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## GENRE FICTION AND THE HIGH LITERARY TRADITION

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### ABSTRACT

*When it comes to the discussion of fiction, the first thing that strikes us is that whether the discussion is on the genre fiction or the literary fiction. This paper aims to focus on both the genre fiction and literary fiction. The intension of the paper is to highlight the debate that generally goes on between the genre/ popular fiction and literary/ serious fiction. The paper tries to focus on how the world of literature is divided between the genre fiction and the literary fiction. There is a group that believes literary fiction to be the real fiction thereby discarding genre fiction as a part of literature. Whereas there are people who are generally found devouring on the genre fiction most of the time, they find the literary fiction to be flat and lifeless. It is because of this distinction in the thoughts between the two groups, there is a tug of war between the genre fiction and the literary fiction. It is this debate that the paper tries to focus on. Further, the paper tries to define what fiction is all about and at the same time tries an attempt to explicate genre fiction and the literary fiction. The purpose of the paper is to show whether there is actually any difference between the genre fiction and literary fiction or it is just a prejudiced notion in the mind of the literary critics. The paper aims at showing the discrimination done between both the fictions. There is always a competition found between both the fictions in which one is always considered as superior whereas the other is always considered inferior; one is always highly positioned whereas the other is always at low- ranking. The intention of both the fictions may be same- to be read, acknowledged and appreciated by the readers, but the readers on the other hand, always distinguish between the two, thereby accepting one and rejecting the other. This is what the paper tries to show here. There are many great writers, many great literary critics who have shared their views on the literary fiction and the genre fiction, and the paper tries to take their help in order to justify the points that have already been mentioned here. The paper has taken the help of Arthur Krystal's Easy Writers Guilty Pleasures Without Guilt; Lev Grossman's Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction is Disruptive Technology; W.H. Auden's The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the detective story by an old addict; Edmund Wilson's Why Do People Read Detective Stories; Leslie A. Fielder's Towards a Definition of Popular Literature; and the paper has also taken the help from different websites where the articles based on the debate between genre fiction and literary fiction are found.*

**KEY WORDS-** Fiction, Literary fiction/ Serious fiction, Genre fiction/ Popular fiction, literary group, common people, entertainment, reality, hegemony, mass group, elite group, marginalization

## INTRODUCTION

We all know, fiction, in layman term, is a story which is not real. In other words, fiction is a form of literature, a prose in a narrative form where the characters, events and plots are imagined and conjured up. Sometimes the story or the event or the characters in a fiction are inspired from the real characters, story or event; but the fictitious story, event and characters are not completely real, they are rather cooked up with imagination, with some essence of reality. There are two very important types of fiction- genre fiction and literary fiction. A majority may have read the famous *Harry Potter* series. Some may have watched the movie adaptation. There are many websites where one can find a large number of fan fictions as well. The *Game of Thrones* series makes the audience glued to it through its magnetic power (both the books and their adaptations). Whereas these two series reign the world of fantasy through magic and many supernatural elements, Sherlock Holmes, on the other hand, showcases the truth to the world by untangling the mysteries through his intelligence, and thus, has become a household detective across the world. They are fictions, and, the popular ones- read, appreciated and lived by many. The characters, though fictitious, are, idols for many. Yet, they are not seen with the eyes of high regards by the literary critics and the giants of literature. They are never prescribed and included in the syllabus in universities and colleges. They maybe popular worldwide, but they aren't given the importance in the world of literature. Whereas fictions like *JaneEyre,1984, Handmaid's Tale, Crime and Punishment* and many are considered to be the gems of literature. They have the status, the merit, that the genre fictions are discarded of. The paper shows this stereotypical difference between the two fictions, by defining them, and also tries to throw light on the difference between the two fictions and the debate going on between them.

There is a "preconceived notion" regarding genre fiction and literary fiction. Genre fiction is the commercially successful fiction. It is sold in majority in numbers in the market and is read by large number of people. Therefore, it is also known as popular fiction. However it isn't given "literary merit" by the critics and giants of literature. It is generally considered to be superficial, oversimplified and facile and therefore it is inferior to the literary fiction. It is generally a belief that genre fiction is meant for entertainment. The language, style and theme are not complex like that of the literary fiction. Even the plot is plain sailing and genre fiction is far away from reality. It dwells in the world of fantasy. Zombies, pixies, elves, dragons, werewolves, ghosts, giants, demons, witches, wizards, detectives, scientists, etc. are the characters that are found in the genre fiction. This means, fantasy, thrillers, horror stories, sci-fi, detective stories, are some of the forms of genre fiction. Genre fiction, though having more popularity than the literary fiction; is, most of the time not nominated with the literary fiction in many prestigious and esteemed award ceremonies of literature. There are many reasons for this; and one such reason is that it doesn't have that merit that has been given to literary fiction. That means the writers of genre fiction are also discarded from this merit as well; the merit is always given, as found in Arthur Krystal's *Easy Writers Guilty Pleasures Without Guilt* to the "dudes of literature." George R.R. Martin, Stephn King, Thomas Harris, Neil Gaiman are some of the famous writers of genre fiction. Most of the times the genre fictions are adapted into movies and series ("A Game of Thrones", "Sherlock Holmes", "The Harry Potter" series and many more).

