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## Popular but not Prized: A Cultural Perspective on Popular Fiction

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### Abstract:

Popular fiction is generally perceived to be the trash can of literary studies and the literary canon. From its writers being called 'creative amateurs' to readers labeled as 'passive consumers' to often being judged in terms of bestsellers, popular fiction continues to be neglected and misinterpreted.

This paper has attempted to examine and dispel ill-informed opinions and prejudices about popular fiction, contributing to the misreading and misinterpretation of popular culture and fiction.

**Keywords: popular fiction, popular culture, bestsellers, canon.**

Simply put, popular fiction is the type of fiction that is read and enjoyed by most readers. But regardless of its vast popularity, it is at the receiving end of criticism and irrelevant comparison from the so-called high-brow critics and universally designated canonical texts. Popular fiction is not a modern phenomenon. Its beginning can be traced back to the sixteenth century when popular literature consisted of jestbooks, broadsides, and narratives dealing with medieval romance. It was solidified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of literacy and the establishment of lending libraries, which provided easy and affordable access to reading materials. However, popular fiction and its writers were considered a diversion even in the preceding centuries. The sensational subject matter of popular fiction was seen to corrode the morals and values of society. Writers, readers, and vendors of popular fiction were viewed

suspiciously and were often the target of criticism and hostility. Only a little has changed for popular fiction since then because even now, it has never been a part of the mainstream curriculum in academia or any prestigious literary award such as the Booker or Nobel Prize. Darko Suvin aptly warns, “A discipline which refuses to take into account 90 percent or more of what constitutes its domain seems.... not only to have large zones of blindness but also to have run a serious risk of distorted vision in the small zone it focusses on (so-called high-lit).” (Suvin quoted in Pawling 2)

Popular fiction is generally perceived as the equivalent of para literature, a trash can of literature, and an example of literary degradation because it lacks literary sublimity and thrives on popular appeal only. It is perceived to be a modern-day extension of Grub Street fiction of the eighteenth century, with writers writing only for money or not writers but rather hacks who indulge in dubious literary practices. It is accused of surviving on formula and plot rather than literary excellence. The readers of popular fiction are not spared either as McCracken says, “the reader of popular fiction historically has not been given such a glowing report.” (McCracken 7) and have been labeled as passive and indiscriminate consumers whose reading tastes have stooped too low to be ever corrected. George Orwell once unabashedly commented on the reader of popular fiction: “... He never read the same book twice. Apparently the whole of that frightful torrent of trash... was stored forever in his memory. He took no notice of titles or authors’ names, but he could tell merely by glancing into a book whether he had it or not.” (Orwell quoted in Glover and McCracken 86). However, these kinds of assumptions are far from true because readers of popular fiction are not tacky readers obsessed with self-pleasure; instead, they are active and nuanced readers who engage critically with texts through an active network of book clubs, prozines, and fanzines. Popular culture and its artifacts have also been dragged into an ideological battle with critics like Adorno and Horkheimer claiming that popular culture artifacts are nothing more than standardized and homogenous products imposed upon the general public by the capitalistic system, thus devoiding popular culture and its products of any little worth they deserve to have. Hence, regardless of its massive popularity across the globe, popular fiction continues to suffer from baseless and uninformed opinions and judgments.

According to Ken Gelder, “popular fiction is the opposite of Literature...Literature deploys a set of logics and practices that are different in kind to those deployed in popular fiction.”(Gelder 12). The primary differences between literature and popular fiction are

assumed to be in terms of quality and style. Literature is considered eternal, rich, complex, restrained, and cerebral. On the other hand, popular fiction is considered simple, trashy, formulaic, escapist, and leaving a corrupting influence on the literary health of society. Literature has always been somehow associated with the works of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen. However, it must be reminded to the critics and haters alike of popular fiction that when William Shakespeare started writing, he was labeled as an ‘upstart crow’ by the then university wit Robert Greene, a flourishing writer and critic in the sixteenth century. Shakespeare’s works catered to the general masses back then, but today, the English classics are incomplete without the works of Shakespeare. Charles Dickens was an author who consistently produced his works, especially in serialized magazines, to make profits. Still, today, his works also form an indispensable part of the canonical texts. This brings to the fore that the discrimination and charges against popular fiction are arbitrary and regressive.

