” English fiction. No doubt, the trio of Anand, Rao, and Narayan has greatly contributed to the formation of Indian English fiction; these writers seem more Dickensian in their approaches clearly signifying interminable influence of the West, whereas the post-1980s Indian English is seemed establishing itself as an independent genre. During this period, the robustly extroverted style, innerness of multiplicity and polyphony, propensity of imagination, use of myths, fairy tales and fantasy, and, the nativised language make the post-1980s Indian English fiction an alternative to the conventional Indian English fiction.

Thirdly, the advocacy and practices of reading the post-1980s Indian English fiction differently, without evolving much into the finicky Western critical theories or into the pedantic Indian aesthetics, make it an alternative literary canon. Instead it focuses on the national consciousness, cultural practices, and indigenous ideals as represented in the post-1980s Indian English fiction. The reason for engaging in a quite different reading practice is to solve out the oppositional west-east critical dimensions. No doubt, Indian literary studies needs the West-free critical orientation to be ‘Indian’ in reality; simultaneously the present literary scene requires the extension of the ancient Indian aesthetics in its modern avatar. It is possible to be the entirely West-free in the literatures written in Indian languages but not in English. As the genre ‘fiction’ and the language ‘English’ both are the western in character, it is not possible to detach Indian English studies from the western critical practices. Nor it is

completely possible to study it from the Indian literary tradition. Hence by advocating alternative reading practices, it may be possible to form alternative literary canon.

II

In his essay, “In Search of Indian Novel”, Herbert McArthur notes that –

A tenaciously particularized religiosity in polyglot jungle of temples and swamis; a more or less official ideal tradition in aesthetics and philosophy but an actual history of eclectic ferment; “non-western” way of thinking often defined and infused by European romantic idealism. One thinks of Gandhi in London, rediscovering Hinduism by reading Annie Besant.¹⁰

When it comes to Indian literature, this attributive scrutiny of Indian English fiction is not merely a view of Herbert McArthur but of many.¹¹ The Indian English fiction of post-1980s is essentially different from the earlier Indian fictions; *religiosity in polyglot jungle of temples and swamis* does not feature in the contemporary fiction, it might be the matter of past when Indian fiction was dependent on the western tradition but it is now a sovereign genre; it has created its own identity. However, it is indeed difficult to develop a separate framework for the analysis of the Indian English fiction. There are certain problems in forming the ‘alternative’ literary canon because the formation of *alternative* literary canon would also require the alternative reading and evaluating practices. It has been observed that Indian readers, due to their western-patterned education, are trained to read literature in the western style frequently relying on the western theories of interpretation.

Analytical practices in India have caught amidst the eastern-western polarities.¹² The present scenario of English literary studies in India marks two opposite traditions. There are the supporters of traditional Indian literary practices for the evaluation of the texts whereas the others prefer the western or the western-Indian merged tradition. Similarly, those who advocate a different orientation of Indian English fiction, they largely rely on the western tradition (Aijad Ahmad, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Makarand Paranjape etc.) or the traditional-pedantic Indian tradition (Kapil Kapoor, Bhalchandra Nemade, G. N. Devy, and others). Nemade’s *Nativism*¹³ probably had a potentiality to alter the reading practices but too much dependence on the traditional Indian theories makes it difficult for the common reader to follow Nemade. Probably the ‘*native*’ (the human subject) is missing in the conception of ‘Nativism’ due to the focus on native literary traditions of interpretations. Nemade’s writings arise certain questions – for whom does we are interpreting the text in the pedantic *shastriya* method of *bhasha* tradition that nativism proposes? Are we creating a kind of elitism among

the readers? Is the *bhasha* tradition of literary appreciation only way to protect or revive the culture? Would the conception of Nativism allow us to concentrate on national consciousness, cultural practices, and indigenous ideals? Doesn't the Nativism show the sign of what Herbert McArthur means to say by the phrase "rediscovering Hinduism by reading Annie Besant"? Cultural practices are different in each corner of India; does it mean that we require as many Nativisms as the different cultural practices of India? Instead focusing on the *bhasha* tradition, one needs to focus on the native, his life, his culture, his aspiration, his relationship with the outer world, his conflicts. This shift in perception would create its unique 'Nativism' that would have potentialities of preserving cultural practices and indigenous ideals. That is why one should go beyond traditional Nativism and restructure a "neo-Nativism" which would focus the social, cultural, psychic, ethnic, and political conditions of a nation for the literary appraisal. Neo-Nativism would not restrict itself to the regional cultural territories but would see the nation as one single cultural unit, *vividhata me ekta*. It would celebrate the diversity of cultures. It would have capacity to indentify the foreign cultural influences and convert it into nativistic life-style and, thus, it would make the foreign culture the part of the larger evolving cultural tradition of the nation. Neo-nativism would make a cry for the *change of mind* and not only the change of heart. It would not be governed by the outer cultural influences but it would govern them by adopting them in a native tradition. There would be only one motto of neo-Nativism – *celebrating diversity*.¹⁴

