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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This Course is a new area of study in academia as you shall see and understand for yourselves after going through the block. This is a course on Popular Literature where once upon a time it was thought ironical to juxtapose the two words 'popular' and 'literature' together. Popular literature was what was considered trashy, lowbrow etc but you will realise that we have moved forward and academia has opened up the narrow gateways to kind of slowly move towards looking at other not so highbrow areas such as the world of the popular. This course is divided into four blocks.

Block 1: Popular Literature: An Introduction

Block 2: Genres of Popular Literature I: Children's Literature

Block 3: Genres of Popular Literature II: Detective & Science Fiction

Block 4: Genres of Popular Literature III: Graphic & Visual Narratives

Please read the following primary texts:

Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass*

Shyam Selvadurai: *Funny Boy*

Agatha Christie: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

Ursula le Guin: "*The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*"

Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam and writers **Srividya Natarajan, and S Anand:**
Bhimayana

Ruskin Bond: *The Blue Umbrella*, also try and watch **Vishal Bharadwaj's** film
The Blue Umbrella.

We are sure you will enjoy this course. Good Luck with your work!

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this block which is an introductory block on Popular Literature, we shall try and define popular literature, examine the difference between highbrow literature and lowbrow/ the popular, we shall analyse the debates that question age old canons and look at critics and theorists who have helped pave the way for a better understanding of popular literature. The block is divided into four units that cover the following aspects of our theoretical understanding of Popular Literature.

Block 1: Popular Literature: An Introduction

Unit 1: What is Popular Literature?

Unit 2: The Notion of the Canonical and the Popular

Unit 3: Exploring Academic and Critical Approaches to Popular Literature

Unit 4: Popular Literature Today



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UNIT 1 WHAT IS POPULAR LITERATURE?

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Culture, Civilisation and Ideology
- 1.3 Popular Culture
 - 1.3.1 Popular Culture, Mass Culture, Commodity and the Marketplace
 - 1.3.2 Popular Culture as Residual Category
 - 1.3.3 Popular Culture and the Idea of Hegemony
 - 1.3.4 Popular Culture and America
- 1.4 Popular Literature
 - 1.4.1 The advent of Postmodernism
 - 1.4.2 Defining Popular Literature
 - 1.4.3 Genres of Popular Literature
 - 1.4.4 Inverse Relationship between Literary Merit and Popular Literature
 - 1.4.5 Literature and Media
 - 1.4.6 Popular Literature Today
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Suggested Readings & References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to the overarching framework of culture and popular culture that encases the concept of popular literature. It will then discuss some of the salient points of the larger debate that surrounds the concept of the ‘popular’. We shall define, ‘popular’, then, present you an overview of popular culture. In this overview we shall be looking at the origins of popular culture, debates around popular culture, and the various connotations of the term popular culture, mass culture, commodity and the market place. Towards the end we shall introduce you briefly to some genres of popular literature. We end with discussing the relationship between literary merit and the marketplace, popular literature and media and conclude with a short note on popular literature today. We shall begin by looking at what Literature is and the relation between popular and literature next.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Literature is considered to be a reflection of the culture of its times. As you know, it is also said that literature mirrors society. Literature is considered to be written works that have some artistic merit in it and has lasting value. The two most important words in the term ‘popular literature’ are ‘popular’ and ‘literature’. Both the terms are expansive and wide in meaning. “Popular” comes from the Greek word “Populus”, which means people. So popular culture/literature is people’s culture/ literature, that is capable of affecting 90 % of the people, 90 %

of the time. *Popular* is one of the most widely circulated terms in today's critical discourse: in literature, politics and social studies, it pertains to the ordinary, the accessible, well liked, informal and to policies and artifacts benefiting people. What is important is that to understand popular literature in all its dimensions, it is essential to be aware of the genesis, background and milieu in which this term has gained currency and meaning. "Popular Literature" includes both fiction and non-fiction. To understand its varied dimensions, a close look at the phenomenon of "mass-culture" and reading taste is required and that is what we shall look at next.

1.2 CULTURE, CIVILISATION AND IDEOLOGY

In this section we shall look at the background of popular literature by beginning with a pertinent question - What is Culture? 'Culture' is a term that has been under scrutiny for a long time. Operating simultaneously along several competing axes of meaning, one needs to pay close attention to the context in which it is used in order to determine its several possible meanings. Each age has witnessed a troubled and problematic understanding of the notion of culture. **Raymond Williams** describes culture as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." (Williams, 1976, 76) Thus, it will be useful to trace the evolution of the notion of culture chronologically. Tracing the word back to its Latin roots, we find that the word 'culture' is *cultura*, from the root *colere*, which has a range of meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship. The primary meaning then was in husbandry, the tending of natural growth. For a long time 'culture' was thus, used as a 'noun of process' to refer to the tending, growth or cultivation of something, usually, crops or animals (Williams in Bennett, 1981, 77). In the 16th century 'culture' referred to the growth or cultivation of human attributes. By the 18th century it functioned, as a synonym for Enlightenment's concept of civilisation. During the Enlightenment, the only form of culture that was sanctified was the official, elite culture of European societies. In the 19th century, however, the meanings of the term 'culture' expanded and began to be differentiated from that of 'civilisation'.

In the 18th century, with the rise of industrialisation, the term 'Civilisation' was limited to describing the development of economic, social and political institutions, and the word 'culture' was regarded as a particular set of codes of conduct or attitudes which were held to be best exemplified in works of art, of the select few, who are the proclaimed guardians of good taste. **Mathew Arnold** in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), referred to real culture as, 'the best that had been thought and said in the world'. But soon in the 19th century 'culture' began to be used in the plural. An interesting addition was the term 'folk' or 'peasant' culture. This led to the use of the term 'cultures' referring to at least two kinds of culture, one of the 'select few' and the other, of the people especially the peasantry. In most academic quarters, it is usually argued that the term 'culture' stands for those artistic pursuits that are considered to be of a certain value or standard i.e. culture proper. Other forms of activity are looked at differently – as entertainment, recreation or leisure or, pejoratively, as 'mass culture'. It was not until the early 19th century that 'popular' was used as a term of recommendation – albeit in a fairly casual way – in the sense that the thing or person(s) to which it was applied were 'well-liked by many people' (Williams, 1976, 199) and, moreover, that this was to be counted in their favor.

The traditional classical concept of ideology was considered close to ‘culture’, but it suggested those forms of intellectual and artistic activity, which were related to economic and political practices. Thus, it may be suggested that culture should be used as a general term to refer to ‘the complex unity of those practices that produce *sense*’, reserving the term ideology for specific types of culture – for political ideas. To sum up, the term culture is largely used as an umbrella term to refer to all of those activities, or practices, which produce sense or meaning. This includes the customs and rituals that govern or regulate our social relationships on a day-to-day basis as well as those texts – literary, musical, and audiovisual – through which the social and natural world is re-presented or signified. Culture in modern times demands an encounter with newer terrains and transitions. Culture helps people develop. There are claims that culture consists of tacit knowledge, and is the domain of primary socialisation. Culture is also a bunch of memory, history and the past.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What are the early understandings of the term ‘culture’?

