

## CHAPTER 4

### RECEPTION OF POPULAR FICTION IN ACADEMIA

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*Literature is to be treated as a document in the study of culture, it is first necessary to know something about who reads, why they do so, and how they go about it (1991, ix).*

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#### INTRODUCTION

Since popular fiction emerged in the Western literatures (i.e Great Britain and the US) as a distinct literary field, broadly speaking in late nineteenth century, discussions whether to accept popular genre novels as part of mainstream traditional literature or not have never ceased. Some literary critics, calling it pulp fiction, kitsch literature, escape fiction, distraction books, unserious fiction or lowbrow fiction castigated popular fiction for the understandable reason that popular fiction writers compromise quality, aesthetic and artistic elements for the sake of recording high sales and meeting their readers' or the publishers' demands. For this reason, in academia popular fiction works have not been well received and catalogued for long at university libraries. Yet, in the near history, the fate of popular fiction has begun to considerably change; several scholarly journals have been launched, and numerous theses whether at MA or PhD level have been written. Therefore, I will allocate a special coverage to the continuing debates about popular fiction in academia. In this paper, my argument is two-

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fold: first I maintain that though the advocates of literary fiction have justifiable reasons, the appearance of fiction as a literary tradition has never been completely independent of commercial interests, readership concerns and market; second, the genres of popular fiction have a promising future thanks to the growing interest among the young generation scholars in popular genres.

Now that we are teaching and studying popular fiction at universities, we need to know; what it is and what it is not; and how we should read/approach popular texts. In this chapter, I will present the commonly accepted definitions of popular fiction, whereby I open them to further debate drawing the point of focus to the similar and different aspects between literary tradition and popular fiction. I discuss how academia responded to popular fictions in an attempt to put emphasis on the rising inclination and interest among the new generation scholars in popular genre novels. Since popular fiction cannot be well comprehended and studied without referring to popular culture, I deploy the term of “culture industry” used by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in order to see how popular literature expands owing to the strong industrial support behind it, and thus conclude that there is a promising future for popular fiction studies across the world. Finally, with a focus on popular genres, I evaluate the ways how literary tradition and popular fiction are processed relating the matter again with academia.

## **DEFINING POPULAR FICTION**

It is a bit challenging to bring a clear-cut definition for popular fiction because it has too many genres and borrows from literary tradition and bears several common characteristics with substance literature. David Glover and Scott McCracken defined it as:

Popular fiction is frequently thought of as those books that everyone reads, usually imagined as a league table of

bestsellers whose aggregate figures dramatically illustrate an impressive ability to reach across wide social and cultural divisions with remarkable commercial success (2012, p. 1).

This definition seems quite open-ended as the authors confess in their paper, because literary authors may also be placed in bestseller lists. Therefore, most often popular fiction is defined and understood through being compared to literary fiction. So we should define it too. In his *Popular Fiction*, Ken Gelder defines it as: “By Literature, I mean the kind of writing (and let us stay with prose fiction broadly speaking) produced by, for example, Jane Austen, George Elliot, Henry James, James Joyce, William Faulkner” (2004, p. 11). Thus, Gelder draws attention to the classic literary authors who used a sophisticated language embedded with deep symbolisms, allegories and metaphors. Gelder adds these classics: “Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen, Arundhati Roy, Don DeLillo, Tobias Wolff and so on (2004, p. 11). He agrees that “The work of some of these writers (e.g. Austen) has certainly been popular, in which case it could reasonably be identified as Popular Literature” (11). Drawing attention to the decisive role of popular culture in the production of popular fiction, Connie Van Fleet defined it as: “Popular literature is the textual representation of popular culture” (2003, p. 64). Agreeing with Fleet, I see popular fiction as one of the subsets of popular culture along with other forms of art like movies, magazines, dailies, manga, cartoons, and etc., where culture industry, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s terms, often set the rules and standards, and want to add to the existing nomenclature on popular fiction the terms of: “taste literature” drawing on the classification made by Bennett M. Berger as taste culture (1977, p. 673) which was used to describe popular culture; and “trend literature”. Considering some literary tradition works which directly address readers and which became trends in their times or classics thus turned into immortal trends, objections to such

naming could be made. However, if we keep in mind the number of popular fictions which reach out millions of readers, the fact that they are related with fans' tastes becomes more clear, and when we look at the bestseller list, it too often changes and is updated which means it is inextricably linked with the rising trends.

## **HOW CAN WE DISTINGUISH POPULAR FICTION FROM LITERARY TRADITION?**

Some distinctions between the two spheres are clear in the definitions provided above. Yet we need further elaborations to reach a satisfying distinction. Fred Botting points out that:

In the realm of popular fiction it is obligatory to judge books by their covers. Advertised, demanding attention, the poster – one of several on boards along the platform – situates its subject in a world of commodities: bestselling, if nothing else, is concerned with shifting large numbers of units (2012, p. 159-60).