In this time (of *globalization*¹⁵), it is difficult to go with any single approach. The relationship between 'East' and 'West' is dialogic; actively or passively both depends on each other. Therefore, it is not possible to adopt a totally confrontationist position towards the West. Or, even it is not possible for to combine the both together due to their contradictory natures. Hence, one has to be very selective while dealing with the East and the West. Even Gandhi realized this and he told to accept the best from the West. He says that if the English become Indianised, the Indians can accommodate them. Simultaneously he also warns that if they wish to remain in India with their civilisation, there is no room for them. Gandhi did not have problem with the western tradition but he was against the blind imitation of the West; he knew it well that the irrational parody of the West would result in the intellectual amnesia. Hence, he favoured the presence of the West but in Indian uniform.

Unlike Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo says that "the idea of taking over what is best in occidental civilisation, is a false notion without a living meaning... In fact, we have been for a long time so imitating the West, trying to become like it or partly like it and have fortunately failed, for

that would have meant creating a bastard or twy-natured culture; but twy-natured, ..., is no-natured and a bastard culture is no sound, truth-living culture. An entire return upon ourselves is our only way of salvation".¹⁶ However, an *entire return to ourselves*, i.e., to our cultural roots seems impractical in the present times. Today, it is not possible to denounce the western thoughts from the critical discourses; doing this might narrow down the extent of one's understanding. It is unfeasible for any culture to be entirely self-sufficient or completely closed from the outside world. Such culture will wither away with the passage of time. Even Sri Aurobindo realized it immediately. Realising the problem, Sri Aurobindo lays down the following theoretical framework:

1. To recover its own centre, find its own base and do whatever it has to do in its own strength and genius is certainly the one way of salvation. But even then a certain amount of acceptance, of forms too, – some imitation, if all taking over of forms must be called imitation, – is inevitable.¹⁷
2. There is in every individualised existence a double action, a self-development from within which is its greatest intimate power of being and by which it is itself, and a reception of impacts from outside which it has to accommodate to its own individuality and make into material of self-growth and self power.¹⁸
3. To a healthy individuality the external impact or entering energy, idea, influence may act as an irritant awakening the inner being to a sense of discord, incompatibility or peril, and then there is a struggle, an impulse and process of rejection; but even in this struggle, in this process of rejection there is some resultant of change and growth, some increment of the power and material of life; the energies of the being are stimulated and helped by the attack.¹⁹
4. At no time did Indian culture exclude altogether external influences; on the contrary a very great power of selective assimilation, subordination and transformation of external element was the characteristic of its processes; it protected itself from any considerable or overwhelming invasion, but laid hands on and included whatever struck or impressed it and in the act of inclusion subjected it to a characteristic change which harmonised the element with the spirit of its own culture.²⁰

These theoretical positions of Sri Aurobindo suggest that it is impossible for any culture or nation to be entirely self-reliant and detached from other cultural influences. The cultural invasions many a times seem culturally and intellectually favouring the dominated culture. One cannot totally reject or accept the idea of the cultural invasion. Hence Sri Aurobindo

suggest the method of *selective assimilation*, enrich oneself from another culture. (Perhaps Sri Aurobindo accepts Gandhi's proposal adopting the best; however what is the difference between Gandhi and Aurobindo is that Gandhi accepts the best in *Indian form*, whereas Aurobindo accepts it in the *western form* as it is.)