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1.3 POPULAR CULTURE

Having been introduced to the general idea of culture, civilisation, ideology and ‘cultures’, let us now look at the broad landscape of popular culture. There is a very high correlation between a person’s occupation, his/her socio-economic status, the kind of music that appealed to him/her, the kind of cinema that was likely to get his/her patronage, the kind of literature she/he read, and so on and so forth. Education alone cannot direct a person’s preferences completely. Some of the famous exponents of popular culture, such as **Ray B Browne, Marshall Fishwick, Bruce Ludke, John Cawelti, Russel B Nye, C W E Bigsby, Leslie Fiedler** to name a few have tried to define various facets of popular culture. Browne uses the symbol of the eyeball. On the one end is folk culture, on the other, elite culture, in the middle, constituting the largest portion is the iris, in which rests the pupil therein, lies popular culture-ever expanding, ever growing and always seeing widely, intently and deeply. And the eyeball is horizontal not vertical. Hence, it is inappropriate to think of one culture as “high” and another as “low”. Further popular culture provides a kind of audio-visual profile of a nation. It pictures the smiles and it echoes the sighs of contentment. Advocates of popular culture insist that popular culture is essential for the health of academics. Not only this, popular culture is the practical-pragmatic humanities. It can be used as a tool to assist in education. It can be utilised in numerous ways to encourage learning, to overcome illiteracy, to retain people in school, and to energise our educational system. Popular culture is the television we watch, the cinema we give patronage to, the type of food— fast, junk, or conventional, that we eat, the type of attire we wear, the music we appreciate, the things we spend

money on, in short, the whole society we live in. It is virtually our life and the world that surrounds us.

In the 19th century, **Mathew Arnold**'s school of thought, worried that Popular Culture represented a threat to cultural and social authority, but the Frankfurt School, a group of German intellectuals noted with deep interest the displacement and menace caused by the explosion of mass culture: from newspapers and cinema to popular fiction and Jazz. They argued that it actually produces the opposite effect; it maintains social authority. In 1944, the German intellectuals **Max Horkheimer** and **Theodor Adorno** coined the term 'Culture Industry' to designate the processes of mass culture, (Storey, 2001, 85). An attempt to plunder Popular Culture as a sociological and anthropological study was also made. Turner in his seminal study *Structure and Anti-Structure* opines that Popular Culture is world turned upside down in a stratified society. **Pierre Bourdieu** argues that the celebration of 'the remarkable of the unremarkable' - the everyday, forms the core of Popular Culture. Let us look at what is popular culture, mass culture, and how popular culture may be marketed in the sub section that follows.

1.3.1 Popular Culture, Mass Culture, Commodity and the Marketplace

Popular Culture is surely culture, which is widely favoured or well-liked by many people. For this, one has to only examine the market: sales of books, sales of albums and videos. We could also scrutinise market research figures on audience preferences for different television programmes. Such figures tell us that popular culture includes a quantitative dimension in it. The *popular* of Popular Culture seems to demand it. Popular Culture, oft defined as 'mass culture', is also mass-produced for mass consumption. This commodified culture is formulaic and manipulative for a mass of non-discriminating consumers who consume with a certain brain-numbed passivity. This has been increasingly debated in recent years. It is true that a good number of new products fail to make a mark despite extensive advertising; many films fail to recover even their promotional costs at the box office and also that about 80 % of music and video albums released every year lose money. Such statistics clearly call into question the notion of cultural consumption as an automatic and passive activity. There seems to be almost a natural relationship between the popular and the masses. We'll look at popular cultural as a residual category next.

1.3.2 Popular Culture as Residual Category

But then, another way to understand and define Popular Culture is, as a residual category. It suggests that it is the culture, which is left over after we have decided on what high culture is. In this definition, Popular Culture exists to accommodate cultural texts and practices, which fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. In other words, Popular Culture exists as inferior culture. This is often supported by claims that Popular Culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation. The latter, therefore, deserves a moral and aesthetic response whereas the former requires a cursory glance and has little to offer. The next subsection will look at popular culture within the domain of hegemony.

1.3.3 Popular Culture and the Idea of Hegemony

To understand Popular Culture in its entirety, it would be unwise to ignore the development of the concept of hegemony of the Italian Marxist **Antonio Gramsci**. Gramsci uses the term ‘hegemony’ to refer to the way in which dominant groups in society, through a process of ‘intellectual and moral leadership’, seek to win the consent of the subordinate groups in society. Known as neo-Gramscian hegemony theory, it sees Popular Culture as a site of struggle between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ of the dominant groups in society. Popular Culture thus, is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it the culture that emerges from below, or the culture of ‘the people’. Rather, it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two; a terrain, marked by resistance and incorporation, a condition of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures. Popular Culture has also been variously defined as modern majority culture; protest culture; a counter tradition in literature; para or sub literature; lowbrow as against highbrow; public enterprise as opposed to private enterprise; and vulgar as contrasted with *avant-garde*. But today, all of us accept Popular Culture as a legitimate, though slightly contested, site for serious study and discussion, but the quintessential debate on the ‘cult of the elite and pop’ has had a long, tortuous and torturous history. Let us now look at popular culture as an offshoot of American culture next.

1.3.4 Popular Culture and America

For critics working within the mass culture paradigm, mass culture is, in a clear identifiable sense, imported American culture. If Popular Culture in its modern form was invented in any one place, it was in the great cities of the United States, and above all in New York. The claim that Popular Culture is American culture has a long history within the theoretical mapping of Popular Culture. It operates under the term ‘Americanization’. Its central theme is that British culture has declined under the homogenising influence of American culture. True, because Popular Culture, as a pervasive phenomenon, hit the Americans as early as the 1920s. Later, in the 1940s, the Bowling Green University critics like, Ray B Browne, Bruce Ludke, Marshall Fishwick, John Cawelti, C W E Bigsby, etc. were the first to voice out their concern for this culture, eulogised by the masses. According to them, the ever-expanding consciousness of Popular Culture doesn’t polarise cultures and dilutes, destroys or reduces them to the lowest common denominator.

Talking of American culture, Fiedler says that the culture of the United States has always been “popular” beneath a “thin overlay of imported European elitism” (1982, 64). He further says that “Our national mythos is a pop myth and our revolution consequently a pop revolution, when Europeans or other non-American cultures talk of the incursion in their culture of pop forms like rock, country, and western music, comic books, soap operas and cop shows on television, they tend to refer to it as a “creeping Americanization” (1982, 65) of their cultures and is used as a synonym for “vulgarization”.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In what ways is culture understood as ‘high’ and ‘low’?

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- 2) Define popular culture and elaborate on its multiple connotations.

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1.4 POPULAR LITERATURE

So, as you may have read, though popular literature: stories, songs, fiction, romances, plays, etc existed since time immemorial, serious consideration of the broad field of popular literature as a significant category only started in the 20th century. You must have also understood from the various critical and theoretical statements on popular culture, that there existed a certain resistance to its admittance into the academia. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since then. To a large extent the advent of postmodernism played an important role in its legitimate position today. Let us see how Postmodernism helped legitimise popular literature.

1.4.1 The Advent of Postmodernism

The advent of postmodernism in the 20th century brought in a complete breakdown of categories. It brought an end to an elitism that was based on distinctions of culture. In another way it celebrated the victory of commerce over culture. Postmodernism dismantled the boundary between ‘authentic’ and ‘commercial’ culture. A good example can be found in the relationship between television commercials and music. For example, there is a growing list of artists who have had hit records as a result of their songs appearing in television commercials. One of the questions this relationship raises is: ‘What is being sold, song or product?’ I suppose the obvious answer is - both. Even the high priests of postmodernism, **Fredrick Jameson, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Susan Sontag, Hal Foster**, acknowledge this ‘new sensibility’ in understanding the cultural discourse of today. In the next subsection, we shall try and define popular literature.

