



# Cultural Theory and Popular Fiction: The Zones of Changes in the Literary Scenario

Dr. Kavitha K

Government First Grade College, Devanahalli, Vijayapura Road Bangalore (Rural), -562110

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## Abstract

Culture theory in the main stream of social practices has created new exploration and interpretations. The meaning of cultural change is seen by the facts of human beings' acceptance and their involvement of the social practices in a transitory process. Seemingly, Popular Fiction undertakes a transitory approach which appears to be true and enduring. Victor Shklovsky and Leo Tolstoy believed that the task of art can de-familiarize and show the reader the common things in an unfamiliar way to enhance the perceptions of reality. Therefore, strange and even the wildest characters are not forbidden. It could be inaccurate to say fictions simply demonstrate a passion for incidents and events. Literature cannot be produced under fixed canons, because literature is something that grows along with the shifts and changes by its culture and social practices. As people adapt themselves to these changes in the social practices, literature also deform by itself. It is understood that by insisting on a never-changing canon of great literary works, popular fictions preferable stress its openness and flexibility. Cultural studies are already disciplined by virtue of being named and *identifiable field of knowledge organized by academic professionals within universities*. Inspecting the zones of changes in the literary scenario pertains to a great deal of interpretations on culture. Usually, culture tend to be always on the pedestal of moving and changing. It always replaces the old and looks for new settlements. If there seems to be any persistent world-view of change, then one of the authentic records could also be the popular fictions of its time. Popular fiction consumes a hope of renovation and senses transition in a unique way as a sign of proclamation to break the immediate past and stimulate the present as an *“historical license for the new*.

## Introduction

*“Art is directly linked with every day cares and anxieties of humanity”<sup>1</sup>*

Culture theory in the main stream of social practices has created new exploration and interpretations. Andrew Ross in his analysis on cultural theories and social practices focused his views on popular fiction, Jazz, Blues and Rock music etc. He shows how popular music in the United States, particularly inherited by the African-Americans, developed out of a complex interactions between avant-garde and commercial circuits, between lower and middle class, and between blacks and whites. However, Jazz music was seen as a low-class entertainment, criticized as rhythms associated with *“savage crash and bang”* and had been degraded as a

product “*not of innovators, but of incompetents.*” Later, despite its racial anguish, it was accepted as a fine form of entertainment. Today it stands at the peak of high culture. In this connection, Lawrence Levine in *Jazz and American Culture* says, “*jazz music is nothing but an expression of acceptability by the cultural change*”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the meaning of cultural change is seen by the facts of human beings’ acceptance and their involvement of the social practices in a transitory process. Popular culture is a sort of ideological mechanism. However, the cultural theory deems popular fictions as a topic, up for resonating resistance and Vigors stimulating the critical approaches in the literary scenario.

Similarly, popular fiction may be called as an informal enterprise. Yet, it creates new understanding by producing amusing characters that respond to the social and cultural changes. Popular Fiction undertakes a transitory approach which appears to be true and enduring. Victor Shklovsky and Leo Tolstoy believed that the task of art can de-familiarize and show the reader the common things in an unfamiliar way to enhance the perceptions of reality. Therefore, strange and even the wildest characters are not forbidden. It could be inaccurate to say fictions simply demonstrate a passion for incidents and events. Adorno in the enlightenment theory makes an analysis that “*the enigmatic readiness of the technologically educated masses... fall under the sway of any despotism, in its self- destructive affinity to popular paranoia, and in all un-comprehended absurdity,*”<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, Norman Denzin observed absurdity is nothing but the nature of dissatisfaction in human conditions. He says; “*the essential absurdity of the world is recognized, ...but it is understood that humans create and give meaning to this world through their epiphanic, existential acts.*”<sup>4</sup>

The representation of characters in the course of social changes may create absurdity under the commodities of modernism which can’t be ignored. And hence, the tendency to expose the hidden interests of human desires may call for the bourgeois culture. The bourgeois culture takes its prerogative stand imbibing modernity and the social cause for change in nature. It is inevitable that popular fictions have to emphasize the social vision and reflect human life from various dimensions and as a result, the characters seemingly come from nowhere, but, by the true facts of common lives. They are closely associated by the incongruity of the social condition by its changes. The word change is rooted at the core of social and cultural values. Cultural changes are imminent complex. Hence, literature cannot be produced under fixed canons, because literature is something that grows along with the shifts and changes by its culture and social practices. As people adapt themselves to these changes in the social practices, literature also deforms by itself. It is understood that by insisting on a never-changing canon of great literary works, popular fictions preferable stress its openness and flexibility. To recognize today’s criteria of importance might close off, yet, parts of that very heritage will appreciate in another 20 years of time. Therefore, the open and flexible procedure is the key value that needs to be upheld.