Here Botting attends two significant characteristics of popular fiction: surface and commercial interest. The interesting and catchy covers of popular novels are important in order to increase the sales, next comes advertisement. Popular fiction writers need advertisement to sell more, not to mention to be placed in bestseller lists. The more a novel is advertised, the more it is expected to sell. Similarly, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson draws attention to this distinction commenting: “Whereas “literature” is indifferent to (if not contemptuous of) the marketplace, original, and complex, popular fiction is simple, sensuous, exaggerated, exciting, and formulaic” so as to appeal more to the market (2010, p. 22). The dubious part of such a distinction is several literary authors, to count but a few, Elif Shafak, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, Margaret Atwood, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Jonathan Franzen, also promoted their books either on their personal websites, or at

book fairs, or their publishers advertise them in different environs like metro stations, billboards located at various points of cities, and airports for the same purpose of increasing the sales. Also, many reputed literary authors earn well or are sometimes listed in bestseller lists. To the point of fact, aiming at reaching high sales has always become a part and parcel of novel. Suffice it to remember two literary rivals and giants of the Victorian age; Charles Dickens and William M. Thackeray who were taking the pulse of their readers. Both authors regularly contributed to weekly and monthly installments, through which they could gauge their readers' reaction and the sales. As S. Diana Neill states, "Book-selling by the middle of the century had become a major industry in which not only were large fortunes made but power exercised as well" (2004, p. 173). Aware of this, Dickens and Thackeray wrote for middle class readers who were "prospering in commerce and industry" (Neill 2004, p. 172) and the role of this reader group in affecting the authors' works is not something ignorable as can be understood from Neill's words: "during the next forty years this class was to become the arbiter of literary taste, at any rate so far as the novel was concerned" (2004, p. 172). In brief, as rightly observed by Clive Bloom, "Heralded by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Mrs Braddon, the nature of authorship became intricately entwined with that of commercial enterprise: the author as entrepreneur" (2002, p. 10). Consequentially, we cannot say that there is a sharp distinction between literary authors and popular fiction writers in terms of advertisement and high sale records.

One other significant distinction is the close relationship between popular literature and entertainment industry which includes "popular narratives for film, radio, television and periodicals as well as in book form" (Montoro, 2015, p. 675). Such commercialization of popular genres is viewed by the defenders of literary fiction as a deficiency of the genres. Horkheimer

and Adorno, in particular, criticize the role of entertainment in making people forget their suffering and offering them the chance to “escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality” (2002, p. 116). Even though Horkheimer and Adorno do not enumerate popular fiction as a significant instrument in the hands of culture industry, it is not difficult to derive the implication in their words on the opening page of their famous essay titled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”: “Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (2002, p. 94). Since popular fiction is also a branch of culture whose commercial links are well-known, we can add popular fiction to the list given above.

There are of course some established genre writers like John Grisham who sold the film rights of his legal thriller *The Firm*, a *New York Times* bestseller for more than a month (Gelder, 2004, p. 104), even before it was published. We should, however, note that film industry has been adapting novels regardless of their category for a long time. What needs to be attended here is the number of sales rather than the fraction of the fictitious work. Filming of popular genres usually come after the books become bestsellers or reach a certain sales record. This is also true for literary fiction that is placed in the bestseller lists. If a literary fiction becomes a bestseller or reaches a high record of sales, it can attract filmmakers before long. Among numerous examples can be quickly counted *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, *The Mystic Masseur* by Nobel Prize winner V. S. Naipaul and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, not to mention nineteenth century Victorian Classics or Shakespeare’s plays. Worthy of note in this context is the concept of late capitalism which applies to literary narrative more than popular genres. Namely, many examples of literary tradition are filmed much later than they first appear which

is also dealt with their being catalogued at university libraries and being placed in school curriculae as well as high sales. Less catalogued and included popular genres are soon filmed if they register success in sales figures.

The readers of fiction and literature department students should also be aware of the fact that pulp fiction or lowbrow labeling does not account for all works produced under popular fiction because popular fiction is not a uniform phenomenon that comprises all popular novels. Pulp is, according to Clive Bloom, “the child of capitalism and is tied to the appearance of the masses and the urban, mediums of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such, it is the embodiment of capitalism aestheticized, consumerized and *internalized*” (1996, p. 14). This definition helps us see the links between industry, masses and popular fiction which has come to be associated more with genre fiction including, mysteries, detective, horror novel, romance, thriller, Westerns, science fiction, fantasy all of which are “known as formulaic and patterned fiction” (Fleet, 2003, p. 65) and etc., yet, there is also mainstream fiction or novel which is described by Fleet as:

These works are intended for a popular audience and the emphasis is on characterization, plot development, thematic relevance, narrative style and, to some extent, originality. They are not, however, held to standards of literary quality such as unique style, social impact, or lasting significance and tend to be less complex, demanding, and self-conscious than novels categorized as literary works (2003, p. 65).