1.4.2 Defining Popular Literature

Popular literature in its simplest sense was that kind of literature that was excluded from the academia. It was not taught in school and university classrooms. In fact, it was not even literature. It was considered to be songs, stories, legends,

fables (oral or written) and kitchen maid romances not worthy to be taught. But they still existed and were mass produced and consumed by the people and had a life of their own. Within its ambit were found a tradition of folk narratives and orature.

In the wake of new critical thinking of contemporary times, several academicians like **Leslie Fiedler** resisted a blind alignment to the academia as the center, but promoted the ‘popular’ in literary and cultural discourse. In his essay, “Toward a Definition of Popular Literature” he considers “popular song and story, mostly story” as popular literature. By popular literature Fiedler implies that literature which has been “ghettoized” or excluded from university education, but has endured on its own. Popular literature is not a category, a type, a sub-genre, or the invention of the authors of the books, or authors who we have been taught to believe belong to popular literature. In fact, the concept of popular literature exists primarily ... “in the perception of elitist critics – or better, perhaps, in their misperception, their ... deliberate misapprehension,” (Fiedler in Bigsby, 1975, 30). Let us now look at genres of Popular Literature next.

1.4.3 Genres of Popular Literature

One of the earliest genres that was relegated to the domain of popular literature was the Romance. Kitchen maid romances often written by women were not considered serious enough. The other prevalent romantic story narrated the difficulties faced by two young people engaged in a forbidden love. The second genre that found much favour with the populace was the fantasy. Children’s Literature, the most famous story being *Alice in Wonderland* by **Lewis Carroll** is also considered as a representative fantasy, the other being science fiction. **Issac Asimov** remains the master storyteller of these stories of scientific adventures and make-believe kingdoms. In America it was the cowboy cult stories, the Westerns, set in the frontier which were hugely popular with the masses. These were tales of travel, power, male valour and discovery. Their rise in the late 19th century coalesced with the popularity of the murder/ crime stories or mysteries and spy fiction. With a detective in the centre, mysteries created world famous characters such as *Auguste Dupin* by **Edgar Allan Poe** and *Sherlock Holmes* by **Arthur Conan Doyle**. Yet, it is **Agatha Christie** who continues to remain the queen of crime till today. In India, **Satyajit Ray** created his own magic with the *Feluda* stories. The Spy Fiction as a genre was born with **Fennimore Cooper** but further became popular with the creation of the figure of James Bond by **Ian Fleming** in the mid 20th century. In recent times, popular literature has embraced a variety of interesting new forms of writing such as comic books, cartoon strips, terribly tiny tales, graphic novels etc which feed on mythology, folk legends, fables and myths of the time. In the forthcoming units, you shall be reading about them in much greater detail and through several examples. We’ll move on to looking at the relationship if any between literary merit and popular literature in the next subsection.

1.4.4 Inverse Relationship between Literary Merit and Popular Literature

It is true that Popular Literature, as commodity literature is dependent upon the ‘free enterprise market place’ and often such literature cannot be stopped from attaining market-place success. Such literature is denied to university classrooms

and libraries, because the notion floated by elitist critics is that the art form preferred by a majority of the people cannot be admirable and worthy of receiving serious attention and cannot be admitted into academia. In many ways these so called guardians of “good” taste “ghettoize” certain writers, even before reading their works. Even librarians “ghettostack” these books as “Juveniles”, “Teenage Fiction” or relegate some to a “super ghetto” called “Pornography”. Such books are never even thought to be considered for any major prize, bemoans a bitter **Fiedler**. He calls this an “untouchable category,” (Fiedler in Bigsby, 1975, 30-31). But today, two decades into the 21st century, the borders that divide the pop from the elite are merging. We will discuss this more in the next unit. Media too plays a major role in creating hype and either taking a novel to its heights or to the bottom of the stack. Let’s examine the role of media next.

1.4.5 Literature and Media

In the last two decades, a paradigm shift has been noticed, whereby a text has been placed against various production apparatuses or other modes of representations — cinema, stage, television, comic books, etc. If literature has to fulfill its roles and purposes and be a communicative practice, the analysis of popular narrative (fiction) can provide a crucial link between literature and culture. In popular literature, a kinship with the other arts exists. So Popular Literature is driven, often by the people, to lend itself to other forms of media. As mass public culture, art practice and vehicle of propaganda, literary adaptations on celluloid and cinema create an extended narrative text for the audience. Thus, questions like— what happens to literature in cinema and can pedagogy remain unaffected by its representations in cinema gains greater relevance now. It is true that 50 % of the films today are based on popular literature. The classic examples are Ian Fleming’s James Bond spy thrillers, furthering the myth of the white man as the saviour of their race and also Bond as the iconic hero out to protect humanity from evil - Russia or Germany, as the case may be. Even Agatha Christie, the queen of crime, creates a discourse around the enigmatic *Hercule Poirot* to paint a social landscape fraught with tensions and distrust, put up in a series of formulaic, manipulative texts. However, when literature flows into other forms of Popular Culture — films, soap operas, and comic books - sub-versions of different kinds occur. Inventions take place in the form of violence and sex, contrarily, many distortions also occur. One can continue with endless examples. Nonetheless, by offering another mode of critical inquiry in the form of films or soap opera, the modern world has forced us to re-look at the definition of the literary canon. Let us look at Popular Literature today in the next subsection.

1.4.6 Popular Literature Today

A form of expression that was once considered folklore, folk song or people’s literature, popular literature today attends to the call of a literate reading public or media and technology ruled television and cinema, the force that frames it is the market place. It responds to the question: What sells and why? Its consumers may be the populace but its creators are often located within the walls of scholarship and the academia. Writers like **Chetan Bhagat**, the creator of the genre of campus novels, is able to capture the pulse of the youth today by giving them narratives in which the same youth live and survive. The late 20th century has seen a greater rise of formulaic fiction than ever before. Pandering to the consumptive epoch of today, these popular fictionists deliver what is demanded

of them by the populace. Some of the Indian popular writers of today such as **Surender Mohan Pathak**, writing in Hindi are churning out crime stories by the dozen. No longer, trashed as low brow literature, unworthy of literary attention and critical gaze, popular literature today has gained a currency of its own. They reside at not only the Wheeler kiosks at railway stations, bus stops, pavements and the like, but they are now the subject of literary and academic conferences and university curricula where their academic, literary, commercial and popular merits are discussed and debated by scholars, publishers and editors. Though the doyen of chick-lit, **Advaita Kala** and several of her kind would like to equally claim academic space within the elite corridors, the reality is that there are no such exclusive spaces available anymore. With distinctions of hierarchy and genres and elite and pop blurring, popular literature today exists in meritorious realms having invaded book shelves and must-read lists.

Part of the difficulty stems from the implied ‘otherness’, which is present / absent when we use the term Popular Literature. **Marc Angenot** in Pawling’s *Popular Fiction and Social Change* says, “Para literature occupies the space outside the literary enclosure, as a forbidden taboo, a degraded product.” But this is also true as said earlier that Literature has always mirrored the reality of the age it belongs to. Thus, the 20th century witnessed the rise of the popular taste. It divests “popular” outside the ambit of elite consciousness and links it with ordinary people, the common masses.

Flash fiction has emerged as a significant form of literature that is being accepted by the masses. Flash fiction as an idea – a story or poem written in minimal words – has been present in literature for a long time, but its undeniable success in the 21st century cannot be debated. When **Ernest Hemmingway** wrote “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” it was applauded as a story with intense depth, gravity and minimal expressions. Today, flash fiction has arrived. In the world of long working hours and Kindle, flash fiction provides a unique reading experience. Though this fiction does not promise the emotional depth of *The Scarlett Letter* or the expansive thrill on the Mississippi of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this fiction creates a world where fiction became a means of entertainment more than introspection. The themes that are touched upon in flash fiction were rooted in the simple emotions that the readers could connect with without delving deep into the complexities of the thematic emotion of the text.