Popular fiction is also viewed in terms of bestsellers, which has been defined as “the work of fiction sold in the most units to the most people over a set period of time.” (Bloom 6), but then again, the concept of bestseller encompasses some factors such as types of units sold – paperback, hardback, ebook or serialized, period- books are not sold uniformly throughout a month or a year and the price at which it is sold. Also, works that have been censored or suppressed are often sold illegally and often sell in high numbers but are not featured in the official best-seller list. So popular fiction is way more than bestsellers.

So the question that remains unanswered is, what exactly is popular fiction? A simple answer might not be possible, but some distinguishing features characterize popular fiction. The most prominent is that it targets a general reading public, not an ‘elite’ and ‘biased’ minority group of readers who prefer the so-called canonical texts. Since popular fiction is meant for a large audience, it needs equally significant printing and distribution channels, and this forms another important aspect of popular fiction, which is the commercial and technological aspect. Commercial and technological factors had formed an indispensable part of popular fiction since the nineteenth century when cheap printing facilities and easy availability from lending libraries made popular literature a household name. In the twenty-first century, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Kindle have boosted the proliferation of popular fiction. Popular fiction is also known as genre fiction. Though the concept of genre is overlapping and shifting, some major genres in popular fiction are romance, adventure, historical fiction, westerns, crime-thrillers, fantasy, horror, science fiction, and chick lit. These

genres have their subgenres. Under romance, there is a historical romance and regency romance. Fantasy is subdivided into quest, urban, dark, and historical fantasy.

Thus, to see popular fiction solely in terms of leftover literature and an industrial practice would not be correct because the real culprit behind the plight of popular fiction is the social, cultural, and historical factors that have left an indelible impact on how popular fiction is perceived and understood. The simple words ‘popular’ and ‘culture’ are charged with certain complex historical and cultural connotations. Cultural and ideological factors often govern how an art form is perceived and propagated in an artistic context. Proper and elite culture is the one that is endorsed by those in power, and their beliefs and tastes are often sanctioned as the appropriate form of culture. The rest that fails to catch up or is not at par with the so-called ‘high’ or elite culture is labeled as mass or popular culture, which is indirectly, if not explicitly is, condemned and is not approved of. These inconsistencies in how culture is understood and judged are among the most critical factors contributing to disrespect towards popular fiction.

Given the current situation of popular fiction across the globe and the discrimination it suffers from, the concept of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu of ‘the field of cultural production’ stands true. For Bourdieu, cultural production, be it cinema, television, or fiction, was the outcome of different social-cultural positions, each related to one another. An apparent example would be the distinction between high and low cultural productions. Bourdieu takes the example of opera and soap operas. Opera is regarded as a form of high-cultural production that is expensive to produce and watch and demands a culturally and socially qualified and dedicated audience. Both the opera and the audience occupy a high cultural position in the cultural field. On the other hand, a soap opera is a routine program on television, cheap to produce and watch, and attracts the broadest possible audiences. Unlike opera, it does not require its audiences to be culturally sophisticated. Even though each soap opera has different subject matter and caters to different tastes, it is simple enough to be understood by its viewers.

According to Bourdieu, highbrow cultural productions such as opera, art-house cinema, and avant-garde productions are ‘autonomous’ in nature, which means these are indifferent to buying and reading by the majority of the public and are often contemptuous of market and profit motives and are celebrated for being original and a fine example of creativity. These artists and artists self-position themselves in what Bourdieu calls ‘the field of restricted production,’ which means their works are directed at fellow artists or a particular social-cultural group. By contrast, variants of low cultural productions such as soap operas and popular fiction

are classified by Bourdieu as ‘heteronomous,’ which means they are open and accessible to mass audiences and are involved in the dialectics of production, distribution, and profit making. These art forms often overlook originality for conventions. These processes usually position these cultural productions under the ‘field of large-scale production,’ which, as the name suggests, aims for broad distribution and recognition. (Bourdieu quoted in Gelder 13).

