

To Win or Not to Win:
The Politics Behind the Booker Prize and Oscar Award

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Introduction

Booker Prize and Oscar Award are the most prestigious awards in the world of creative arts. Every award season, the whole world awaits the long-lists and shortlists for Booker Prize and Oscar Award, and the winners earn worldwide recognition, fame, and fortune. Though popular among the public, lots of controversies surround the prize committee, selection criteria, award nominees, and winners of both the awards. This paper attempts to study the history or evolution of both the awards along with the conflicts that make them the most controversial in the contemporary era.

Booker / Man Booker Prize

Booker Prize was first awarded as Booker-McConnell Prize. In 1968, Booker McConnell Ltd., a firm 'dealing in sugar, rum, mining machinery, and James Bond' announced a £5000 prize for fiction to be awarded to a British or Commonwealth author. The inaugural winner, in April 1969, was PH Newby, a BBC controller, for his work *Something to Answer for* (Stoddard 2014).

Booker Prize Foundation is an independent registered charity funded by the entire profits of Booker Prize Trading Ltd., of which it is the sole shareholder. This foundation took over the administration of the prize in 2002, and the investment company Man Group became the title sponsor. The prize money awarded with the Booker Prize was £21,000 and was subsequently raised to £50,000 in 2002 under the sponsorship of the Man Group, making it one of the world's richest literary prizes (themanbookerprize.com). The winner is usually announced at a ceremony in London's Guildhall, usually in early October.

The Man Booker Prize is the leading literary award in the English speaking world, and has brought recognition, reward, and readership to outstanding fiction for over four decades. It was established in 1969. The winner receives £50,000 as well as the £2500 awarded to each of the shortlisted authors. Both the winner and the shortlisted authors are guaranteed a worldwide readership and an increase in book sales (themanbookerprize.com).

The Man Booker Prize is awarded each year for the best original novel, written in the English language and published in the UK. In the beginning, only Commonwealth, Irish, South African, and later Zimbabwean citizens were eligible to receive the prize. Since 2014, the limit has been widened to any English language novel. The Man Booker International Prize is being awarded for a single book, translated into English and published in the UK.

In commemoration of Booker Prize's 25th and 40th anniversaries, The Booker of Bookers and The Best of the Booker were awarded to Salman Rushdie for *Midnight's Children*. The Lost Man Booker was given for books from 1970, which had been skipped due to an administrative change. The Man Booker Best of Beryl was given to Beryl Bainbridge, who was shortlisted five times but never won (Squires 2015).

Martyn Goff, the administrator of the Booker Prize between 1970 and 2006, played a vital role in developing the prize into the global brand it is today, via canny networking and the occasional leak and stirring of controversies (Squires 2015). He was central in propelling the awards to their current heights and has variously been referred to as the prize's impresario, its maestro and its eminence grise. He was known in the book trade as "Mr. Booker".

After Goff joined the Booker team, the judges began considering books from that year's publications, making their deliberations more current and more useful in the sales campaigns of publishers and booksellers. He managed to cultivate the media in such a way that every year there was an expectation of some sort of quarrel, or at the least, very lively debate.

One of the few controversies in which Goff was not involved was in 1972, when John Berger announced he would give his prize money to the Black Panthers, in protest at the sponsor's historical connections to sugar plantations in the Caribbean which ran on slave labour.

Under its generous new sponsor (Man Group) from 2002, the well-established Man Booker no longer has the need to court scandal to get press attention (Squires 2015).

From the very beginning, the objective of the Booker Prize (until 2002) and Man Booker Prize (till date) is to promote and sell books, as well as to reward the "best" (Squires 2015). Man Booker Prize for Fiction is among the most prestigious in the literary world. It is also incredibly generous to the big publishing houses. 5 out of the 6 books shortlisted in 2014 came from Penguin Random House; 9 out of the 13 long-listed books came from the big publishers. In 2015, it was 8 out of 13. The reading public was quite surprised to hear the announcement in July 2015 that Emmanuel Roman, chief executive of Man Group, the lead sponsor of the prize, joined Penguin Random House's board of directors (Marsden 2015).

There's the concern that digital publishing is wary of opening the floodgates of publishing to everyone. There are no safeguards in terms of quality. The concern about the quality and how one can know what to read is paramount, and long standing (Gillis, 2015). Awards such as the Man Booker

can offer a shortcut to the classics of the future, readily assigned by a panel of people regarded as experts in the field. For some readers, choosing books from an official selection like the Man Booker shortlist makes it easier to know that what they are reading is deemed “acceptable” by the literary elite (Jones, 2017).