The United States of America made significant contributions in the arena of flash fiction with *Narrative* and *Smith* magazines that provided an opportunity for people to publish flash fiction. India has captured the imagination of readers on social media with the immensely popular *Terribly Tiny Tales* in 2013 with **Anuj Gosalia**. Also commonly known as micro fiction it caters to writers who wish to tell a story in the structured limits of 140 characters. Launched in 2016, *Mirakee* is another writing mobile application which serves as a platform for flash fiction writers. This application lets a writer embellish their writing in an image form. *Mirakee* has become an instrument which helps writers to explore the realm of flash fiction.

The 21st century witnessed not just a celebration of Indian writing in English, but the birth of a readership for racy, quick reads. In this neo-liberalised globalisation in India, we witness the rise of a new kind of readers who have become an increasingly emboldened social class. Commercial popular fiction was celebrated with Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night at a Call Centre*

(2008) and *The 3 Mistakes of my Life* (2008). Romance and Campus Fiction became the two genres that gave the Indian audience a literature that was thoroughly Indian. Post 2000s, the new brigade of engineers or management graduates-turned authors held the baton of commercial Indian fiction such as **Durjoy Datta** who was not just a commercial author, but a social media person. From attending literary fests, conferences, book signings, doing appearances and book reading before and after the release of the book, the commercial author is here to stay. An important role is therefore played by both, the publishing houses and the authors who are increasingly involved in connecting to the masses through various social media platforms. So in many ways, the *popular* in popular fiction in the current age of technology mirrors the true image of the society and the readers / the audience choose book covers, review books, post videos about book signings and participate in the making of popular literature.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Draw the linkages of popular culture with the marketplace.

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- 2) Write notes on:

- i) Postmodernism

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- ii) Popular Culture and America

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- iii) Popular Literature and its forms

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1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at the notion of what is culture, popular culture, mass culture, and also looked at popular literature and what it means, and also looked at some of the genres of popular literature. In the next unit, we shall look at the notions of the canonical and the popular.

1.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress 1

- 1) Read Sections 1.1 and 1.2 carefully and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read sections 1.2 and 1.3 carefully and then answer in your own words.
- 2) Read section 1.3 and all the subsections carefully and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read section 1.3.1 carefully and then answer in your own words.
- 2)
 - i) Read section 1.4.1 carefully and then answer in your own words.
 - ii) Read section 1.3.4 carefully and then answer in your own words.
 - iii) Read section 1.4.3 carefully and then answer in your own words.
 - v) Read section 1.4.6 carefully and then answer in your own words.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Cultura	: Latin word for 'culture' from the root colere, which has various meanings: inhabit, cultivate, protect.
Populus	: Greek word for 'people'
Mass Culture	: The common people and their culture; popular culture that appeals to the common man
Commodity	: object or thing that can be bought or sold; commercial; saleable.
Hegemony	: authority, one-upmanship, power
Ghettoize	: place in seclusion, reject

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UNIT 2 THE NOTION OF THE CANONICAL AND THE POPULAR

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Defining the Canon
 - 2.2.1 What is a literary canon?
 - 2.2.2 The classic and the classical
 - 2.2.3 Popular Classics
 - 2.2.4 The Notion of ‘Taste’
 - 2.2.5 *Ekstatis*: The Pleasure Principle
 - 2.2.6 The Idea of Kitsch
 - 2.2.7 Highbrow and Lowbrow
- 2.3 Relation between Myths and Popular Literature
- 2.4 Popular Literature: Opening up the Canon
 - 2.4.1 The Idea of the ‘Canon’, the ‘Pop’, and the Academia
 - 2.4.2 Popular Literature and Mass Media: Cinema
- 2.5 Indian English Popular Fiction and the Literary Canon
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.8 Glossary
- 2.9 Suggested Readings & References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall be discussing the notion of the canon and canonical literature. Then we shall juxtapose it with the idea of the popular and popular literature. By now you are quite familiar with the term ‘popular’. As we move on further, we shall also understand terms such as the classic, classical, elite, and ‘high and low’ culture. Towards the end, we shall present a comparative discussion on the canonical and the popular through some examples.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Until approximately the mid-nineteenth century, the term popular was associated with ‘peasant’ culture, the lowbrow and the common. Since then, came a phase when some particular cultural forms have oscillated from one side of the boundary to the other as the terms in which they have been reviewed have shifted. We can see these processes at work, particularly, in cinema and literature, where films and books that were once viewed as quite routine forms of popular entertainment – the early Chaplin films, or spy thrillers, crime fiction and popular romances, for example, have since come to enjoy the status of revered classics. William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture, yet as late as the 19th century, his works were very much a part of popular theatre. Similarly, *film noir* can be seen to have crossed the border, supposedly separating popular and high

culture: what started as popular cinema is now the preserve of academics and film clubs. In India, this cultural traffic became apparent when commercially successful popular fiction of the west such as the James Bond's spy fiction and Agatha Christie's detective fiction were able to find a foothold in the academic curricula of many universities and a popular and box office successful film like, *Sholay* earned a space for itself in the category of classic cinema. Even the most rigorous defenders of high culture would not want to exclude them from their select enclave. Thus, in recent years 'popular' seems to have acquired a legitimacy of its own and has managed to stand outside the all embracing umbrella of 'high culture'. Let us begin the next section by trying to understand what a canon is in literature.

2.2 DEFINING THE CANON

There is often a blurring of distinctions between the elite and the popular. Leslie Fiedler, one of the earliest exponents of popular culture in America gives the example of Japanese art, a floating word picture called "*Ukiyoe*". *Ukiyoe* is high art which crosses over to popular art and possesses the merits of high art. An ancient Japanese art form, *Ukiyoe* is printed with wooden blocks in several colours and they portray well-known figures, prostitutes and popular actors or as the Japanese would say, "*bijin*", i.e. "a beautiful person". Fiedler removes the discrepancy surrounding this art form and says, "Popular is too ambiguous a word to trust, for two of its commonest meanings are middlebrow and folk. But *Ukiyoe* is lowbrow and urban. It is a mass-produced art of the city," (Fiedler, 1972, 11). This is just one example to establish that several texts from literature often are, both, classic and popular. The word canon has the connotation of a tradition, a category, and a league which is exclusive and limited. For a long time, canon as a term had a religious connotation. Canon was a standard of judgment or a text containing those views, such as that of the *Bible* or the *Koran*. Sometimes within religious traditions, as views evolve or change, some formerly canonical texts become "apocryphal," meaning outside the realm of what's considered representative. Some apocryphal works are never granted formal acceptance but are influential nevertheless. An example of an apocryphal text in Christianity would be the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. This is a highly controversial text not widely recognised by the various Churches — but believed to be the words of one of Jesus' closest companions. There is a belief that the Canon essentially is that 'hall of fame', place, or tradition where only a select few can reach. But with time, the understanding of the canon has been revised and popularity today is not the reason for exclusion from the canon. But what exactly is a literary canon? That we shall explore next.