Popular fiction usually enjoys its domination by creating its own merits concerned with both the aspects of truth and imagination. Pierre Bourdieu notes that the “*Systems of domination find expressions virtually in all areas of cultural practices.*”<sup>5</sup> Collin McCabe in *High Theory/Low Theory* specify that “*Art [as a] practice...produce(s) knowledge*”<sup>6</sup> Popular fiction with the magic of empathy and identification reveals the way of being receptive to the changes occurring in day-to-day processes. In this way, popular fiction is not only an effort to experience vicariously a simple need for entertainment but, a guide for the readers to ensure the transformations in the society. Popular fiction entangles the process of social interactions. They generate

accessibility by substantiating the perceptions of modernity. The novels created from Daniel Defoe to Sidney Sheldon, etc., are the by-products of the cultural theory. *“Our values and beliefs are fragmented and discordant”*<sup>7</sup> and the culture oncourse reflects the conditions that *“There are always small fissures in any set of cultural rules and beliefs. A few individuals see the cracks of inconsistency and sometimes prophetic tones try to signal the need for change. But these voices are often swallowed up in the rush of history. It is when the few voices are joined by many that the serious forms of critique begin to emerge”*.<sup>8</sup> Popular Fictions have become the centrifugal force by the zones of changes in the world of literature. They are altered by the conflicts of opposing forces and tendencies. Yuri Barbash states: *“Artistic creativity has been shifted to the epicenter of the battled ideas, into the whirlpool of political passions of the age, and that some of the keenest conflicts are taking place in this sphere.”*<sup>9</sup>

## Cultural Theory and Popular Fiction

Cultural Theory and Popular fiction ventured into academics in 1996 at Liverpool John Mores University. This encouraged interdisciplinary discussions addressing popular culture in general and popular fiction in particular. Alias Salmon’s dissertation on ‘Mills and Boon’ was the first paper favoring cultural studies in the academics. It became the growing *“permeability of boundaries”*<sup>10</sup> in the academics and re-organized the structure of knowledge in the late twentieth century. It had the subtle purpose to serve the ideas of knowledge by evoking new convergence to accomplish objective thinking. The most visible interdisciplinary effort in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the *“American Studies Movement”* on the contrary, Stuart Hall claimed the dangerous threat that arose out of respectability in the academics by the inclusion of popular literature. She remarks that the *“professionalization and ‘Americanization’ of cultural studies has ‘a moment of profound danger’, because this is bound to threaten its role as an interdisciplinary field which draws strength from its marginality within the academy”*<sup>11</sup> However, we see that John Frow who strongly opposed Hall’s views and indicated that the looming threat from outside the field has to be repelled and resisted because cultural studies are already disciplined by virtue of being named and *identifiable field of knowledge organized by academic professionals within universities.*<sup>12</sup> Such thoughts renews our knowledge and heightens the demands for *“inquiry”* in cultural studies. Interpretative categories ranging from humanities, linguistics, rhetoric, semiotics, hermeneutics and feminist theories heightened the conceptualization of culture were justified in terms of *“inquiry”*. John Frow remains very skeptical about the anti-academicism and the limiting nature of disciplines and comments that literature is not the repression of spontaneously developing knowledge but is precisely productive of knowledge. There can be no knowledge whatsoever that is not enabled by some such structure, however informal, however embedded in everyday life. The question therefore is not, whether or not there should be disciplines and disciplinary relations, but can only be about their form, relative flexibility, their productiveness, and so on. Seemingly *“literary criticism developed its discursive justification towards popular fiction.”*<sup>13</sup> Richard Hoggart suggested that *“we need to open up literary studies to other forms of inquiry.”*<sup>14</sup> He also highlights the sociological divisions saying that literature is uniquely concerned with the total human response, with the quality of life in the fullest sense. Hoggart also affirms saying that *“there is no recognizable discipline of ‘English’, no genuine whole, but only a set of contrived frontiers and selected approaches which, for complicated historical and cultural reasons, have come to be known as ‘a subject’. Thousands are living*

