



---

## **POPULAR FICTION: SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**



**Mangrule Toufik Maheboob,**

Ph.D. in English,

Mahatma Gandhi Mahavidyalaya,

Ahmedpur, Dist.-Latur (MS).

### **ABSTRACT**

Popular fiction is a very significant area of literature and literary studies. At the same time it is very complicated to be defined as it is the part of ever-pervading popular culture. The field of popular fiction is a very notable part of popular culture. As popular culture is widespread and ever-pervading, popular fiction is also very vast and wide. As there is no clear boundary between the culture and popular culture, it is also very difficult to define popular fiction due to its all-pervading nature. Popular fiction is always seen and defined in contrast with literary fiction. However, many books of literary fiction share the elements of popular fiction. Similarly, many books of popular fiction include the elements of literary fiction. Hence, there is not a clear boundary between literary fiction and popular fiction. Due to this, it becomes very difficult to define the field of popular fiction and distinguish it from literary fiction. However, this difficult task of defining popular fiction can be made something easy with the help of the theory of popular fiction as proposed by some critics who have tried to define popular fiction as a special kind of cultural practice. The present study

incorporates the theory of popular fiction in the light of the perspectives of some of the prominent critics, Ken Gelder, Thomas Roberts and Victor Neuburg. These perspectives are very helpful to understand the concept of popular fiction as a special kind of literary and cultural practice.

### **KEYWORDS**

Popular fiction, culture, practice, literary fiction, theory, literary study

### **RESEARCH PAPER**

Popular fiction has been a very integral part of literature and literary studies. However, it has remained neglected for a long time due to the negligence of the literary critics who have always tried to prove the superiority of literary fiction over popular fiction. Despite the long-time negligence, popular fiction has established its own identity as one of the significant aspects of literature. Hence, in the contemporary times, popular fiction is being studied as one of the noteworthy elements of literature and literary studies. Many critics have tried to study popular fiction from various perspectives. In the book, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Gelder has made an attempt to define the field of popular fiction. Perceiving the difficulty in defining popular fiction, Gelder notes, “The field of popular fiction is so immense that even those commentators who try to account for the whole of it inevitably reveal only the tip of the iceberg” (3). However, Gelder has made an insightful attempt to explain the distinguishing features of popular fiction in a comprehensive way. He views popular fiction in terms of popular culture. Likewise, another important critic, Thomas Roberts has attempted to define popular fiction in his book *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, as a special kind of literary activity.

#### **Popular Fiction as ‘Popular Literature’:**

Popular literature has always been the integral part of human life. Every period of history has had popular literature in some way or the other. Since the ancient times, popular literature has remained one of the important aspects of human culture. “Popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favour with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain” (Encyclopaedia Britannica online). Popular literature is the literature which is written for a wide range of people. It includes any form of literature, such as, poetry, play or novel, written with the sense of popularity. The

primary aim behind the writing of popular literature is to reach a large number of people and find favour with them. Surveying the history of popular literature in England, Victor Neuburg examines in the book, *POPULAR LITERATURE: A HISTORY AND GUIDE* (1977), that “popular literature can be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure. Such a reader may, of course, come from any class in society, although, the primary appeal of popular literature has been to the poor- and by the eighteenth century also to the children. Generally this literature has comprised non-establishment, non-official publications, but it has also included the religious tracts which one group in society thought that another group ought to read for its own good- and these were distributed in extremely large numbers” (12-13). From the above observation, two important aspects of popular literature can be noted. First, popular literature is written for all, not for the selected few people; and second, though popular literature is most often a non-official publication, it may also include the official publication intended to be spread among the large number of people.

Popular fiction has become synonymous to popular literature in the present times. In general, the term ‘popular fiction’ is used in the place of popular literature, as popular literature is widely an invented and imaginative writing dealing with the world of fiction. Neuburg remarks, “fiction became of increasing importance in popular literature, and its growth, at a romantic and sensational level, amongst unsophisticated and working-class readers was phenomenal” (144). Thus, fiction is a very important aspect of popular literature. At the same time, the word ‘fiction’ is usually used for the imaginative works in the prose form. In the present scenario, the term ‘fiction’ is especially used alternatively for the ‘novel’. Hence, Ken Gelder uses the term ‘popular fiction’ in contrast with other literature which is not meant to be popular. He uses the word ‘Literature’ to demonstrate the literature other than popular literature. To study the logics and practices of the popular novel as the contemporary appeal, he deliberately uses the term ‘popular fiction’ instead of popular literature. He points out, “Literature deploys a set of logics and practices that are different in kind to those deployed in the field of popular fiction” (*Popular Fiction* 12). Hence, as the present research is concerned with the novel form, the term ‘popular fiction’ is more suitable in the place of popular literature. Similarly, popular fiction is variously known as:

pulp fiction, junk fiction, paperback fiction, genre fiction, category fiction etc. All these names are used alternatively for popular fiction.