Literary fiction, on the other hand, is the fiction that is considered by the literary critics to be the actual work of literature. It is generally believed that literary fiction is dense and sturdy in style, language, character and plot. It is not shallow and superficial like the genre fiction. It dwells in reality, unlike the genre fiction. It is the superior one. Writers of literary fictions are always nominated and awarded the prestigious awards of literature. Literary fiction tries to show the reality of the world- the pain, sufferings, agony, trouble and day to day challenges that we face. It is believed that people who find literary fiction uninteresting and genre fiction interesting, are the people for whom genre fiction is a course to "escape from reality".

Of course there is difference between genre fiction and literary fiction; not one but many. That doesn't mean that one should be superior and other should be inferior. It is this prejudiced notion that has led to war between the two genres. Both the genres have their own essence, both are great at their places. The only thing is that literary fiction is boring to some and genre fiction is not the work of literature to some. Just as in culture, we have popular culture and high culture- popular culture is followed and celebrated by vast number of people (the common people) and high culture is followed and celebrated by the elite group and this elite group, though small in number, are powerful and have control on everything; so the high culture has been given the tag of real culture and the popular culture is thus marginalized. Similarly in literature, genre fiction is read mostly by the common people, whereas the literary fiction is read by people who are associated with the world of literature (literary critics, professors of literature, students of literature). In this case people who read genre fiction are common people and the people who read literary fiction are elites. So the elites have the control and the power and thus they decide- what kind of fiction is the real fiction and what kind of fiction is unreal or to say, is meant for entertainment only. So the hegemony of the elites which is mostly found in culture and other aspects in our day to day life, is found in literature as well. And this leads to the tug of war between both the fictions. There are many giants of literature who are fond of reading genre fictions like detective novels, thrillers and horror stories but they feel ashamed to accept this fact. Arthur Krystal in his essay *Easy Writers Guilty Pleasures without Guilt* believes that literary fiction is "good" and genre fiction "tastes good". This means literary fiction is the healthy food and genre

fiction is that junk food which is tasty but harmful for health. This is what the literary critics generally think. It is in this essay, Krystal talks about Edmund Wilson who considers that reading genre fiction is a "vice". He talks about the "guilty pleasures" in this essay. According to the dictionary guilty pleasures means "something such as a film, television programme, or piece of music, that one enjoys despite feeling that it is not generally held in high regards." However in the essay, he says that the genre writers, now are getting the same "literary status" like the writers of literary fiction. Still he has his prejudiced notion on genre fiction and literary fiction that is visible in his essay; not only him, but there are many who still have their stereotypical thoughts for both fictions alive in their heart and mind.

Whereas Krystal considers genre fiction as a means to escape from reality, Grossman in his essay *Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle: Genre Fiction is Disruptive Technology* rejects this idea by stating that "When you read genre fiction, you leave behind the problems of reality- but only to re-encounter those problems in transfigured form, in an unfamiliar guise, one that helps you understand them more completely, and feel them more deeply." Since it is believed that genre fiction is meant for market profit and an "escape from reality", Grossman, further rejecting this idea says that "Fiction is never real, but feelings always are." This means that though genre fiction is far away from reality, through its fantasy and supernatural elements, tries to touch the reality that we all face.

Though genre fictions may be inferior in the eyes of many critics, but it is a popular fiction. That means, it attracts a large number of readers towards it. It has that magnetic power that keeps the reader stuck to it. W.H. Auden, one of the most influential writers of literature, is a die-hard fan of detective fiction, which is a form of genre fiction. For him it is "an addiction like tobacco or alcohol." Yet for him detective stories are not "works of art". We all know that literature is a work of art. This means its forms are also different works of art. But for Auden and for many others genre fiction is only a means of entertainment. Hence it is not a form of literature. It is this stereotypical thinking that has marginalized the genre fiction. There is a difference between genre fiction and literary fiction, but the difference has been intensified to such an extent that the debate has become a never ending process. Leslie A. Fielder in his work *Towards a Definition of Popular Literature* states that in order to distinguish between the genre fiction and literary fiction, the critics divide the writers and their works into certain sections such as "serious novelists", "mere entertainers", "best sellers" and "art novels".

## CONCLUSION

Both the fictions are different from one another in various aspects. But their intention is same- to reach the heart of the audience. Literary fiction shows the reality and genre fiction through its supernatural elements, revolves around reality, it is not completely away from reality. The reality in literary fiction is raw and the reality in genre fiction is in disguised form. For instance, *The Game Of Thrones* series is a fantasy fiction, but power and politics are the themes that are found in this series; that is of course, is the part of the real world. The *Harry Potter* series deals with the themes such as racism; that is very much prevalent in the real world. Both the fictions are different, yet great in their own ways.

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