2.2.1 What is a Literary Canon?

In literature, the canon is the collection of works considered representative of a period or genre. The writings of famous writers such as William Shakespeare or **Chaucer** are, for instance, a part of the Western canon, and classical Indian writers such as **Kalidasa** and **Surdas** are a constituent of the Indian canon as their writing and style has impacted the writings of many in all genres. A literary canon stands the test of time. The writers and their writings have universal appeal, having a universality of theme and enter a certain hall of fame. In Indian literature, Sanskrit texts were often and always part of its literary canon. The *katha* and the folk traditions were for a very long time never a part of the canon. Recently,

there has been a rethinking and several texts have shifted and moved. The entire idea of a fixed literary canon has been questioned. Shakespeare has been adapted to films by writers and filmmakers of many countries. In India, **Vishal Bharadwaj** has adapted Shakespeare's canonical plays, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, into films such as "*Omkara*", "*Haider*" and "*Maqbool*". This is just an example to demonstrate that cinema and media has also played an important role in the new idea of the literary canon. But we shall be reading more about this in Block 4 where we look at Vishal Bhardwaj's *The Blue Umbrella* a cinematic adaptation of **Ruskin Bond**'s novella of the same name.

As stated earlier, the accepted body of work that comprises the canon of Western literature has evolved and changed over the years. For centuries, it was populated primarily by white men and was not representative of Western culture as a whole. Over time, some works became less pertinent in the canon and were replaced by more modern counterparts. For instance, the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer are still considered significant. But today People of color have become more prominent parts of the canon as a past emphasis on Eurocentrism has waned and several modern black writers such as **Langston Hughes** (1902 – 67) of the "*Harlem*" renaissance fame, **Toni Morrison** author of "*Beloved*" (1931 – 2019), and **Alice Walker** (1944) author of *The Color Purple*, and are a vital part of the modern canon. For example, contemporary writers such as **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861 – 1941) of the *Gitanjali* fame, **Pablo Neruda** (1904 – 73), **Raja Rao** (1908 – 2006) the author of *Kanthapura*, **Patrick White** (1912 - 90), **James Baldwin** (1924 – 87), *The Native Son* **Edward Braithwaite** (1930-2020), **Chinua Achebe** (1930 – 2013), most well known for *Things Fall Apart*,

Scott Momaday (1934), **Amy Tan** (1952), and **Sherman Alexie** (1966), are all representatives of the entire subgenres of Native American, Asian-American, Australian, Caribbean, African, Indian and African-American styles of writing. Some writers and artists' work are not as well appreciated in their time, but their writing becomes part of the canon many years after their death. This is especially true of female writers such as **Jane Austen** (1775 – 1817), who wrote "*Pride and Prejudice*"; **Charlotte Bronte** (1816 - 55), who wrote "*Jane Eyre*", and **Emily Dickinson** (1830 – 86) who is well known for her poem "*Because I Could Not Stop for Death*". Literary prizes such as the Nobel, Pulitzer and Booker Prizes have played a significant role in the making of the contemporary canon. Additionally, it has also expanded the definition of the canon, turned it elastic and blurred the distinctions between classic and popular. Some of the contemporary writers of fame and popular appeal who have found considerable space in academic discussions are **Marquez** (1927 – 2014), **Bapsi Sidhwa** (1936), **Salman Rushdie** (1947), **Orhan Pamuk** (1952), **Amitava Ghosh** (1956), **Jhumpa Lahiri** (1967), **Aravind Adiga** (1974), and many more. It is often believed that the 'contemporary' takes time to enter the canon and become 'canonical' as it has to stand the test of time over decades if not centuries. But what is a classic? Let's explore this next.

2.2.2 The Classic and the Classical

Often, it is the classic and the classical that constitutes the canon. Highly contested, the term classic is considered to be the obverse of popular. The overarching frame of reference of the classic as also defined by various dictionaries leads us to the following: 'classic' exhibits timeless quality'. Like the canonical text, a classic has a universality of theme and stands the test of time. 'Classical literature'

thus refers to that rubric of literature: works which were exquisite in their times and still hold merit and relevance in contemporary times. These works withstand the ravages of time and continue to educate, enlighten and inspire people of all times. Our earliest understanding of classical antiquity was basically Greek and Roman Literature. Shakespeare's tragedies such as *Othello* and *Macbeth* have displayed lasting worth, and exemplify merit of its genre and also hold relevance in contemporary times. Classic is thus, something, which is timeless, and the content of a classic work never becomes obsolete. A classic is that which remains unmoved by the changes in time and continues to assert its relevance across ages.

The famous Victorian poet, Mathew Arnold's touchstone method refers to an understanding of real excellence and beauty in poetry. T S Eliot, one of the most renowned modern critics links maturity to a classic. According to him, a classic can only occur when a civilisation, its language, literature and most importantly, mind is mature. Finally he adds the quality of comprehensiveness to the making of a classic. A discussion of classics is important because there is a deep connection between the canon and classics. Any text that enriches the human mind will eventually stand the test of time and thus, would be appreciated and read by generations. If there is a high brow classic can there be a popular classic? The next subsection explores this question.

2.2.3 Popular Classics

An interesting dichotomy occurs when these two terms popular and classic are used together. Self contradictory in many ways, the term 'Popular classics' defies water tight compartmentalisation and strict categorisation into binaries of high or low. Such texts are claimed by both, the high Classicists tradition and the market oriented popular tradition. These texts rest on the fulcrum of popular appeal, the quality that provides it longevity and reverence. They attract a wide readership alongside a substantive market. In the hegemony of commodified modern epoch, these texts sell. Some would include within its broad rubric texts such as the famous Indian progressive writer, **Munshi Premchand**'s stories and novels, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

2.2.4 The Notion of 'Taste'

Having established 'taste' at the center of every art and its product, **Pierre Bourdieu**, a celebrated 20th century exponent of the 'everyday' in popular culture says that the word 'Opera' is highly culture loaded. 'Having not been to the Opera' stands for lack of taste, standard and deficiency in culture. Initially an individual perception or idea, taste soon became a marker of a certain kind of culture. This is just one example to establish that several other sociological activities were categorised into 'high' and 'low'. Having been much discussed in the 18th century, taste became aligned to another important term in its multiple frames of reference, aesthetics. Both were polite cultured words that defined merit and worth. Yet we all will agree that no institution or a set of people or any other social construct including the university can be the chief, or the sole guardian of "taste" and "standards". The majority, the public, the commoner also have a huge role to play in the making of taste and culture. Literary taste is closely linked with the notion of value and possibly, its lack of it. What is valuable is

often treated with seriousness and merit. And a belief that runs largely in academic quarters is that the taste of the public is not a marker of value and worth. This statement is contested by many postmodernists such as Jameson, Sontag and Fiedler, who talk about the concept of “*Ekstasis*” that should govern literature and culture. Let us look at what *ekstasis* means next.

2.2.5 *Ekstatis*: The Pleasure Principle

The ‘pleasure’ principle has always been a point of study from **Aristotle**’s (385 – 323 BC), *Poetics* and Shakespeare’s (1564 – 1616), plays and Premchand’s (1880 – 1936), stories to popular bestsellers such as the romance *Gone with the Wind* (1936), by **Margaret Mitchell** (1900- 49), the Detective fiction of Agatha Christie and Spy thrillers of Ian Fleming. **Jerry Palmer** draws upon Aristotle’s poetics and its universal principle which tells us that Tragedy does not produce any chance pleasure, but the pleasure proper to it. Similarly, the form of pleasure evoked by thrillers is suspense which makes a reader read a story to find out what happens next. And this thrill or pleasure invokes a sense of *ekstatis*, in short ecstasy or happiness. *Ekstatis* is the emotive charge of a story which also provides it lasting energy. It can be summed up as the therapeutic function of art, which helps us to connect emotionally. Every narration or mode of art has the pleasure principle as its basis. If the bloody murders in the popular spy thriller writer Ian Fleming’s Bond novels and the detective fiction of Agatha Christie’s crime thrillers invoke thrill and excitement so does the murders in the novels of classic novelists such as **George Eliot** (1819 – 80), and **Thomas Hardy** (1840 – 1928). Kitsch is a term that occurs very often when we talk of cultured and the popular. But what does it really imply? Let’s look at that.