In contrast to the popular belief that literary prizes make books popular, awards also have negative influence on reader response and book reviews. Awards such as Booker draw bad reviews from mismatched readers (Flood 2014). Flood examines a study by the academics Amanda Sharkey and Balázs Kovács who compared 38,817 reader reviews of 32 pairs of books on GoodReads.com. One book in each pair had won an award, such as the Man Booker prize, or America's National Book Award. The other had been shortlisted for the same prize in the same year. Their study implies that winning a prestigious prize in the literary world seems to go hand-in-hand with a particularly sharp reduction in ratings of perceived quality. This is because ‘a larger sampling of readers is drawn to a prize-winning book, not because of any intrinsic personal interest in the book, but because it has an award attached to it’ (Norris 2014).

Man Booker Prize is not much better than Lewis Carroll’s caucus race (Boxall, 2015). Samuel Beckett’s wife, Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil, responded to the news that Beckett had won the Nobel Prize in 1969 exclaiming “quelle catastrophe”. Doris Lessing’s response on being told she had won the same prize in 2007 was “Oh Christ” (qtd. Boxall, 2015).

It is perhaps embarrassing to win a literary prize, as it is embarrassing to be lavishly rewarded or celebrated for doing anything that comes as a vocation. If it is embarrassing to win a prize, it is also embarrassing *not* to win one. The myth is that Jorge Luis Borges regarded his failure to win the Nobel Prize as a cruelty and an injustice difficult to bear: *Not granting me the Nobel Prize, has become a Scandinavian tradition; since I was born they have not been granting it to me* (qtd. Boxall 2015).

When people look for long listed and shortlisted works, attention turns to those who are not on the list. “Literary criticism has to suspend fixed conceptions of value in order to evaluate; but the job of naming the best novel of the year will always involve us in a kind of brutality - the kind of barbarism that, as Walter Benjamin discovered, is the underside of any ‘civilized’ gesture.” (Boxall 2015)

Marlon James’s status as the first and only Jamaican author to win (or be shortlisted for) the Man Booker Prize highlights the awards’ historic lack of diversity. Of the 49 authors who have won the Man Booker Prize since its inception in 1969, 28 have been British and 75% of those, English. Such inequalities do not only relate to an author’s nationality. It is also important to note that the prize has been awarded to 30 men, but only 16 women. The Booker Prize Foundation changed the rules of entry in 2014 to allow American authors to be considered for the first time. There are concerns that Americans would dominate the prize’s long-lists and shortlists (Marsden 2015).

A ‘Bourdiesian’ analysis reveals the Booker Prize to be both a site of social reproduction and one where symbolic violence prevails (Norris 2006). In *The Booker Prize: A Bourdiesian Perspective*

(2006), Norris applies French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's cultural theory to evaluate the Man Booker Prize. She examines three aspects of corporate sponsorship: motivation for sponsorship, distinctive characteristics of corporate sponsorship, and its long-term effects. She places the Booker within the broader context of the UK's literary awards system in the 1960s, major changes in the British literary world from the late 1970s that affected the production and consumption of literary fiction, the prevailing free marketism of the 1980s, and the ongoing debates within (literary) academia. Her study challenges the prior assessments of the award, most notably Richard Todd's 1996 *Booker Study, Consuming Fictions*.

BAFTA Awards

The British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) is a leading independent arts charity. Its vision is a world where everyone's life is culturally and creatively enriched through excellent work in film, games and television. Its mission is to bring the very best work in film, games, and television to public attention, and support the growth of creative talent in the UK and internationally. BAFTA does this by identifying and celebrating excellence, discovering, inspiring and nurturing new talent, and enabling learning and creative collaboration (*bafta.org*).

Canadian Screen Awards

The Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television is a national, non-profit, professional association dedicated to the promotion, recognition, and celebration of exceptional achievements in Canadian film, television and digital media. Unifying industry professionals across Canada, the Academy is a vital force representing all screen-based industries. The awards have evolved from humble, pre-television beginnings in 1949 at Ottawa's Little Elgin Theatre to today's star-studded red carpet events. In 2013, the Canadian Screen Awards was born as the result of a merger of the Gemini Awards and Genie Awards - the Academy's previous awards presentations for English-language television and film productions (*academy.ca*).

Academy Awards or Oscar

Academy Awards, otherwise called Oscar Awards, are presented annually by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) to the extraordinary talents in the film industry. Each January, the entertainment community and film fans around the world turn their attention to the Academy Awards. Interest and anticipation build to a fevered pitch leading up to the Oscar telecast, when hundreds of millions of movie lovers tune in to watch the glamorous ceremony and learn who will receive the highest honors in filmmaking (*oscars.org*).

In 1929, the first Academy Awards ceremony was presided over by Douglas Fairbanks, the 'King of Hollywood' and the Academy's first president, at the Spanish Colonial-style Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel (Glancey 2016). The awards ceremony was first broadcast on radio in 1930 and telecasted for the first time in 1953.