The problem with popular fiction also lies in the fact that popular fiction forms a part of the broader spectrum of popular culture. Popular culture has been the victim of allegations and mudslinging since the time of Plato. In his book “Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society,” Raymond Williams defines popular as “belonging to the people, widely favored or well-liked but somehow always associated with being ‘low’ or ‘base.’”(Williams 198). Popular culture is an authentic reflection of the tastes and preferences of the people. However, popular culture is generally viewed as highly commercialized and caters to an audience that is dumb and has no sense of qualitative judgment or aesthetic appreciation.

Several self-proclaimed gatekeepers of culture, such as Plato, Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, and Adorno and Horkheimer, have vilified popular art and culture. In the West, Plato is the first philosopher to attempt to discriminate between ‘culture’ and ‘popular culture’ in his work ‘The Republic.’ In his work, he believes that art forms like poetry and painting should be banned in an ideal republic, and philosophy should be propagated to cultivate a refined taste among the audiences. According to German philosopher Immanuel Kant, natural science and moral philosophy were the only means to seek and expand culture, and everything else is ‘kitsch,’ i.e., cheap entertainment. In the late nineteenth century, philosophy was replaced by literature and liberal arts tradition to judge ‘the culture’ and ‘popular culture.’ Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis were their chief proponents. Arnold, in his essay “Culture and Anarchy,” comes down heavily on the culture of the working class. According to Arnold, the culture was in a state of decline, which could only be saved by adopting the high-class culture. F.R. Leavis bemoaned the cultural crisis of the twentieth century. The crisis, according to the Cambridge school gatekeeper, was that of leveling down. Culture sadly no longer thrived on hierarchical principles, and the only way to recover the lost glory was to be acquainted with the works featured in ‘The Great English Tradition.’ His wife, Q.D. Leavis, is also known to have attacked popular fiction in the essay ‘Fiction and the Reading Public’ where she claimed that popular fiction is like a drug that causes addiction, which destroys the literary health of the public and the country. The most brutal critique of popular culture is provided by the Frankfurt school

members Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who coined the term ‘culture industry’ for popular culture, which was only concerned with profit-making and producing homogenous products.

It was only in the late 1950s and 1960s that cultural critics like Paddy Whannel and Stuart Hall, in their work ‘The Popular Arts,’ began to replace the misleading generalizations about popular culture by differentiating within and across what was popular culturally. Later, American cultural critics like Gilbert Seldes and Robert Warshow Seldes defended popular culture, claiming that it has charm and can produce great works on its terms.

Thus, though popular culture has been at the receiving end of numerous criticisms and accusations, “popular culture is a little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation imposed from above to make a profit and secure social control...these are not the matters that can be decided once and for all (outside the contingencies of history and politics) with an elitist glance and a condescending sneer nor can they be read off from the moment of production- it is ultimately in ‘production in use’ that questions of meaning, pleasure, ideological effect, incorporation or resistance can be decided.” (Storey 88). Popular fiction forms a part of a more extensive umbrella term, popular art, and there is always a connection between different art forms, especially media productions. It encourages reading because once the viewers watch a show or a movie, they want to know the source and hence go back to reading the text, which promotes reading habits among youths. Unfortunately, such misconceptions have been circulating in society because when it comes to the study of popular fiction that “the student has been faced with either an empirical survey of production, marketing, and consumption of popular fiction which deliberately eschew any consideration of the meaning embodied within the text themselves or they give an ‘internal’ account of the themes embodied within the text or genre but unwilling and unable to make connections between the literary artifact and the social context in which it moves and has its being.” (Pawling 2).

It can be concluded that all the differences and charges leveled against popular culture and its artifacts are arbitrary and a game of power relations between the privileged and the underprivileged. There has always been this social and cultural anxiety about the growing working class, which holds the potential to dethrone the self-appointed protectors of the culture. Popular fiction can only be thoroughly and adequately justified when thorough research is done considering diverse perspectives. It is crucial to demolish wrong ideas that evolve around

popular art forms, and they must be given equal opportunity for correct analysis and interpretation. Popular culture and popular art forms, especially fiction, have their own aesthetics and literary value. They must be seen as a valuable addition to cultural heritage and not be looked down upon. It is only possible when one goes beyond the cultural distinction of profound (aesthetic) and fun (hedonist) culture and further adopts a flexible definition of a culture that would be considered dynamic and evolving rather than a static institution.

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