2.2.6 The Idea of Kitsch

Close on the heels of our understanding of the notion of the canon, canonical and classic and most importantly ‘taste’ is the idea of Kitsch. Kitsch is in many ways the obverse of taste. Kitsch is those objects or art that is considered to be in poor taste because of its excessive garishness and sentimentality. Almost vulgar or tawdry, lacking style and substance, they are sometimes appreciated in an ironic way. Kitsch has come to be connected with the popular, the lowbrow and the common. A German word, it relates to all that is worthless and tasteless. For a long time, literature produced by the marginalised people in the west, particularly the blacks and the natives was considered camp literature or kitsch: vulgar and lowly. Kitsch and camp literature became redefined when significant and brave stories such as one by **Maxine Hong Kingston**’s (1940), a Chinese American penned the story of a Chinese girl growing up in America called *Woman warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), hit the American book stalls. This is just a one off example of literature dissolving boundaries of literary merit and also of people from the margins telling their own stories, their way. This discussion on kitsch leads on to an analysis of what is highbrow and what is lowbrow. This discussion follows in the next subsection.

2.2.7 Highbrow and Lowbrow

As we understand the various terms associated with the notion of the canon and the popular, it is further important to familiarise ourselves with terms such as highbrow and lowbrow. Highbrow is considered to be associated with the intellect

and the mind. The people who appreciate everything that is considered intellectual are known as Highbrows. They have taste and they look down upon anything that is popular, common and kitsch, in short belonging to the lowbrow culture and the lowbrows. Presently, more and more critics are bursting this divisive myth of intellectual stimulation and pop fetishism. Extensive studies on American novel, cinema and music undertaken by cultural critics such as **Perry Meisel** prove these distinctions of highbrow and lowbrow to be thoughtless and severely damaging to culture. Middlebrow is neither highbrow nor low brow, it is something conventional lacking refined distinction or raw energy. Much later, the middlebrow was to become aligned with the middleclass. This dichotomous debate is often also called Private Enterprise and Public Enterprise. Private implies the domain of the ‘select few’ and public enterprise is of the teeming commoners. In many ways it is minority and majority discourse. Let’s examine the relationship between myths and popular literature next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Define ‘canon’ and ‘canonical’ by giving examples.

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2.3 RELATION BETWEEN MYTHS AND POPULAR LITERATURE

There is a close connect between myths and popular literature. Myths wipe out the gulf that divides elite culture from pop culture. Myth is the only consistent agent, which universalises all literature into a mythic whole. A good example is that of science fiction. Despite its new or modern look, science fiction draws upon myths for its popular appeal. In *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the two movies that made a mark in the contemporary scientific world, the scientific apparatus gives us an excuse to return to certain tales of mystery and adventure that thrilled us when we were little kids. Thus, popular literature contains communal dreams, shared myths or archetypes. And an ability to sense what already exists in the popular mind. Similarly, characters of popular works immediately enter the public domain like Pickwick, Don Quixote, Sherlock Holmes and David Copperfield, etc. Though not really a serious point of debate but it is nevertheless a truism that certain books and authors are always remembered like Chaucer and Jane Austen and their works, but their characters do not leave an imprint on the memory of the readers in the manner in which certain popular characters from popular works such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Sherlock Holmes* and *Tarzan* became household names even with those people who hadn’t heard of Lewis Carroll, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** or **Edgar Rice Burroughs**, the creators of these popular figures in fiction. Moreover, popular literature never seems the kind of literature that you are reading for the first time (1978, 200) since it dramatises communal myths and dreams of time immemorial, reiterates Fiedler.

Interestingly, popular literature is not bound by the writer, or the produce or even the mode: audio, visual or any other art form in which it is produced. Popular literature never really belongs to one medium it never is just “words on the page” says Fiedler. He puts it succinctly that all literature is finally, essentially, “... images in the head. Once its images pass through words...into our heads such primordial images of archetypes or myths...can pass out again easily into any other medium. They can be portrayed on the stage; they can be painted; they can be sculpted in stone; they can be turned into stained glass windows, they can be carved in soap” (1978, 201).

2.4 POPULAR LITERATURE: OPENING UP THE CANON

It was in the mid twentieth century, after German intellectuals such as **Adorno** and **Horkheimer** had expressed grave concerns over the explosion of mass culture in their book *The Culture Industry*, that serious consideration was given to everything ‘popular’. The 1970s saw some prestigious European and American Universities incorporating courses in popular culture at the University level. Of significance is the inclusion of **Shobha De**’s novel as representative of Asian-Indian literature for serious study at the university level in the west. The late 1980s saw several Universities in India such as Mumbai, Punjab and Jadavpur redefining Canonical study. At the University of Delhi, academic discussions on the opening up of the syllabus of BA Honours English courses began in the late 1980s. It was in early 1990s that the study of popular literature was amalgamated with Canonical literature in an optional paper called ‘Forms of Popular Fiction’. Studying the canon was indeed the staple diet, something ‘outside’ the traditional conservative canon, was indeed exciting. Opening of the canon of literature can be said to be the result of the advent of postmodernism on the one hand and the birth of the era of globalisation on the other. This has indeed led us to believe that nothing is born classic or popular. These are dissolvable categories for several studies have shown that most of the classics today were popular once. The music of the famous band the ‘Beatles’ was not taken seriously and was considered vulgar but was very popular. Today it is considered a classic. The famous English writers D H Lawrence and William Faulkner wrote on taboo subjects, their books were banned, yet they were popular then, and are considered classics today. The fact that Shakespeare wrote for the pit and knew little Latin and even less Greek, has not blunted his influence over the years on readers. Several examples of this kind abound to show the blurring lines between the classic and the popular.

2.4.1 The Idea of the ‘Canon’, the ‘Pop’, and the Academia

It is true that by studying canonical works of the past, we gain a new appreciation for them from a modern perspective. For instance, **Jonathan Swift**’s (1667 – 1745), *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), for a long time was placed on Children’s Literature shelves in the library. Today deeper insight has uncovered it as a piece of exemplary satire on humankind. An implicit hierarchy exists within the academia. Academia insists on standards and anything that is within its realm is considered standard. The inclusion of the popular has in a way dismantled the hierarchy and subverted standards. The classic and the popular are taught alongside and read together in classes. This is the impact of globalisation and

postcolonial understanding of literature. Academia and academics rely on the canon to teach students about literature, so it's crucial that it includes works that are representative of society, providing a snapshot of a given point in time. This, of course, has led to many disputes among literary scholars over the years. Arguments about which works are worthy of further examination and study are likely to continue as cultural norms and mores shift and evolve.