The Oscar statue is 13.5 inches tall and weighs 8.5 pounds, with 24-karat gold finish. Irish art director Austin Cedric Gibbons sketched the Oscar statuette, an Art Deco medieval knight holding a

crusader's sword and standing on a reel of film with five spokes representing actors, directors, producers, technicians, and writers. In 1928, Los Angeles sculptor George Stanley redesigned the statue with an improved knight figure, without the film reel (Washington 2016).

24 Academy Awards are presented every year for the artistic and technical merit in the American film industry. Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film was introduced only in 1957. Until then, foreign-language films were honoured with the Special Achievement Award. Almost 3048 Oscars have been awarded from the inception of the award in 1929 through the 89th Academy Awards ceremony held in 2017.

Oscar statuette has a rich, rumour-filled history (Glancey, 2016). Academy librarian and executive director Margaret Herrick remarked that the statue resembled her Uncle Oscar. Bette Davis, who was a president of the Academy, claimed that the rear end of the statue reminded her of her first husband Harmon Oscar Nelson. In 1934, Hollywood columnist Sidney Skolsky described Katharine Hepburn's first best actress win using the name 'Oscar' (based on a vaudeville joke), with the intention of making the gold statuette 'human'. The name became popular, and the Academy made the name 'Oscar' official in 1939 (Washington, 2016).

Every winter, studios release their most aesthetically and artistically valuable projects, aspiring for some coveted nominations at the Academy Awards in February or early March (*Tufts Daily*). This is popularly called 'Oscar Season'. During this period, studios spend millions of dollars and campaign for their films to attract the Academy voters and win Oscar Awards. 'Oscar Season' is criticised worldwide as it emphasises more on 'marketing' rather than the 'quality' of the movies.

'Oscar bait' refers to the money-minting 'formula-based blockbusters' with glossy production values. Detweiler (2008) remarks: Whenever Hollywood producers long for an Oscar, they dig into the history books. Historical epics offer prime opportunities for accolades in cinematography, art direction, costume design, and make-up, and they create an attractive escape for the actors and audiences... Blockbuster epics are prime 'Oscar baits' (190).

UCLA professors Gabriel Rossman and Oliver Schilke have tried to define 'Oscar bait' mathematically. They have reviewed almost 3000 Oscar-eligible films released between 1985 and 2009 and developed an algorithm to evaluate 'what makes a film most likely to be nominated for an Oscar'. Their findings reveal the predominant features of 'Oscar bait': when a film is released; whether it is being distributed by a major studio; whether the actors, writers, and directors of the film have previous Oscar nominations; and whether it features genres and plot (IMDb) keywords most associated with Oscar nominations (Keating, 2014).

Though many criticise or mock at 'Oscar bait', VanAirsdale (2012) states that it is an art form, a state of mind, a business model. Its yield includes some of the recent American cinema's most resonant triumphs (e.g., *Titanic*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Social Network*) and some of its most wretched

garbage (e.g., *Nine*, *The Lovely Bones*). It is true that ‘Oscar bait’ safeguards Hollywood from stopping only with ‘craven super-hero franchises and anemic romantic comedies’.

Ever since, the Oscars have been controversial. Walt Disney has received 26 awards till date while Alfred Hitchcock is never recognized, except with an honorary statuette (Glancey, 2016).

The first recipient of the legendary Oscar in 1929 was Emil Jannings, who started making propaganda films for the Nazis in the 1930s. He is the only German actor to have won the Academy Award for Best Actor till date. Though Emil Jannings was given the award, the first ‘real’ winner of Oscar was Rin Tin Tin, an 11 year old German shepherd rescued from wartime France in 1918 by a US airman.

The dog had acted in 27 films and received the most votes for best actor in first-round voting. The then newly formed Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) under the aegis of Louis B Mayer, head of MGM, decided that giving a dog the ‘first’ soon-to-be-legendary gold-plated Oscar would give a wrong impression. So the Academy held a second round of voting with human contenders only (Glancey, 2016).

Though Academy Awards are considered a great privilege, a few legendary artists have refused to receive the Oscar for specific reasons. Katherine Hepburn won 4 Academy Awards (in 1934, 1968, 1969, 1982), but she did not turn up to receive any of them. She made her first appearance at the 1974 Academy Awards when she presented the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award to her friend and producer Lawrence Weingarten and received a standing ovation (*bbc.com*).

In 1935, Dudley Nichols won the Academy Award for Best Screenplay for *The Informer*. He refused to accept it as the Writers’ Guild was striking at that time. After the conflict was over, he was in possession of the statuette by 1949.

George C. Scott declined his best actor nomination for *Patton* in 1970. He won anyway, but did not attend the Oscar ceremony which he called ‘a two-hour meat parade’. Marlon Brando won 1972 Academy Award for Best Actor. Native American actress and activist Sacheen Littlefeather refused the award on Brando’s behalf, protesting against the film industry’s treatment of Native Americans (*bbc.com*).