To give some examples for this second category, we can enumerate, among others, *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, *Where The Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens, *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami. Furthermore, genre novels, the label most often used for popular fictions is not a decisive phrase to explicate the distinction between literary fiction and popular novels. Such

that substance literature has also its genres like Bildungsroman, historical novel, epic, and romance, some of which are also found in popular fiction like romance. The history of genre narrative is not a recent phenomenon in that it dates far back to Ancient Greeks who first classified drama mainly dividing it into: tragedy and comedy. Genre is therefore, as Lisa Fletcher called, a “weighty term with a complicated theoretical history” (2016: 2), which forces us to revise our main classification of popular fictions under the category of genre fiction. Yet, here, I do not deny the plethora of genres in popular fiction, each of which has a kind of formulaic structure, but I want to remind that to belong to a genre or to bear some characteristics of a genre should not be the first criteria for us to evaluate or categorize a work of fiction. For as Jacques Derrida remarks, “Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text” (1980, p. 212). In academia, today, we see more specified genres in fiction (both literary and popular), and it seems quite a high probability in the coming days to meet new genres depending on the cultural, technological, environmental, social, economic and scientific changes and developments. So, in our readings of and studies on works of fiction regardless of their genre, we can take Derrida’s words as a guiding admonishment.

Among the advocates of literary fiction, or avant-garde art are undoubtedly found the elite classes and the elitist intellectuals. Elitist intellectuals and elite classes have come to be seen by many scholars including Pierre Bourdieu as the flagbearers of avant-garde art or highbrow literature. Bourdieu builds a relationship between the consumption/purchase of cultural products and the degree of economic welfare and intellectual background or cultural preparedness of people, thus:

Bourdieu had seen that cultural production (e.g. cinema, television, any kind of literary activity and so on) was the result of a range of different cultural, social positions, each of



which is related (conflictually or otherwise) to one another. An obvious example is the distinction between high and low cultural production: for example, opera on the one hand, and soap opera on the other. Obviously, opera is a form of high cultural production, usually expensive to see and requiring a significant amount of cultural-social education from its audience, which remains small and dedicated. Opera audiences are likely to be reasonably well heeled, probably well educated and (at the very least) middle class; opera itself, so cost-intensive that it usually needs financial support from the state in order to get off the ground, thus stages itself as an 'event' (quoted in Gelder, 2004, pp.12-13).

This observation by Bourdieu also holds consummately true for literary works. In other words, while substance literature requires a certain level of preparedness and intellectual background, popular fiction can be more easily read and understood by almost all groups of readers.

None the less, defending an argument in parallel with Horkheimer and Adorno who professed that masses are "mere material that those in control can raise one of them up to their heaven and cast him or her out again" (2002, p. 117-18), I want to underline that the business elite consisting of industry owners, namely, the capitalists and established aristocracy have also a share and role in the production of popular literature products. Based on Bourdieu's assumptions, we can cautiously say that these elite groups may not prefer to read or read less pop genres, but it is also the business and capitalist elites who are running the sector of popular culture, owning numerous cinemas, film companies, publishing houses, pulp magazines, fanzines and etc., which translates that without their support, popular genres would hardly survive, reach their popularity in the West and across the world today. It is therefore they have vital role in the production and dissemination of popular fictions to the globe.

Another common point between literary fiction and popular genres is that they both quite often take their topics from contemporary events and developments. For example, depending on the rising climate crisis and environmental problems, we see literary novels that address environ issues, in other words, eco-fiction, which generously borrows from science fiction and fantasy. This means even if pop genres are not directly made objects of academic studies, they are indirectly involved while we are reading eco-fiction, or utopian or dystopian fiction, or novels about pandemics. To the knowledge of all, popular genres have their aficionados who follow their favorite writers and queue for buying their loved books. These fans can, in Horkheimer and Adorno's terminology, be placed in avid consumers of culture industry. For these scholars, there exists a kind of ideological truce between these conformist consumers, here I mean the readers, who are willing to buy whatever is served to them, and the producers (2002). From this perspective, popular fiction readers are reduced to passive consumers, they buy what the industry offers without questioning or taking the product undertake a quality control. This may sound an appropriate criticism, yet we should be aware of the fact that literary authors have also their loyal readers just like the popular fiction aficionado.