In the vein of Sri Aurobindo, the critics like Makarand Paranjape and others employ the method *selective assimilation* in the field of literary studies. Gandhi's proposal for *selecting the best in Indianised form* would have been a better than the notion of *selective assimilation*. The idea of *selective assimilation* leads to some queries: are we again proposing the study of Indian English literature (fiction) through the western parameters? How is it possible to combine the Indian literary tradition which has its roots in aesthetic soil and the western literary tradition which has its grounding in the materialistic notion of the world? In such uncongenial condition, one has only one way that is *middle-way approach*, a moderate position that would safeguard the interest of the protagonists of the western tradition and also preserve and protect cultural practices, national ethos, and native identity of India.²¹ The *middle-way approach* hints at the formulation of altogether different reading practices that occasionally depends either on the West or the East. And if it depends on the West, it would be appropriated as per the purpose of the nativised interests. Such mutual wining over the western tradition would certainly make us indigenous. The best way to deconstruct the western identity is to formulate alternative conceptual framework. Hence the *middle-way approach* deals with formulating such reading practices that can be used by all without involving much in the western or eastern literary traditions. It can be even practiced by the readers of any nation without being conscious of the traditional literary practices. It would just focus on the text for the literary analysis and would study the native life, their aspiration, their struggle, etc. The neo-nativism may also function as the *middle-way approach* to the study of Indian English literature in India

One may adopt the following framework for the study of post-1980s Indian English fiction. One should not forget the fact that the deconstructive prepositions of postmodernist regime do not approve any fixity of synchronic relationship, yet he/she may employ this parametrical frame to evaluate literary fiction of post-1980s. This would probably take the readers out of the complexities caused by the eastern-western literary traditions.

1. *Fictionalisation* – This hints at interpreting the post-1980s fiction by focussing on the art of fictionalisation. One should pose the questions, such as, how has the writer created fictional atmosphere? What techniques has he employed? To what extent he has succeeded in creating authentic fiction? How native material like history and myth is utilised to enhance the fictional effect of the text?
2. *Ideolised Aesthetics* – It is not possible to accept any text in post-1980s as ‘purely’ aesthetic creation. Literary texts are always part of some ideologies. Hence the texts must be assessed focusing on how the writer has ‘ideolised’ the aesthetics to make it more relevant to the contemporary needs. What are the textual sources that make ‘ideological’ and ‘aesthetical’ resonances possible?
3. *Culture* – The text must be rooted to the culture from where it emerges out or to which it is addressed to. One should engage in analysing the text’s – a. competency of creating cultural harmony, b. ability of depicting cultural life of people, c. capability of creating unique cultural identity, and d. trimetric of land, culture and identity.
4. *Time and place* – Time and place are the pertinent aspects of the literary explorations. ‘Moment’ and ‘milieu’ must be the one of bases of literary analysis. It would make the literary inquiries more penetrate and rational.
5. *Intellectual Resonance* – A query regarding the intellectual resonance is an important area of inquiry. How the text balances with the already existing knowledge and what is its capacity to empower literary tradition intellectually? What is the significance of the subject matter in the present times? – are some of the questions that one should pose.
6. *Ontological Queries* – It implies the artistic phenomenon of probing into metaphysical queries concerning the nature of being, existence, and, reality. One must peep inside the philosophical dimensions of the literary account. The metaphysics of the text must be explored.
7. *Narrative Techniques* - What are the narrative techniques the writer has utilised? How has the writer experimented with the narrative? – such queries would make our study of the fiction more interesting.

A careful look at the first letter in each parameter tries to convince that probably using “FICTION” formula to form alternative reading practices for the post-1980s Indian English fiction. Using these parameters even the neo-nativism can more focus on the text and the native life-style and traditions. This would ground the literary study on the social, cultural,

psychic, ethnic, and political conditions of a nation. Adopting these measures can lead to a question that are we going back to the liberal humanist approach as propounded by the pre-modern European thinkers? The answer to this query is “No”. The liberal humanist approach was purely aesthetic-artistic construct. The liberal humanists believed that text contains the meaning entirely within itself; they thought that it is only through detaching the text from contexts and studying it in isolation one can understand the text; and they considered that it is the duty of the criticism to interpret and explain the text to the readers. They ignored the language studies, historical considerations and philosophical questions. The liberal humanist approach focused much more on the artistic components and the formalist²² beauty of the literature, and, the culture was subdued in it; whereas this FICTION approach centres on cultural aspects, it celebrates the cultural diversity. In the liberal humanist approach formalistic content was at the centre, whereas in this approach *native* (the human being) and its culture are at the centre. The earlier is the liberal humanism, the later is the cultural humanism. It may happen that some individual parameters do not appear culture-centric; however the beauty of this approach lies in their unity and not separation. Together they would have the power of celebrative native culture.

