

## Popular Literature- A Marginalized Genre

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There are still, a thin minority of people who have learnt substantially good English by the dint of hard work, practice and a great effort, and have often felt enraged looking at the non-standard forms of English creeping into the dictionaries, being considered official. Their indignation is due to the degeneration of the standard language. People who have religiously studied and mastered British English can't accept even American vocabulary, spellings and their strange grammatical syntax.

Academic sphere was believed to be the most sacred and pure place of learning chaste language and literature. Literature was supposed to have a therapeutic value that would instil in the readers values and ideals. They clearly knew and could distinguish what was chaste and what was not good literature.

But as the time passed by, the society became more complex and there was a revaluation of the canonized beliefs, values and standards. Whether the change was for better or worse is not very clear even now. The tables were turned; the canonized classics were pushed to the back burners. The marginalized was centred. A distinct line of demarcation became hazy and even disappeared. Those who could not rise up to the ideal standards managed to pull down the ideal standards to their reachable heights. Minorities and marginalized rose in population and there was an awakening, a cold malice to settle old scores of inequality with equality. It was not just a mutation of the literary tastes. Lots of politics and globalization manoeuvred behind the scenes. These changes were distinctly visible in the spheres of social, cultural and literary domains.

The bone of contention of this paper is the distinction between the Class and Mass literature. What makes a piece of literature to be classified as class or mass? Is it due to the fall in standards of the evaluation process or is it because of the rise of standards of the mass literature rubbing shoulders at par with class literature? In order to understand this we need to have a basic survey of both these literatures.

Certain writers are branded as popular or classical writers irrespective of the content and presentation of their works. It is more a certification on the competence of the author than the performance of the individual text. Let us, at the outset, see how the mass or popular literature is classified and what different varieties of literature are included in them. Suppose an unknown writer writes a text. For several reasons that has to be categorized and pigeon-holed. The editors, book-sellers and the librarians need to know to which category it falls under. This will help them to shelve and market it: whether the text belongs to genre, main stream or literary. For our convenience let us make these three distinctions in fiction.

Before arriving at conclusions, it would be sensible to have a clear distinction between these categories to clear up confusion. The following are my observations after having read some of the representative fiction in each category. They are not rules as such, and there could be some novels which are a cross-over, those that do not fit in to any one category I mention here. (Barsch, 371-83)

**Genre fiction:** are those novels that come under the science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance and thriller. In such categories, the plot or the structure of the story is dominant and the development of the characters is not really very important. The novel is either focussed on the romance of the two protagonists, or if it is a mystery novel, the main character is always up to solving the riddle of mystery. The sole purpose of the writer is to entertain the reader with a predictable denouement. Some of the successful writers in this category are :

Stephen King (horror), John Grisham (legal thriller), Sue Grafton (mystery), Kathleen E. Woodiwiss (romance), J.R.R. Tolkien (fantasy).

**Main-Stream Fiction:** They are that group of novels that do not fall under any category. Though they have a predominant plot as in the genre fiction, these novels build up round characters with greater depth of characterization. Entertainment becomes the primary goal of these novels. The stories are easy to understand and straightforward. They make the conclusion with poetic justice resolving most problems without leaving any loose ends. Some of the successful writers in this category are Pat Conroy, Maeve Binchy, John Irving, James A. Michener, Amy Tan.

**Literary fiction:** Language, style and techniques play a more important role in these kinds of novels and though there will be a plot, it is of less importance. The plot weaves around the philosophical issues or some ideology. The characters introspect themselves and expose their follies or goodness. There will be several layers of meaning and challenges the reader to comprehend the novel according to their respective level of perception. The hidden meanings and message that are suggestive of the novel are usually something more serious and dense that is applicable to the universal cause. Though literary fiction is respected more in the academic circles, they are the ones which usually break the conventional norms of a fiction, like the story ending without poetic justice or even leaving the reader in a state of incomprehension and confusion or it may not have a plot with those famous five stages of a fiction. These variety of novels do not have a mass readership and they do not sell as much as the genre literature or main-stream literature.

Examples of successful literary fiction writers are Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway.

The Genre fiction which largely constitutes the Mass literature, have diversified varieties of themes like romances, horror, suspense thrillers, science fantasy and fiction, crime and mystery novels. Each of these has further delicacies of variations. To give only one example, take for instance the horror novels: The source of horror could be a child, which is abducted and in threat or danger. Creepy kids that are under the influence of dark forces pose a threat to adults. The child is lovable darling and a blood relative when it is normal but under the influence of the evil power could be disastrous. Erotic vampire could be the source of horror, where the character is a vampire and sexually provocative. Hauntings: a classic form centering on possession by ghosts, demons or poltergeists, particularly of some sort of structure. Psychological thriller and supernatural menace also make novels thrilling.

With so many varieties of sub-themes, the novels are bound to be very interesting and sell like hot cakes. In spite of the invasion of electronic media like the internet and Television, if people continue to have reading habit, the credit definitely goes to such writers who hold them in their rapt attention.