Even if popular genres are criticized for their focus on plot rather than character development, in terms of immortal characters, we see that both literary spheres have their immortal characters. For literary fiction, to count but a few, we see: Raskolnikov, Othello, Hamlet, David Copperfield and etc.; for pop genres among many others are found: Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, Lestat, Harry Potter and etc. In this sense, we can draw popular fiction a bit close to literary tradition keeping in our mind the words by Ezra Pound as, "Literature is news that stays new" (quoted in Germain, 1977,

p. 37). Yet, I should state that, with this I am not trying to equate literary fiction characters with the popular ones, but what I want to underline is, unlike as it is supposed by many scholars, it is also possible to find popular fiction works and characters that continue to live by becoming a source of inspiration for prospective novels, in other words they become the classics of the genre in which they are created. This means not all popular fiction works are consumed and thrown away immediately by the readers or by the potential popular fiction writers. There is still much to say about this topic, but I will turn back to it in a later section under processing of popular fictions.

While reading and understanding popular fiction and literary tradition, one of the most significant distinctions to be considered is, I think, the exaggeration factor. Both literature forms have connections with industry but, popular has more, both utilize and are affected by contemporary issues like pandemics but pop genres more, both can be filmed but popular genres more, both can be studied in academic but popular less, both can be read for entertainment but popular narratives more, both can contribute to their readers' professional, academic and social skills, but literary tradition more, both can be commercialized but popular more. Publicity is, as Australian novelist Mervyn Blake states, "an author's very breath of life" (quoted in Nile 1998, p. 66), but it is more true for popular fiction.

## **POPULAR FICTION AND ACADEMIA**

Popular fiction has been seen by several literary critics as borrowing from literary fiction but never carrying the same quality literary fiction has. However, we should be awakened to the fact that in academia, the conventional firm attitude towards popular fiction has been broken. We see lots of scholarly journals published, to count but a few, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Crime Fiction*

*Studies*, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, all of which address one or more particular genres of popular fiction. In addition to these we can count: *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Studies in Popular Culture*, *The Journal of American Culture*, and *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Furthermore, many reputed scholars have produced a bulk of academic canon over the popular genres since late twentieth century. Today, at Oxford, we have J. R. R. Tolkien Professorship of English Literature, which is yet another example that demonstrates the indelible influence of popular fiction on academia.

Since popular fiction, as Peter Swirski notes, is “by now a truly international cultural and business phenomenon which transcends all national, political, or language barriers” (1999, p. 3) owing to the strong support given in the first world, the presence of a need in academic to seriously address the cultural values wrought and produced in popular fiction circles is undeniable. Besides, it seems quite possible that in the developing nations where popular culture is gaining ground, we may expect to see universities include popular literature and genres in their curriculum—now in many Turkish universities popular literature has already been included in the curriculae of literature (particularly in English Language and Literature) departments, and launch scholarly journals as found in the US and elsewhere.

Popular genres are largely shaped, and produced depending upon the current trends and events. Accordingly, with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemics, many popular novels like *The Wrack* by John Bierce and films like *The Sadness* by Rob Jabbaz were produced<sup>2</sup>. Similarly a large number of literary authors

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<sup>2</sup> However, before the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, there were also a vast number of both popular genre fiction works like *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981), a science fiction novel by Dean Koontz, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, a science fiction (also categorized in fantasy fiction) and literary fiction novels such as *A*

penned novels referring to COVID-19 or previous plagues. As an example, Orhan Pamuk wrote in 2021 *Nights of Plague*, a novel he had contemplated much before the outbreak of COVID-19, but what's common with popular fiction here is, as Pamuk expresses, he was frequently inquired, just like popular fiction writers, by his publisher and friend circle who were familiar with the content of the book about the time of completion as goes: "Over the last two months, friends and family, editors and journalists who know the subject of that novel, 'Nights of Plague,' have been asking me a barrage of questions about pandemics" (2020). This example also shows how the popular events also affect the production stage of literary works. Here, however, I do not mean that the author conceded the content, aesthetic, and artistic quality of his work, but rather I want to designate that contemporary events/developments may also influence or give direction to literary authors. The other common point and confidential link between the two literary fields that became more apparent with the pandemics in 2019 is the explosion of academic studies that draw on the fictional works regardless of genre. Several scholars revisited pandemic or plague stories without exception. This means, here and there, the ways of literary fiction and popular narratives, and that of the scholars who study popular fiction and literary tradition intersect; as a result, both stories and scholars may quite naturally refer to one another. Accordingly, there is a bright future for popular fiction in our world entangled by such issues as pandemics, diseases, climate changes, droughts, immigration waves, famines, starvation, because these are frequently deployed by popular genres. As demonstrated in many researches and papers, during global COVID-19 pandemic, people read mostly books on pandemics, and watched films about pandemics, and in academia, COVID-19 pandemics has

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*Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) by Daniel Defoe, and *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus. The recent global pandemic just repopularized it as a major topic to read and write about, namely recapitalized it, which indicates that late capitalism may work in both camps.

become one of the most researched and studied topics regardless of academic discipline. Of course, literary authors before Pamuk wrote about different diseases like Daniel Defoe, but what seems interesting is the publication of literary novels on diseases with the outbreak of COVID, a situation that compels us to consider the option if literary authors like pop fiction writers follow the current events or developments while composing their works. If that's the case, it means the source of inspiration for both literary authors and popular genre writers is the same. Yet, the style, content, and narrative techniques are for sure immensely different from each other. This convergence between the two literary fractions demonstrates that the unprecedented and extraordinary events, ideas, symbols, figures and characters of popular genres today, also enter the literary tradition as central topics notwithstanding the huge differences between the styles of pop genres which generously uses exaggerations, and literary fiction.