*within this frame of reference: it is part of the self-justifying, self-perpetuating, closed world of 'English studies', and it has its counterparts among other humanities.*"<sup>15</sup> Further, Hoggart clarifies that *"literature should be value free"*<sup>16</sup> concerned with the formulation of the total human response. Similarly, Raymond Williams also describes literature as: *"highly valued kind of writing which deals with the imaginative or creative as opposed to the factual or practical, is largely an invention."*<sup>17</sup> He makes clear that "all kinds of texts such as; fiction, poetry, speeches, autobiography, history, sociology and philosophy, brings an exemplary lift through the meaning of culture. He argues that *"culture is the field which associates...all class...as a whole way of life of people.*"<sup>18</sup> Though, F.R. Leavis favored the traditional forms of literature, he invites the techniques of practical criticism based on advertising, popular newspapers, pulp fiction, book clubs and the industry. His influential journal *Scrutiny* saw literary criticism, relatively an enterprise, concerned towards culture. *"A real literary interest is an interest in man, society, and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn."*<sup>19</sup>

Studying popular fiction is empowering. It allows interpretative ideologies to operate at the conceptual levels. John Cawelti notes that cultural forms currently acknowledges as subjects to change in relation, to different reading practices. It enters to the readers by different sets of cultural codes. He says: *"Cultural studies have become popular as a representation of the political and repressed culture. High and low culture should both be studied in order to explore the complex relationship between cultural values and its commodities."*<sup>20</sup> Reading popular fiction varies according to the interest focused on its content. Clifford Geertz points out saying that *"We are living in an age of blurred genres"*<sup>21</sup> which has a jumbling variety of discourse within which disciplinary distinctions are increasingly hard to call upon. It is seeming a different and valuable approach to compartmentalize popular fictions in the zones of literary scenario. Popular fictions have its own merits fixing its platform uniquely on the cultural theory. Joseph Kockelman argues that literature promotes the *"integration of knowledge, freedom of inquiry, and intellectual curiosity."*<sup>22</sup> To a simple question such as where do we acquire our knowledge about the past? Often students respond, saying that it was from story books or films rather than the text books or history lessons. Many might have understood more about the World Wars I and II through watching films. For example, children may understand the Second World War better from the stories told by their grandparents or from cartoons and comics which is an unconscious process of acquiring knowledge. Thus, cultural theory and popular fiction are interconnected by the legitimate nodal-zones of literature where changes occur in a literary fashion.

## **The Zones of Changes in the Literary Scenario**

*"It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature.... (and) it needs a complex social machinery to set the novelist into action"*<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes it may seem exaggerated to emphasize the rapidity of the shifts and changes in the literary scenario. The concept of "change" interrogates several issues such as women, fiction, culture, race, religion, ethnicity, frontiers, immigrants, politics, economics and social. These issues have gone through various changes throughout the times, which in turn has caused the rules and values also in transition. Inspecting the zones of changes in the literary scenario pertains to a great deal of interpretations on culture. Usually, culture tend to be always on the pedestal of moving and changing. It always replaces the old and looks for new settlements. If there seems to be any persistent world-view of change, then one of the authentic records could also be the

popular fictions of its time. Popular fiction consumes a hope of renovation and senses transition in a unique way as a sign of proclamation to break the immediate past and stimulate the present as an *“historical license for the new.”*<sup>24</sup> Popular fictions in the literary phenomena claims authentically a genre that reinforces the realm of literary cult. It, absolutely avoids to fall into the category of stereotyping vulgarities and enforces inventions of the fictional realities. In the cultural context it represents the shared values of the society. Popular fictions have purely a literary fashion of new understanding by producing amusing works that respond to the social and cultural changes.