2.4.2 Popular Literature and Mass Media: Cinema

It is with the birth of the representation of literature on celluloid that a unique relationship between literature and cinema was established and its strong bond is visible even today. The German school of critics as was mentioned earlier in *The Culture Industry* (1940) wrote on the 1930s booming Hollywood films euphoria. These critics were concerned with the fact that the common man was mixing up real life with reel life. Cinema, as one of the dominant technologically progressive modes of cultural transmission has positioned itself as integral to the development of the 'cult of the pop' in modern societies. As mass public culture, art practice, vehicle of propaganda and adaptations, cinema creates an extended narrative text for literature. Thus, questions like — what happens to literature in cinema and can pedagogy remain unaffected by its representations in cinema gains greater relevance now. In the last two decades, a paradigm shift has taken place, whereby a text has been placed against various production apparatus — cinema, stage, television, comic books, etc. If literature has to fulfill its roles and purposes and be a communicative practice, the analysis of popular narrative (fiction) can provide a crucial link between the literature and study of other modes of representations. In the next section we shall examine popular Indian English Fiction.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Do you think that there is a distinction between classic and popular? Illustrate through examples.

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- 2) What is the role of mass media and technology in extending the understanding of the canon?

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3) What do you understand by the term ‘opening up of the canon’?

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4) What role does cinema play in expanding the understanding of literature?

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2.5 INDIAN ENGLISH POPULAR FICTION AND THE LITERARY CANON

The Indian English popular fiction, rooted in the concerns of the present, voicing the aspirations of the young and new Indian middle class, is redefining the canon. Unknowingly, in its bid to respond to the cultural effects of consumerism, moral anxieties over shifting gender roles and changes in youth culture, and its drive to become self-consciously less literary, it is playing a pivotal role in canon formation. Its bold step to align the English language shorn of its complexity and literariness and adopt a simple, pragmatic approach to language, these pop fiction writers have made themselves more relevant to their young readers and also the budding, experimental competitive print, television and online media. In this entire process, Indian English popular fiction is also participating in rewriting hegemony. They represent the consumerist middle class—one that represents the promise of the liberalising Indian nation—as the new materialist Indian dream. As India steps into the 3rd decade of neo-liberalised globalisation this emboldened sect of readers up their demands of reading and consumption. And in the commercial fiction of mass market writers like Chetan Bhagat, Advaita Kala, **Ravinder Singh** and Durjoy Dutta these readers/consumers find psychological gratification and celebratory representation. **Suman Gupta** talks at length about popular and commercially popular Indian fiction in his aptly titled book, *Consumable Texts: Uncultured books and Bibliographical Sociology* (2014). Looking at the popular texts of the 21st century, the economic factors and ‘number of copies sold’ are some indispensable parameters. Most of these novels by young social media savvy authors deal with the contemporary lived reality of the new Indian youth. They talk to this youth on several social media platform, propose to their fiancée (as in the case of Durjoy Dutta) with the readers in view and continue to seek their advice. To aid the relationship of an author and his audience, social media increasingly becomes an essential device in helping understand the desires and wants of the reader/consumer. The commercial author, then, steps out of his/her role of an individual capable of simply writing. With Chetan Bhagat, the profile of a star-author was more than just producing popular

literature. It also now included successfully marketing oneself and the text. This breed of young writers does not really concern themselves with canons and canonisation. They are making their own kind of canon. While there are sections of staunch literary critics who have frowned upon the idea of popular commercial fiction emerging as a major form, it is essential to understand that in the simplistic growth of this kind of fiction as a form of literature, there is a larger hope for the young of today to understand the nuances of a **Wordsworth's** (1770 – 1850), 'Daffodils' or **Keats** (1795 – 1821), 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What is the relationship between the Indian English popular fiction and the literary canon?

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- 2) Comment on any popular fiction that you may have read recently.

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- 3) Write a note on any novel that has been made into a film.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

Every text and work of art has an existence and moves within a social context. It has to be examined as a form of cultural produce and a process of meaning creation. The great 16th century poet **Spenser** (1552-99), has acquired a reputation as a poets' poet and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory, but in his day *The Fairie Queen* (1590-96), was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights, beauteous maidens and hideous ogres and dragons. Fiedler believed that literature is no longer sacrosanct to be monasticated in a sanctuary within the library and the academia. He implores an accommodation of counter-culture which would assimilate the high mimetic mode of art and its obverse – the low mimetic, a literature outside the academy –

science fiction, soap opera studies, media and film studies, comic books, and says, that it does not mean “opening the gates to the barbarians” (Fiedler). It will not be wrong to say that in this postmodern age, the center-margin paradigm locates the ‘common’ in the arrogant history of highbrow culture power. Canons will remain albeit in newer forms.

2.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read section 2.2 and subsection 2.2.1 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) After having gone through the unit carefully, you should be able to attempt this answer in your own words.
- 2) Read section 2.4.2 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
- 3) Read section 2.4 (completely) carefully and then write the answer in your own words.
- 4) Read section 2.4.2 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read section 2.5 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

2.8 GLOSSARY

Apocryphal	:	outside the realm of what’s considered representative.
Canon	:	a standard, an accepted tradition
Juxtapose	:	place side by side;
Opening-up	:	expanding, broadening, ever growing
Oscillated	:	moved, shifted, uncertain position

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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UNIT 3 EXPLORING ACADEMIC AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO POPULAR LITERATURE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Important Issues in Popular Literature
 - 3.2.1 Popular literature as Part of an Entertainment Industry
 - 3.2.2 Popular Literature as Genre Fiction
 - 3.2.3 Rooted in Time and Place
 - 3.2.4 Role of Audience/ Readership
- 3.3 Theories of the Culture Industry
- 3.4 Redeeming Popular Literature
 - 3.4.1 Structuralist Reading of Popular Literature
 - 3.4.2 Sociological Reading of Popular Literature
- 3.5 Gender and Popular Literature
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.8 Glossary
- 3.9 Suggested Readings & References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit provides a comprehensive account of the many critical approaches that have been used to study popular literature over the ages. As soon as the term popular is mentioned, it triggers several connotations – meant for the masses, accessible to a large denomination of people, easy to consume etc. In most of traditional literary criticism, popular literature has been relegated to the margins, not considered worthy of serious study or analysis. The binary between high and low art and canonical and popular literature has informed much of the earlier approach to popular literature and popular culture at large. However, over the years this schism has been challenged by various literary theories until it was totally discarded by the tenets of postmodernism.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

We will begin by understanding certain significant features of popular literature like its place among popular culture and the entertainment industry, the importance of genres and the role of audience participation. It will then briefly elucidate the major literary approaches – the Frankfurt School, Structuralism, Marxism and Postmodernism among others. By doing so, it will trace the journey that popular literature has undergone as a body of writing and how its critical study has become more nuanced and heterogenous in nature. It will also look at how we have moved from a time when critical approaches denounced popular literature as an escapist and mediocre form of writing to the contemporary realm when popular

culture seems to have engulfed all other forms of knowledge production within its embrace. Let's look at some important issues in popular literature to begin with.

3.2 IMPORTANT ISSUES IN POPULAR LITERATURE

Before we understand the many critical and theoretical approaches used to study popular literature, it is imperative to quickly go through some of the most significant interpretations of this form of literature. One of the earliest critical understandings of the word 'popular' comes from Raymond Williams's definition of the term in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. According to Williams, the word popular derives from the Latin word 'popularis' which means belonging to the people. He writes, "it referred to a political system constituted or carried out by the whole people but there was also the sense of low or base...popular has been seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power from them" (236). Williams further identifies two characteristic traits of popular culture – firstly, it is considered an inferior kind of work (the notion of the popular versus the canonical) or work deliberately setting out to win favour like popular entertainment (this will later dovetail into the argument about market economics defining the aesthetics of popular literature). Secondly, it is a form of literature that is "well-liked by many people" (Williams 236), in other words, it has distinctive mass appeal. This definition is particularly helpful since it points towards several issues which have evolved into major debates in critical readings of popular literature. It will be helpful to take note of these issues before we delve into the engagement of popular literature with critical theory. The following are some important issues of study in popular literature and we shall explore them next.