The fact that some literary authors also penned and still pen popular genre books blurs the lines between two narrative streams. To count but a few, we can mention a famous Kenyan writer Wahome Mutahi whose works include: *Three Days on the Cross* (1991), *How to be a Kenyan* (1997), *Whispers and Cammisasius* (2002). For his novel *Three Days on the Cross* he won Jomo Kenyatta Prize for literature in 1993. Yet, at the same time Muhati wrote a weekly newspaper fiction called *Whispers*, "a 'popular' fiction column published by the *Sunday Nation*, the largest circulating newspaper in East and Central Africa" (Ogola, 2002, p. 48).

This also means that we are required to revise our methodologies while performing textual analyses. More manifestly putting, shall we read the popular fiction written by literary authors as independent from their other literary texts, or should we read and analyze them with reference to their literary works? To the knowledge of all, these are the questions we can answer by

referring to new historicism and new criticism. New historicism is defined by *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as: “A term coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt to describe a form of academic criticism which emphasizes the study of literature within a historical and social context ” (2013). With this definition, thus it becomes once more clear that we cannot ignore the literary authors’ genre writings while trying to interpret their literary works, the vice versa is equally true. From this perspective, then we, as the academics who are trying to apply different theories to texts, have no way but to consider the other works of the authors we have picked while performing our researches. Indeed, that is an accustomed attitude adopted by most scholars who utilize this method in their MA and PhD theses, sometimes in articles, not to mention monographs. The other approach that gained acceptance in American academy and the world in 1930s and 1940s is new criticism which is defined by *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) as:

New Criticism treats the literary work of art as a stand-alone, self-sufficient object that can only be properly appreciated in isolation. Careful attention to the specificity of language use, a process usually referred to as ‘close reading’, should tell the reader everything they need to know about a text (2018).

In parallel with this definition, Isabel Hofmeyr conveys the common attitude adopted by some contemporary scholars as: “Texts appear to be their own agents and are invested with extraordinary power in terms of which they can ‘create obedient subjects’” (2001, p. 322). For those who defend reading literary works of the authors who write in both streams independent of their popular works, new criticism seems the ideal option. Both approaches have, without doubt, their cons and mins, but it is not the mission of this essay to elaborate them all. Especially for poetry, this method can be effectively used, but in fiction we need

further historical and social context. What I want to emphasize is, today in our readings and studies at higher education, we can plausibly merge literary texts referring to popular genres and vice versa on account of the fact that popular fiction has already been an indispensable part of our cultural and intellectual life even identity as underlined by Bennet and Martin:

In the many and varied forms in which they are produced and circulated – by the cinema, broadcasting institutions and the publishing industry – popular fictions saturate the rhythms of everyday life. In doing so, they help to define our sense of ourselves, shaping our desires, fantasies, imagined pasts and projected futures. An understanding of such fiction – of how they are produced and circulated, organized and received is (...) central to an understanding of ourselves; of how those selves have been shaped and of how they might be changed (Bennett & Martin, 1990, p. ix).

This may suggest that I am supporting the first line of thought (new historicism), yet I should state that to prefer one or two depends on several parameters like the genre of literary writing whether it is a poem or novel, and whether the text itself is sufficient or not for the reader.

In this study, I neither intend to extol the kind of works produced under popular fiction nor degrade or deride them in favor of literary tradition, but what I want to emphasize is, whether we take into serious or not, the genre narratives are becoming more and more integrated every passing day into the mainstream traditional literature owing to the youth who “have a vested interest, a voice and a stake in the production and consumption of popular culture” (Schultz & Throop, 2010: 319). This also means young readers and scholars are more apt to read and study popular literature, which beyond doubt, accelerates the integration process of popular texts into academia. Robert G. Sewell indicates this rising interest of the



Americans in popular genres in the 1970s in the US: “The rapid rise of scholarship and teaching in popular culture during the 1970s has leveled off but the demand for these courses is steady and strong” (1984, p. 452). Hence, literary scholars, graduate and undergraduate students who are surrounded by popular genre books need an introductory source like a guidebook that offers a balanced reading of popular fiction and substance literature with an unjaundiced eye and that will help clear the confusions about the position of popular literature. This paper unassumingly attempts to fill the gap in this field.