## The Perceptions of Fictional Reality and Characterization

Culture which perceives changes has close relationship with popular fictions. Fiction explores the social and cultural practices of the common people which elucidate the substance or material enhancing the process of fictional reality. According to Henry James, fiction has truth in reality. The *“vision of reality”* he says that it comes from the social and cultural practices. He argues that it is difficult to give a recipe for calling them into being because they are the hidden interests of human natural desires. *“The characters, the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix.”*<sup>25</sup> In the *‘Rhetoric of Fiction’* Wayne C. Booth discusses the accessibility of characters in fiction, Booth elucidated his views on portraying the characterization he adds very clearly saying that the implied author has his choice of liberty to give the sum of the total effect to his novels. Booth says that the author is the second self of the reality to whatever he has created. It was Booth who described popular fictions are *“the richest in the history of the subjects.”*<sup>26</sup> Similarly, David Bellamy in *The New Fiction* asserts that the *“characterization in fiction has reached the age of individualism.”*<sup>27</sup>

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century modern writers attuned their treatment of characterization to the social and cultural changes. There are two reasons for reading popular fiction at the terrain of critical analysis. One for the technique of characterization and the other stands for its narrative. The technique of character structure is the leading source of perfection especially in popular fictions. I. A. Richards observed that *“a work of art should be creative and self-sufficient artifact containing its meaning and value within itself.”*<sup>28</sup> Seemingly, E.M. Forster’s analysis also signifies that *“art is valuable because it has to do with order, and creates little worlds of its own, possessing internal harmony, in the bosom of this disordered planet.”*<sup>29</sup> Raymond Tillis, favors the new critical challenges posed by the growth of popular fictions, says that the root of this credo is the assumption that art is to be judged by reference to something internal to itself and argues that a novel should be valued for its openness and fidelity, and the critical judgments should test the work of art by its content. Tillis relinquishes with similar thoughts says that; *“There is, however, a yet more radical claim: that not the reality facing the subject but also the subject who faces that reality is socially and historically constructed.”*<sup>30</sup> The core human values are set beneath the truth of its reality. Reality is nothing but the acceptance of social and cultural practices. Thoughts and fantasies are the pure forms of truth to resonate something to its reality. It is not that all fictions are simply imagined and created. The writers are aware of what they express out of their experience. Even the readers perceive to what is put in a work and respond to it. Thus, popular fictions are in the process of recording and documenting the social events. In the process, popular fictions make us to understand and update the changes and essentially it relates to the developments occurring in the society. Hence, popular fictions care

more for its content and demands criteria for critical evaluation which binds a sensible approach of socio-cultural norms and more deliberately to the changes it adheres. Further to elaborate, Eminent writers like Scott Fitzgerald's in *The Great Gatsby* deals with gender and society. Ernest Hemingway offered an insight into the psychological gaps and spiritual scars of the war experiences. The economic crisis in 1930s also left a mark on John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* Such popular fictions provide great material of its time and social experience. Sir Walter Scott, Marie Corelli, Ian Fleming, J. K. Rowling, Stephen King, Sidney Sheldon and the contemporary writers displayed many facets of the world problems in their works. They created characters exposed to the social disorders. They extracted the hidden interests of human desires in a way to reveal the unobserved realities.

## Conclusion

Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, and many other popular writers structured their heroic figures larger than life. They brought the hard-realities with mythic significance binding to the cultural and social forces. There is always a passion for choice and acceptance in society by majority. so, there are certain imperatives to legitimize the desired values accepted by the social practices concerned to the human situations. Hence, any acceptance by the society may alter the original norms. Popular fiction is a platform in which the hidden interests of human desires are enacted. In other way, Todd Gitlin analyses that "television, cinema, popular literature, music, art etc., are central to popular culture and it is necessary that particular attention should be given to them to locate *"mechanisms of domination."*<sup>31</sup> Further, he adds that all human cultures that which have animated the whole societies over some considerable stretches of time have always to convey something important to the world. Thus, interlinking cultural theory and popular fiction offers new formulation and new understandings of the thought process. They examine the social dimensions of human conditions by their own standards. Fictional goals are far more modest, when applied to the dimension of human life.

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10. Klein, Julie Thompson. Interdisciplinarity: History Theory and Practice (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990)13-14. **Notes:** Instead of sharpened methodologies, broadened theories, and improve communication, there are disputed borrowings, aborted projects, strayed ideas which encounter interdisciplinary enterprise.

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30. Janklow, Mortrobertwagner.blogspot.com/2007/01/sidney-sheldon-89-master-of-flashy.html - 91k. **Notes:** Mort Janklow is a literary agent New York April 15, 2002 To judge the winner of America's newest and largest international affairs book award, the Council has named literary agent Morton L. Janklow as chairman of its blue-ribbon award jury. Janklow is senior partner at Janklow & Nesbit Associates, one of the foremost international literary agencies, which represents many leading writers of important non-fiction.
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