### **Popular Fiction and Literary Fiction:**

In the academic discourse, the terms popular fiction and literary fiction are used in a contrasted way. Both are considered as the opposite of each other, as they have their own distinguishing features. It does not mean that both don't share each other's features. Many a times those distinguishing features overlap each other. However, popular fiction is variously defined in contrast with its counterparts. In the book *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (1990), Thomas J. Roberts has distinguished 'popular fiction' from 'learned fiction'. He views learned fiction as 'canonical' and 'serious' which is "written for its own small, highly educated readership" (1-2). Roberts notes that this type of fiction is studied in the classroom and needs to pay serious attention for the understanding. On the other hand, he views popular fiction as 'plain fiction' which "does not ask to be read more than once: it certainly does not expect to be studied" (2). He also terms popular fiction as 'junk fiction' which "has many names, each with its own nuance: genre fiction, vernacular fiction, category fiction, paperback fiction and others besides" (2).

Ken Gelder has observed that popular fiction can be distinguished from literary fiction using some of the unique features. He has analysed popular fiction in the context of 'the field of cultural production'. He makes the distinction between popular fiction and literary fiction on the basis of the distinguishing features of 'low cultural production' and 'high cultural production' respectively. The features of high and low cultural productions proposed by Pierre Bourdieu have been used by Gelder for defining popular fiction in contrast with literary fiction. Gelder uses the word 'Literature' instead of literary fiction for all the literature except 'popular fiction'. He defines popular fiction as something different from the rest of literature.

### **The Field of Cultural Production:**

In the introductory chapter of his book, Gelder declares that 'industry' and 'entertainment' are the two important key words that help in defining and understanding the field of popular fiction. He evaluates the term 'culture industry' and analyses popular fiction in that context. The term 'culture industry' has been developed and negatively used by the twentieth century prominent cultural critics, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. According to them, popular cultural

productions are the result of 'culture industry' where the cultural productions are commercialized with the purpose of earning. In the industry, the importance is given to a large number of productions. Things are produced on a large scale for appealing the masses. Gelder mentions that popular fiction can be best understood in relation with the 'culture industry'. He notes that popular fiction, being a popular cultural product, relies upon production, marketing and distribution. On the other hand, literary fiction is not written with any of such purpose. Industry and profit do not matter for literary fiction whereas they are the integral part of popular fiction.

Gelder observes that popular fiction can be understood properly and comprehensively in terms of 'the field of cultural production', a very crucial term defined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his essay *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. According to him, cultural production, for example, cinema, television or any literary activity etc. is the result of different cultural-social positions. These cultural productions are directly or indirectly related to one another. Bourdieu divides these cultural productions as 'high cultural production' and 'low cultural production'.

Gelder observes that for Bourdieu, the field of high cultural production is 'autonomous' in nature. The receivers of these productions are very small in number. These productions are for the selected and limited people in the society. He calls it as the 'restricted field of production'. The production is restricted to a small number of people. He argues that a good amount of education and intellect is required for the understanding of 'high cultural productions'. Here, the preference is given to the 'elites' who are very few in number. They control and restrict the field of production. Hence, this avant-garde cultural production is 'autonomous' due to its indifferent nature to the buying and reading or viewing public.

The cultural productions, such as, works of visual arts, opera, experimental media, art house cinema etc. are produced for the selective 'elites' in the society. They do not rely on the large number of readership or viewership. They are contemptuous of marketplace and profit. Their production is not for the market as they are not produced with the purpose of getting profit. One may ask the question what the reason lays behind the production of such high cultural productions. The answer would be; it is the sense of 'creativity' that motivates the artist to create something for 'self-gratification'. Hence, the sense of creativity and disinterest in profit limits the field of

high cultural production as the 'field of restricted production'. It is opposite to the field of 'low cultural production', which is open in nature.

Bourdieu defines the field of 'low cultural production' in contrast with the field of 'high cultural production'. According to him, the field of 'low cultural production' is 'heteronomous' in nature. As opposite to the high cultural productions, this field is not limited to the small and selective number of the people. Instead, it is open to a large number of people where the productions are produced for immense readership or viewership. The question arises why there is a large scale production for a large number of people. The answer can be; the primary reason behind such a large scale production is 'industry'. Things are produced for earning money and getting profit. Bourdieu calls this field as the field of 'large scale production'. Commercial success is the main intention behind the production of things on a larger scale. Things are produced with the purpose of broad-based distribution and large scale consumption.