In academia graduate students who have profusely read and watched popular genres may normally prefer to study their favorite genre for their thesis projects. This is what I have come across very recently. No need to mention their names, one of my MA students wanted to study a popular genre like mystery thriller. Actually this is one of the factors that triggered me to take a stock of popular fiction along with the need for undergraduate students a well-groomed introductory essay into popular literature. Ill-disposed though I was to accepting such a thesis project at first, it did not take long for me to embark on checking the literature created in this realm and accept my student’s project. The earlier readings of my student’s of mystery thriller novels can be conceived amateurish, yet his thesis study means certainly a professional work that will contribute to the composition of a canon in academia. And yes such theses will be catalogued at university libraries and be references for further studies. In this sense popular fiction is a brother to literature but a junior one. Working like an elementary stage, it may both inspire and prepare students for their future studies and academic works.

Next but not least, since interdisciplinary studies are promoted in the groves of academe, and accordingly in vogue today, it is not uncommon to see theses or research articles conducted espousing film/media studies and literary studies. Even at both undergraduate

and graduate levels, degrees are granted in film and literary studies in a combined model including but not limited to: BA in the Film and Literary Studies at Leiden University, BA in English Literature and Film Studies at Keele University, MA in Film and Literature at York University, PhD in English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, and Combined PhD in Comparative Literature and Film and Media Studies at Yale University. As a result, there are countless theses and scholarly papers published in this field, which can also be valued within the scope of cultural studies if not directly within literary studies. To the point of fact, this latter sentiment is adopted by many scholars who prefer to “ignore by and large popular literature” preferring it to be placed in the domain of cultural studies (1999, p. 2) as Swirski expressed in his essay. From the perspective of interdisciplinary studies, popular narratives can be read and studied by being married with film, media and cultural studies. One good example of such a study belongs to Fletcher who says:

the fundamental premise of her book, *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings* is that popular fiction studies can be enriched by closer engagement with key terms from the lexicon of spatial and geographical studies, and, just as importantly, that scholars of popular fiction have much to offer geocriticism and the geohumanities more broadly (2016, p. 3).

As demonstrated in this paper, considering the irreversible exchanges between literary fiction and popular genres and the large number of convergences between the two as listed above, popular genres can reasonably be read, critiqued and studied with reference to literary studies. Since 1960s in particular, as Sewell informs us, several university libraries have gone into action by establishing special collections where “An extensive collection of novels on which films had been based” (1984, p. 450) was kept.

## **POPULAR FICTION AND POPULAR CULTURE**

Given that popular fiction is the product of popular culture backed up by capitalist ideology, I will critique popular genres within the context of Anglo-American popular culture. Even though “the cultural formation designated by ‘popular fiction’ has changed over time and varies according to its cultural and geographical situation” (Bianchi & Zanettin 2018, p. 793), popular literature spreads to the rest of the world as part of popular culture that we can posit in American cultural imperialism. From the leftist perspective adopted by Horkheimer and Adorno, we can understand the expansion of popular culture and fiction studies across the world as a consequence of US-led Western cultural imperialism. In other words, the culture and cultural products of the US and other Western capitalist countries first hypnotize the masses at home and then invasively infiltrate into the culture and academia of the developing and underdeveloped countries. For it is an undeniable fact that popular literature flourished in the US and Europe in late nineteenth century owing to the “increased levels of literacy and urbanization and by new technologies of industrial publishing” (Bianchi & Zanettin 2018, p. 793-4) and has loomed constantly large since then across the world as a significant part and parcel of the popular culture.

In the same vein, it is from the capitalist developed countries that popular genres are served to the rest of the world. It is for this reason that, as Schneider-Mayerson expresses, “Popular fiction as a general object of study has rarely been explored, in part because it is often subsumed under the umbrella of popular culture” (2010, p. 21). On the other hand, Schneider-Mayerson also makes it clear that “Following the model of E.R Thompson, Richard Hoggart, Althusser and above all Antonio Gramsci, authors such as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and John Storey credited popular culture with political as well as aesthetic significance” (2010, p. 24), which

translates that if popular culture is a worthy object of reading and analyzing due to the political and aesthetic significance attributed to it by several noted scholars, a subset of it, popular fiction can also be approached with academic lenses.

Though it is the masses that popular culture appeals most, it is a controversial issue whether it is the masses who determine the trajectory of popular productions or the business and ruling elite as implied by Horkheimer and Adorno. The industry may of course consider the interests, tastes and habits of its consumers while designing forthcoming products, yet, we should at the same time notice that the mechanisms of production and advertisement are not in the hands of masses but in those of few capitalist elites. When we look at the production centers from where popular culture is primarily served we see that it is the capitalist countries, say, the US, Great Britain, and etc, which determine the contents of the popular genres to a large extent by the hands of dominant classes or business elites. In this sense, it is worth remembering what Horkheimer and Adorno alleged:

Whereas the mechanism of supply and demand is today disintegrating in material production, in the superstructure it acts as a control on behalf of the rulers. The consumers are the workers and salaried employees, the farmers and petty bourgeois. Capitalist production hems them in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them” (2002, 106)

In parallel with the abundance of cultural and literary production owing to the enormous industrial support in these developed nations, popular fiction studies arise and are promoted first and foremost in these nations, but for sure do not remain limited to the first world but expeditiously spreads the rest of the world.