Thus, the alternative literary canon demands alternative reading-appreciation practices. The parameters shown above together have the potentiality to emerge out as the solid framework for the study of post-1980s Indian English fiction. This would also satisfy pragmatic part the theoretical practices. They are more focused and universal in outlook.

Notes:

1. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. (p. 14)
2. Ibid. p.14.
3. This assertion may lead to a query as what criteria one should apply while dealing with the translated literature or literature in different dialects within the same language family? As I think, one should stick to the criterion for the canonicity of that particular literature. In the case of translation, one must follow the criterion of the target language, and, in the case of literature in the different dialects of the same language family one need to adjust and to have the different criterion for dialect to dialect. Each dialect has its own aesthetics and hence none has right to impose criterion of other dialects on it.

One should remember it that the relationship between language and canonicity is also influenced by the pattern of the intra-lingual dialectical differences. Patterns of domination get reflected in imposition of one particular dialect posed as the ‘standard’

over other forms and dialects or language. This is not a case with only with the Indian languages; it is equally applicable to the European languages. English, French, and Spanish also have dialects and there are patterns of domination there as well. French language spoken and written in Paris is quite different from the one in Normandy or in Grenoble. Therefore, one must be aware of ‘internal colonialism’ within a linguistic family apart from the class distinction within a linguistic group and in the manner the classes use the language.

4. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back*. New York: Pantheon, 1987. Print.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Kirpal. Viney. “What is the Third World Novel?” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 23.1 (1988). Print. (pp. 144-156)
8. Mee, Joan. “After Midnight: The Novel in the 1980s and 1990s”. AK Mehrotra (ed). *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. (p. 318)
9. Chaudhari, Amit ed. *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. London: Picador, 2001. Print. (p. xxiii)
10. McArthur, Herbert. “In Search of Indian Novel”. *The Massachusetts Review*. Vol. 2, No. 4 (Summer, 1961), print. Pp.600-613.
11. There had been a long chain of the ‘critics’, such as Herbert McArthur, David McCutcheon, Gordon Bottomley, and others, who think that Indian (English) fiction is parody of English fiction.
12. The east/west binary is primarily non-Indian construct. It has been constructed by the scholars mostly coming from the west. Several travelers (who wrote monumental travelogues), and then, the colonial officers-scholars down to Max Muller found the need to familiarize themselves with Indian languages not because they fell in love with the literature that Indian languages contained, but because without that linguistic ability they could not have tightened their imperial grip over the Indian colony. Probably once they must have realised that Indian languages and literature not only have diversity but literary cultural richness that those languages have gained over centuries of history. They had to establish the supremacy of western languages and literature therefore they needed to undermine and relegate indigenous literary canons and aesthetics. The notion of ‘Orientalism’ is really the product of this imperative of imperialism. Euro-centrism is the other side of the coin that had flavours of racism, colour, and pre-conceived notions of modernity (as oppose to tradition).
13. One should also concentrate on the dichotomy of European and Nativism. It is introduced through bypassing the fact that Europe has abundant diversity within. However, their imperial projects and aspirations compelled them to keep their diversity subdued and to project Europe as one, homogeneous, and, united which it never was. The European Union is also resting on assurance that their cultural diversity would not be impinged upon by the European Union government. The word ‘Native’ was introduced as “Other” of Europe.
14. In one of the National Seminar organized by the Department of English, the M. S. University of Baroda, Vadodara in March 2014, in his Presidential Address, G. N. Devy had used this phrase. No doubt he has used this phrase in altogether different context.
15. One should remember that the neo-colonial idea of ‘globalisation’ is the result of a desperate European need to continue the domination over the non-Europe. To believe in the existence of globalisation is equal to accept the western intellectual discourse.

16. Aurobindo, Sri. "Indian Culture and External Influence". *The Renaissance in India and other Essays on Indian Culture*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1997. Print. pp. 44-45.
17. Ibid, p.45.
18. Ibid, p.48.
19. Ibid, p.49.
20. Ibid, p.50.
21. *The Middle-Way Approach* is originally proposed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV to resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese people based on equality and mutual co-operation.
22. When I say 'formalist', I do not mean the formalistic tendency of Formalism as proposed by Saussure and others, to me it means generic elements, the artistic elements that makes a literary piece literary in reality.