According to Gelder, popular fiction rests fairly on the characteristics of 'heteronomous cultural production', whereas literary fiction on the characteristics of 'autonomous cultural production' as stated by Pierre Bourdieu. This can be understood in terms of 'industry', 'popularity' and 'entertainment'. These terms are very helpful for defining popular fiction in context of present scenario.

### **Industry:**

'Industry' is the distinguishing feature of popular fiction that differentiates it from literary fiction. The present age is the age of industrial development all over the world. Industrialization and capitalization are very crucial in defining the modern life practices. Every aspect of human life has been shaped by them. Literature, being one of the significant cultural aspects, has also been dominated by them. Hence, industrial practices can be helpful to define popular fiction in the present times. Gelder notes that 'industry' is considered as opposite to 'creativity'. Literary fiction is written with the sense of 'creativity'. On the contrary, popular fiction is written with the sense of 'industry'. Gelder remarks, "The key paradigm for identifying popular fiction is not creativity, but industry" (15). Popular fiction works as an industrial practice where the books are produced on a large scale. The writer produces plenty of books within a very short period, to say, two, three, four or more a year. It makes a writer to produce 50, 100, 200 or even more during his or her lifetime. For example, Stephen King published about 60 books, Agatha Christie published close to 90, Catherine Cookson

over 100, Georges Simenon more than 200 etc. Hence, popular fiction is produced as a product in the industry where the importance is given to a large scale production with the purpose of getting profit.

**Popularity:**

‘Popularity’ is another significant logic of understanding the concept of popular fiction. Popular fiction is written with the sense of achieving a worldwide popularity. The writer of popular fiction desires to acquire the place as a prolific writer. It does not mean that all the writers of popular fiction are prolific; many of them become less prolific than the writers of literary fiction. However, all the popular fiction writers write with the intention of being prolific. On the contrary, literary fiction does not follow such logic. The writer of literary fiction may also achieve the worldwide popularity. But he or she does not keep any prime intention of being popular. Hence, the distinction between popular fiction and literary fiction can be made on the basis of ‘intention’. Gelder notes, “The scale of difference between literary and popular fiction is in one sense more accurately registered in terms of ‘intention’ rather than actual achievement” (22). Whether the result of getting popularity is achieved or not is not the matter for the writer of popular fiction. The ‘intention’ of achieving popularity is important in the case of popular fiction.

**Popular Fiction as a source of ‘Entertainment’:**

‘Entertainment’ is the next important logic of defining and understanding the concept of popular fiction. The books are produced with the intention of appealing the majority of people. Entertainment is the source of a widespread appeal all over the world. It attracts the plenty of readers who are always in the search of pleasure. They get pleasure with the help of entertainment. With this the readers try to escape the sorrows of life and enjoy the world of imagination to seek entertainment. Gelder observes, “Popular fiction from one point of view is escapist, ephemeral and superficial: ‘mere’ entertainment” (34). Hence, the writer reaches to the masses through entertainment. When the writer writes the book, he expects that the readers must be entertained. He attempts to entertain the masses and achieve a large number of selling. It does not mean that the books of literary fiction are not entertaining. They can also be entertaining and mass-appealing. However, they are not written with the prime intention of entertainment. Entertainment is secondary for literary fiction, whereas, it is the prime object behind the writing of popular fiction. Hence, the logic



of entertainment is one of the distinguishing features of popular fiction that gives the writer a proper marketplace and popularity.

#### **Popular Fiction as ‘Bestseller’:**

‘Bestseller’ can be the logic for understanding popular fiction and distinguishing it from literary fiction. Popular fiction has a wide range of selling as the books of popular fiction are sold in a large number of copies. Due to this, the books of popular fiction take the label as ‘bestsellers’. The books are sold immensely due to the immense public demand. It does not mean that the books of literary fiction are not sold on a larger scale. Many of the books of literary fiction are also sold on a wide range. At the same time, many books of popular fiction are sold in a very less number. Hence, it is something difficult to consider the term ‘bestseller’ as the distinguishing feature of popular fiction. However, Gelder has used this term for defining popular fiction on the basis of the ‘intention’ of the writer. The writer of popular fiction intends to be the ‘bestseller’ writer. The intention is primarily productive. When the writer of popular fiction writes the book, he desires that his or her book should be sold on a large scale to be the ‘bestseller’. On the other hand, the writer of literary fiction does not write with such intention. The intention of the literary author is primarily ‘creative’ than ‘productive’. Hence, the label ‘bestseller’ goes with popular fiction and becomes one of its distinguishing features.