Because the underdeveloped and developing countries try to keep up with the developed capitalist global North in technology,

science, education and culture, popular fictions/studies spread across the world so fast. Popular genre novels are translated into numerous languages and reach hundred thousands or millions of readers, whereby popular fiction enters into academic sphere in different parts of the world faster than literary works. For this justifiable reason, popular fiction is, as Glover and McCracken express, “an increasingly globalised field” (2012, p. 9). Consequentially, though popular literature can be regionally studied, its very nature requires referring to the global context.

## **PROCESSING POPULAR FICTION AND SUBSTANCE LITERATURE**

Though Gelder and many other scholars underscored in the processing of popular fiction the commercial interests and benefits, I will weigh them on academic scales. Some critics like Horkheimer and Adorno who favor literary fiction complain about the passivity of popular fiction readers, comparing them with passive consumers of capitalist production system. On the contrary, for John Hartley, readers, audiences and consumers of popular art forms are also active in meaning-making process, as can be derived from his words; “Publics and consumers are not simply people waiting out there for something to consume, but on the contrary, they are brought into being as consumers and publics by the process of cultural production” (1996, p. 47). Adding to Hartley, I want to accentuate that popular genres, by shaping their readers’ or audience’s perceptions and attitudes toward life and events, may also aid them develop some of their skills. In other saying, the group of people who regularly read or watch such genres as science fiction, fantasy, horror, apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and zombie fiction, may adapt themselves better to the changing contemporary world which is frequently inflicted by wars, famines, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes or

other natural or man-made catastrophes because they read or see similar unusual and horrible things in advance, which acclimates them to real life disorders or calamities. To give a specific example, in their article “Pandemic Practice: Horror Fans and Morbidly Curious Individuals are More Psychologically Resilient during the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Scrivner et al. conclude that “trait morbid curiosity was associated with positive resilience and interest in pandemic films during the pandemic” (2021, p. 1), and thus hypothesize that “exposure to frightening fictions allow audiences to practice effective coping strategies that can be beneficial in real-world situations” (2021, p. 1). Keeping this postulation in mind, we can say the readers of pop fiction are not always passive consumers but at the same time active practitioners of what they have learnt by reading or watching. In brief, processing of popular fictions is not always like the consumption of market products. They change and contribute to the development of some important skills, formation of public opinion and cultural assets which have so far come to be associated with literary tradition.

Popular genres deploy such themes as sexual abuse, assault, rape, violence, all of which allow themselves to be made objects of scientific studies within such fields as trauma studies, psychoanalysis, feminist studies in particular, consequently, in terms of subject matter, popular genres can compete with literary fiction. As one of the most reputed critics of literary fiction, Henry James notes, “plethora of historically interesting observations of settings, social relations, and events in the novel all exist within an artistic matrix; and they require careful study as part of that often intricate aesthetic context” (quoted Allen 1983, p. 236), where James emphasizes the nature of the readers’ and scholars’ response to the given literary texts. It is also clear that these elements are and can plausibly be employed by the popular genre narratives. Accordingly, the biggest distinction between literary tradition and

popular genres is not the setting, theme, or topic but the artistic and aesthetic style and language for which popular fiction has up to now been chastised by numerous scholars. So the question we need to ask is who studies popular genres usually plot driven, easy to understand and theoretically analyze? Who studies literary fiction difficult to grasp and analyze?

Although works of popular fiction are mostly processed in popular magazines, whether released by private corporations or universities, like “The New Yorker”, “Paris Review”, “Ploughshares”, “Harper’s Magazine”, “Yale Review”, “Georgia Review”, “Kafa (Head)”, and “Bavul (Baggage)” recently, we have begun to see that they are more frequently valued in academic community, in journals, at universities as MA or PhD Thesis, academic books and etc. We should also see the fact that some of these magazines are published by the reputed universities of the world, which thus enter academic spheres for further processing. Further, in the contributor list of some of the popular fiction magazines are found established literary authors. Such names as Ernest Hemingway, J. D. Salinger, John Updike and Vladimir Nabokov contributed to The New Yorker magazine. In Turkey, the reputed novelists like Orhan Pamuk, poets like Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca and Can Yücel wrote to a popular literature magazine called Öküz (Ox). Accordingly, the fact that universities and literary authors take place in the production and consumption phases of popular literature both accelerate and facilitate the transition from academic sphere to the popular one. One advantage provided by popular magazines to these literary writers is beyond doubt the large readership. Those who do not read their literary works read what they write in popular outlets with a plain style in a simple language, which may trigger the readers to the authors’ other works written in traditional literary style. The vice versa is also quite possible such that literary fiction readers and academics who study literary works can read and

study popular genres. As mentioned above, there are numerous academic popular fiction journals and publications contributed by the experts in literary fiction. Therefore, as it is impossible to entirely isolate the literary authors from popular narrative platforms, it is equally impossible to utterly isolate the popular fiction readers from literary realm.