Whether an author is of a higher quality or not is measured at a university or similar institutions, determined not by book sales but by critical acclaim by other established literary authors and critics. The literary fiction can be elegantly written with lyrical style and structured in layered manner of plot. The tone of literary fiction can be darker than genre fiction. Based on these parameters, it was easy for readers to bifurcate the class literature (literary) and the mass literature (genre). However, a crossover fiction being written these days has faded the distinct border between these two and made it difficult to assess its category.

#### **Differences:**

The genre fiction is formulaic and the denouement can be easily being guessed by the reader. It provides entertainment to the reader as an end in itself. Usually it sees to it that the novels have a happy/satisfying ending. Unlike the Literary fiction, these have a straightforward prose and reflect the conventional life or current ideology. Narrative techniques are simple and

linear narrative that stays in present. The genre fiction has a wide range of readers, not confining to academic studies. They are easy and fast to write as similarly to read as they come close to real life. The conversation between characters is quirks and clever dialogue. The climax of such novels is often big like a shootout, love scene and finally they substantially make a good writing. (Bauer, 125-40)

On the other hand, literary fiction is character driven or theme and language driven. They are not formulaic as in the genre fiction. They are supposed to provide meaning and cultural value. The fiction has unhappy or unclear ending. The literary style is unique and the prose is fresh. The literary novels could expose darker truths of life and they challenge ideology. Unlike the genre novels, literary fiction experiments with non-linear narrative with flashbacks. The writers cater to specific readers. They are hard to write and even the reading becomes a serious affair. While a genre novel can be read by the time one gets down a long train journey, literary reading cannot be done so. It requires a more serious atmosphere and better concentration. The characters are fully fleshed out and human. Some amount of guessing and inferring is left to the reader about the plot and the intentions. An elaborate dramatic and sensational climax need not be expected. Climax is by and large small that could depend on a certain decision of a character or a realization of the protagonist. The major claim of a literary fiction is its good writing.

Scholars, now a days, believe that there is certainly a slight distinction between the literary and genre literature in terms of certain values and usage of language and other such features, however, one cannot claim that literary fiction is superior. Many genre fiction novels deal with difficult and unhappy subject matter and cannot be considered escapism which is a hallmark of literary fiction. There are certainly, examples of outstanding writing in genre fiction where the prose is “taut and clean” and carefully crafted. On the contrary, there are several examples of badly written literary novels.

The complaint against the generic or popular writing is that it is written very easily. Why should one consider that ease and clarity should disqualify a book from greatness? Having a plot does not mean a novel cannot have meaning – that a finely nuanced plot can deliver just as much meaning and emotion as a deftly wrought work of literary fiction with more carefully rendered prose.

The line between genre and literary fiction is very blurry and that many of the great writers from both sides are borrowing madly from the conventions of the other. Many literary fiction writers are writing science fiction and thrillers, while genre fiction writers are importing literary fiction techniques. He still feels they are distinct, but notes that some critics argue that they are merging.

### **Findings:**

I conclude my paper with some examples of great reputed classical writers writing genre fiction, and being hailed as good writers. These examples support my findings that the line of demarcation between popular fiction and literary fiction is very thin or hazy. Mary Shelley wrote her novel *Frankenstein* in 1817 that was considered to be a classic. It is nothing short of a horror story. Other famous authors of this era were Frederick Marryat who wrote the novel *The Phantom Ship* (1839) and a short story *The Werewolf*; Herbert George “H. G.” Wells, who combined the genre of horror with science fiction in his short stories and novels such as *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) or *The War of the Worlds* (1898); and Robert Louis Stephenson with his *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Guy de Maupassant’s *Le Horla* (*The Horla*, 1887). Although these writers became famous through works that did not belong to the genre of horror, they were able to perfectly evoke the dark, shadowy, scary and obscure atmosphere. (Balkin, 5-37)

In the United States of America horror was very popular in the 19th century, which was a coup in the history of horror literature, especially thanks to authors like Edgar Allan Poe (The

Black Cat, 1843; *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 1839; *The Pit and the Pendulum*, 1842; *Cask of Amontillado*, 1846 and other short stories), Nathaniel Hawthorne (*A Wonder Book*, 1852; *The Marble Faun*, 1860; *Dr. Grimshawe's Secret*, 1882 or *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1851). All these are considered as literary novels though they are in no way different from the genre novels.

Franz Kafka, an existentialist writer of Czech-Jewish descent very significantly contributed to the development of the genre. Even though his works are not defined as horror novels, they are characterized by a threatening atmosphere, in which the main protagonists are suffering physically and psychologically. The twentieth century is the era of the bloom for horror. The genre as such is already clearly shaped but now subgenres are beginning to form.

Much water has flowed under the bridge and the way we look at literature has changed. It is not just the people and the communities who were marginalized are brought to the centre, but even the literature that was once marginalized has been taken up seriously for academic study. We need not be surprised of James Hadley Chase or Agatha Christie is prescribed as a text book for an undergraduate class.

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