#### **Popular Fiction as ‘Genre Fiction’:**

Popular fiction is also known as genre fiction. Genre fiction is the category of fiction in which it is specifically written in order to appeal the readers. Genres are the plot-driven stories written in a specific literary genre for appealing the readers. The writer of popular fiction, most often, writes for the specific readers in a particular genre. It doesn’t mean that all novelists of popular fiction write only in a single genre. They may write in more than one genre, but most of them are known for a particular genre in which they widely write. For example, Dan Brown is known for thriller, J. K. Rowling for fantasy, Stephen King for horror etc. There are various genres and subgenres of popular fiction. Some of the worldwide popular genres are: Adventure, crime, fantasy, historical, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, suspense, thriller etc. All these genres are widely read and appreciated all over the world. Majority of people read them and seek entertainment which is the prime aim of popular fiction.

#### **Popular Fiction as a ‘Process’:**



‘Process’ is the very important logic of defining and understanding the field of popular fiction. It includes production, distribution and consumption. Gelder notes, “The field of popular fiction is made up not simply of the novels themselves but an entire apparatus of production, distribution and consumption” (75). The process of popular fiction is very different in nature from the process of other literary kinds.

Production is the first step in the process of popular fiction. Production of the books is seen as the industrial practice. Books are produced for the market in a number of copies. This large scale production distinguishes popular fiction from literary fiction which is restricted to a very small scale production. Most often, the books of popular fiction are produced in paperbacks. It makes the books easily and very cheaply accessible to all. The role of the writer as well as the producer is very important in the process of production.

Distribution is the next important aspect of the process of popular fiction. It includes the “bookshops, organizations committed to genre fiction of one kind or another, fanzines and prozines – professional genre magazines” (75). Books are sold and distributed through the bookshops that are available not only to the important places, but also to the public places such as bus stops, railway stations or airports etc. Books are made available at every nooks and corners so that the readers can buy them very easily. Similarly, popular fiction is advertised greatly through the fan magazines and genre magazines known as ‘fanzines’ and ‘prozines’ respectively. Different attempts are done to distribute popular fiction on a larger scale. Gelder observes, “Popular fiction is sold through a range of bookshop venues: from supermarkets and drugstores, to chain bookshops” (76).

Consumption is a very crucial element of the process of popular fiction where the reader plays the role of the consumer. Books of popular fiction are in fact ‘consumed’ instead of being ‘read’. This means, popular fiction is read very differently than literary fiction. Gelder notes “From the perspective of popular fiction, *all* reading is leisured: one generally does not read popular fiction ‘seriously’ in the way one might be expected to read Literature” (23). Popular fiction is not expected to be read seriously. On the other hand literary fiction is always read seriously. So that it is also called serious fiction, as the readers read it in a very serious mode.

Speaking about ‘learned fiction’ as the counterpart of popular fiction Roberts remarks, “these stories require a highly specialized response, one marked by deep respect, by

close attention and by careful reading” (1). The reading of popular fiction is not careful and serious; it is something casual and easy going. The plot of popular fiction is simple and easy to understand. It does not seek a serious and careful reading. Gelder quotes, “readers of popular fiction read *faster*. They do, in this sense, consume their fiction. Popular fiction is meant to be read quickly, sometimes in one sitting” (37). Hence, the process of popular fiction is very different from literary fiction that helps to define popular fiction as a special kind of cultural practice.

In this way, a brief outline of the theory of popular fiction as understood from the perspectives of Gelder, Roberts and Neuburg brings us to the conclusion that popular fiction is a very noteworthy aspect of literature that plays a significant role in the field of contemporary literature. The field of popular fiction works as the industrial practice where the books are produced with the intention of reaching to the large number of readers. As entertainment is the primary aim of popular fiction, majority of the readers read and enjoy popular fiction. Readers read various genres of popular fiction and seek pleasure through that. The process of popular fiction includes production, distribution and consumption, which makes it a special kind of literary and cultural practice. Hence, popular fiction is a very important part of literature in the contemporary times.

### **WORKS CITED**

- Gelder, Ken. *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. Routledge, 2004.
- Neuburg, Victor. *POPULAR LITERATURE: A HISTORY AND GUIDE*. Woburn Press, 1977.
- Roberts, Thomas J. *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*. Uni. of Georgia Press, 1990.
- “Popular literature”. [www.britannica.com/art/popular-art#ref236490](http://www.britannica.com/art/popular-art#ref236490).