University libraries form one of the crucial processing phases of literary works. It goes without saying that literary fiction has been collected and stored in academic libraries for long. What about the collection of popular fiction? Do university libraries have collections or shelves spared for popular genres? The quick answer is very little at the best because of the obvious reason: “The perception that popular fiction collections do not support the missions of public or academic libraries is commonplace and the impact is severe” (Fleet, 2003, p. 74), which basically stems from the above given assumptions about popular fiction. Yet, we should note that this space allocated at libraries for popular fictions is getting broadened owing to the rising interest of the young scholars in studying popular genres. Now that students particularly in English or American Departments are studying popular genres and mainstream popular fiction for their MA and PhD theses, the need to create a collection for popular fiction is apparent despite the fact that “The mass market paperback and pulp magazine formats of most popular literature genres make preservation and conservation a universal problem for all libraries” (Sewell, 1984, p. 459). Thanks to the developments in the field of digital humanities, it is not difficult to foresee this storage problem can be easily overcome, yet we should also be aware that there is a worldwide tendency in printing sector encouraged by ecological and eco-critical campaigns toward using less wood, which means more electronic publications. There are numerous publishers that publish and sell electronic books. Indeed



it is not new to see arguments developed in this conjuncture. In his comprehensive book, *The Death of Literature*, Alvin B. Kernan attends to this changing trend in publishing sector: “And in the late twentieth century print culture is giving way to an electronic culture that stores and transmits information by means of such electric devices as the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and computer” (1990, p. 128). As it is clear, both literary fiction and popular genre novels have been for some time past stored and published in online platforms. Today whether a novel is published in print as hard copy or paperback has less importance so long as the electronic version is available. Correspondingly, the characteristic of disposability attributed by Walter Nash (1990) to popular fiction slowly but surely loses its validity.

Also worthy of note, popular fiction constitutes one of the vital veins of contemporary global popular culture, namely the culture promoted and patronized by the developed nations like the USA, therefore as Connie Van Fleet states, popular fiction can be used “as primary source material that reveals the nature of American culture” (2003, p. 64). Furthermore, within global context, as Christopher Pawling notes, “the analysis of popular narrative can provide a crucial link between the field of literature and other aesthetic modes of communication such as film and television” (1984, p. 2). This being the case, why don't the university libraries provide access into secondary sources that will support thesis or academic studies? In addition, popular genres have their classics too like *Sherlock Holmes*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and etc., which have been shelved in public and university libraries. This means academic libraries will sooner or later spare more room for popular fiction categories, which translates in the context of our discussion to the processing fields of literary fiction and popular fiction will better converge on each other.

## **CONCLUSION**

As demonstrated in this paper, it is not an easy task to distinguish popular fiction from literary tradition with clear-cut lines by solely relying on the given differences and similarities between the two because there are a lot of gray zones between the two. Style, depth, language and aesthetic concerns are unequivocally still the most dominant benchmarks most scholars cleave to while praising literary fiction. On the other hand, we should also acknowledge that the material or commercial interests which have come to be associated with popular genres have also interested and still interest literary tradition authors, a situation which augments the confusion.

Considering the rising bulk of academic studies, namely, books, articles, MA theses and PhD dissertations along with the establishment of independent programs and departments directed at popular fiction, today we do not have the luxury of ignoring or casting aside the prodigious canon of popular fictions just calling them trash literature. In addition to a wide number of interdisciplinary studies conducted on popular genres, literary fiction, also allows itself to be comparatively analyzed or critiqued with popular fiction. Ultimately, as Pawling notes,

Like all forms of cultural creation, popular fiction both reflects social meanings/mores and, perhaps more importantly, *intervenes* in the life of society by organising and interpreting experiences which have previously been subjected only to partial reflection. Thus, to 'understand' popular fiction is to examine it as a form of cultural production and as a *process of meaning creation* which offers a particular way of thinking and feeling about one's relationship to oneself, to others, and to society as a whole (1984, p. 4).

As for academia, the former big gap between these two literary spheres has been progressively being filled with the emerging

researches and studies carried out in the field of popular fiction studies, thus libraries have begun to spare more room to popular works of art under such categories as rare works and special collection. In brief, popular fiction which was once derided for its close affiliation with commerce and capitalist industry, and for its formulaic simple plot-driven structure, today stands as a promising field of literature not only as an instrument of entertainment but also as an object of academic scrutiny.

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