Woody Allen has won 4 Academy Awards, but he has not accepted any of them in person. He remarks: “The whole concept of awards is silly. I cannot abide by the judgement of other people, because if you accept it when they say you deserve an award, then you have to accept it when they say you don’t.” (qtd. Wittmer, 2017).

Though it is considered ‘inappropriate to take a political stance during an awards ceremony’, many celebrities have talked boldly about political issues. In 1973, Sacheen Littlefeather remarked that “[Brando] very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award” for the movie *Godfather*

because of “the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry” and “recent happenings” at Wounded Knee Creek, on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota (Shapiro, 2017).

In 1978 Vanessa Redgrave was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Julia* in which she played an anti-Nazi activist. She was opposed very aggressively by Jewish groups because of her support for Palestinians. During the awards ceremony, she remarked: “And I salute that record, and I salute all of you, for having stood firm and having dealt a final blow against that period when Nixon and McCarthy launched a worldwide witch-hunt against those who tried to express in their lives and their work the truth that they believed in. I salute you, and I thank you and I pledge to you that I will continue to fight against antisemitism and fascism.” (qtd. Shapiro, 2017)

In 2002, Halle Berry remarked that her Best Actress win would open up new avenues for the African American actresses in the industry. Michael Moore criticised President George W. Bush and the war in Iraq while accepting his Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine* in 2003.

In 2009, Dustin Lance Black who won the Best Original Screenplay award for *Milk* assured that the gay and lesbian kids would get equal rights federally across the great nation. Best Actor winner Leonardo DiCaprio pleaded for action on ‘climate change’ in his 2016 speech (Shapiro, 2017).

Academy is also criticised for supporting ‘racism’ and ‘male domination’ in the industry. A study reveals that the voters of the Academy are nearly 94% Caucasian and 77% male; 86% above 50 years of age; 2% Black and less than 2% Latino (Horn, et.al. 2012).

Spike Lee and Jada Pinkett Smith refused to attend the Academy Awards function in 2016 as twenty contenders for acting awards were white, and films with black themes were not nominated for the Best Picture. Cheryl Boone Isaacs (who is a black and the Academy’s President) emphasised the recent changes in the Academy membership giving priority to gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (*bbc.com*).

In *Can we talk about the Oscars intelligently?* Wyman (2015) remarks: The lack of diversity in the nominations is undeniable, as is the Academy’s long history of adoration toward the white male. But the Academy Awards have actually greatly improved their recognition of minority actors. In 2008, *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film about a poor Indian boy, won the Best Picture. In 2013, *12 Years a Slave*, a movie portraying the pathetic lives of slaves in the pre-Civil War south, won the Best Picture for director Steve McQueen, and best adapted screenplay for John Ridley, both of whom are black (Wyman 2015). Mahershala Ali who won the Academy Award for Best Support Actor in 2017 is a Muslim convert.

Sir Michael Caine urged black actors to be ‘patient’ over their lack of representation at the Oscars and claimed that ethnicity should not be a factor in the nominations. He remarked: “There’s loads of black actors. In the end you can't vote for an actor because he's black. You can't say 'I'm going to vote for him, he's not very good, but he's black, I'll vote for him'.” (qtd. Sherwin 2016)

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Recently, the voters of the Academy do not focus only on mainstream crowd-pleasers. In 2012, James Cameron's ex-wife Kathryn Bigelow's movie *The Hurt Locker* won against the spectacular movie *Avatar* that broke *Titanic*'s box office records. In 2017, Barry Jenkins's low-budget drama *Moonlight* that tells the story of a gay African American boy growing up in poverty in Miami won Best Picture against *La La Land* which was a box-office hit.

According to Wyman (2015), the actual problem lies 'beyond' the nominations and the awards. He rightly observes that Hollywood's liberal politics, while improving the representation of minorities in Oscar nominations, has not led to diversity in the actual makeup of the industry; only a minuscule percentage of top studio and filmmaking roles are held by women or non-white men.

Conclusion

Though the Booker Prize is being criticised so harshly by writers, critics, and readers alike, it continues to serve an important function of selecting and promoting serious literature in the English language. Except a few, Booker Prize winning novels usually have high literary value.

Booker Prize nominated, longlisted, and shortlisted novels mostly contain 'stories not told before' in 'ways never tried before'. Booker Prize winning novels may or may not deserve the award, but they provide variety in themes or characters, introduce the recent trends in writing, and keep us abreast of what is happening in the literary world.

Though Oscar Awards are being scrutinised or criticised all over the world, these remain the highest merit and credit for any artist in the film industry. Oscar Awards attract media attention, and the award winners gain name, fame, and fortune for their lifetime. Political or apolitical, both the Booker Prize and Oscar Award remain the oft-dreamed and most-cherished awards in the fantastic world of arts.

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