3.2.1 Popular Literature as Part of an Entertainment Industry

Popular literature has always been understood as part of the larger entertainment industry which exists in the form of the marketplace regulated by forces of demand and supply. Works of popular fiction are often classified as 'bestsellers' and critics have repeatedly argued that their aesthetics are governed by commercial forces. **Dominic Strinati** (1947), a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Leicester and the author of *An Introduction to Studying Popular Culture*, says that industrialisation and commercialisation have had significant influence over works of popular culture. This makes us wonder if the criteria of profitability and marketability take precedence over "quality, artistry, integrity and intellectual challenge" (3). This debate shaped one of the most important critical conceptions of popular literature as a part of a "culture industry" (Adorno), which is discussed in detail in later sections. Popular Literature as Genre Fiction is what we shall examine next.

3.2.2 Popular Literature as Genre Fiction

Genre fiction refers to works of literature written with the intent of conforming to the norms of a particular kind of writing. Such works place more emphasis on following the traditions of a particular genre. Science fiction, detective thrillers and romance novels are often considered prime examples of genre fiction. **Ken Gelder** (1955), a Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of

Melbourne, who has also been a visiting fellow at University College and King’s College in London, and the University of Edinburgh, classifies popular fiction as genre fiction and says that generic identities “determine not just what is inside the actual novel, but who published it, how and through what ventures it is marketed, who consumes and evaluates it and how this is done” (2). This over-determination by the traditional markers of genre have also led to the labeling of popular literature as ‘formulaic’ i.e. the idea that all popular fiction follows the same old, repetitive narrative logic and lacks any creative vigour or originality. Let us look at how Popular Literature comes across as a genre that is rooted in time and place.

3.2.3 Rooted in Time and Place

The idea of the popular is very firmly rooted in a particular spatial and temporal realm. What counts as popular today might not have the same valence a few decades from now. Similarly, what is popular in a particular culture or community might not translate well to other cultures. Critics have often argued that popular fiction lacks longevity i.e. it does not survive the test of time. As opposed to this, a classical or a canonical text “transcends time and space and gives new meaning to new generation of readers” (Berberich 4). This distinction between popular and canonical has occupied a central position in all critical discussions of this form of cultural production. Instead of seeing popular literature’s lack of longevity as a weakness, certain critics now understand it as its strength. Since these texts are rooted in a particular time and space, they are able to capture a society’s socio-cultural anxieties or as Clive Bloom (1953), an Emeritus Professor at Middlesex University, UK, who writes on popular literature, gothic fiction, history and politics, and is a broadcaster as well as an occasional journalist, puts it, they become “the barometer of contemporary imagination” (15). The audience/ the readership too play a huge role in determining the popularity of a text.

3.2.4 Role of Audience/ Readership

Popular fiction is marked by a significant involvement of readers not simply as consumers but also as producers and creators. The creation of fandom or groups of fans who are devoted consumers of certain genres or authors leads to certain important changes in the production and distribution of popular literature. As Ken Gelder writes, “popular fiction has fans - readerships which live through their genres, inhabiting them and claiming them,” (81). This aspect shapes our understanding of this literature as a mass mediated form, one which is equally influenced by the forces of the market and the demands of their devoted fandoms. In the next section, we shall look at the various theories of the culture industry.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Elucidate some of the key features of popular literature which set it apart from other forms of writing?

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3.3 THEORIES OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

In order to study the history of critical approaches to popular literature, it is imperative to place it within the larger umbrella category of popular culture. Most traditional readings of popular culture have understood it as an inferior, degraded category which is capable of harming the intellectual capacity of people. The earliest of these readings was done by Matthew Arnold who set up the binary of “the popular” and “culture” in his book titled *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). According to him, culture, which included the writings of canonical authors like **John Milton** (1608-74) and William Shakespeare, could educate and enlighten the masses while popular fiction, written for mass consumption, was responsible for England’s social decay. This interpretation of popular literature as a low form of art continued well into the middle of the 20th century and culminated in the Frankfurt School’s theories about the culture industry.

The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923 by a group of Jewish German intellectuals including the likes of **Theodore Adorno** (1903-69), **Max Horkheimer** (1895 - 1973), and **Herbert Marcuse** (1898 – 1979), Herbert Marcuse was a German-American philosopher, sociologist, and political theorist, who was the third member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. He was born in Berlin, studied at the Humboldt University of Berlin and then at Freiburg, where he received his PhD. Max Horkheimer was a philosopher and sociologist who was well known for his work in critical theory as a member of the ‘Frankfurt School’ of social research. One of the major ideological focuses of the Frankfurt School was the critique of Enlightenment, an intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th century which sought to comprehend the world through human reason and rationality. Intellectuals of the Frankfurt School believed that the Enlightenment movement had lost sight of its goals, turning into a nightmare which constricted human freedom. Adorno also a philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musicologist, and a composer known for his critical theory of society, believed that the Enlightenment “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (92).

According to them, all products of popular culture including literature, music and movies were part of a “culture industry” where a work of art has no autonomy; instead, it becomes a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. Since artworks are now governed by the logic of profitability, they become repetitive and formulaic, foreclosing the possibility of any subversive elements which challenge the traditional dominant order. Hence, Adorno believed that popular culture further legitimises socio-cultural status quo and renders the masses powerless. He writes, “the power of the culture industry’s ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness” (Adorno 89).

This is one of the earliest critical understandings of products of popular culture. However, it must be emphasised that this dismissive view of popular literature has since been attacked multiple times through various critical registers. To begin with, it is clear that the Frankfurt School’s ideas overlook the heterogeneity of popular culture and the needs and desires of its audiences or readers. It assumes that all forms of popular culture are similar and therefore, regressive in nature. Additionally, Adorno considers that all audiences or products of popular culture have little or no agency at all. This stance of complete passivity of the reader/

audience has also received its fair share of criticism. Dominic Strinati argues that audiences are more active and discriminating about what they consume than Adorno’s theories allow.

One of the most relevant criticisms of the theory of the culture industry comes from **Walter Benjamin** (1892 – 1940), a German Jewish philosopher, a cultural critic and essayist. He was an eclectic thinker who could combine elements of German idealism, Romanticism, Western Marxism, and Jewish mysticism, and contributed tremendously to aesthetic theory, literary criticism, and historical materialism. Needless to say, he was also a close associate of the Frankfurt School, and friends with thinkers such as the playwright **Bertolt Brecht** as well as the *Kabbalah* scholar **Gershom Scholem**. In an article titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin writes about the revolutionary potential of the film medium. He argues that technological reproduction has democratised a work of art by challenging what he terms its ‘aura’. Traditionally, when a work of art was rooted in a singular time and space, it acquired a sense of exclusivity and originality. For instance, there was only one original painting or one original sculpture displayed at a museum or an art exhibition. However, as copies of such art works are made possible, there is a “tremendous shattering of tradition” (223). Therefore, works of art become more available to people and they now assume the role of a critic instead of a passive consumer. Benjamin supports these claims with a thorough formal study of the medium of film. However, what is of significance here is, the challenge posed to the generalisation of Adorno’s theories about the culture industry.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Comment on the categorisation of popular culture as a “culture industry” by intellectuals of the Frankfurt School?

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3.4 REDEEMING POPULAR LITERATURE

Let us now examine the different schools of thought and how they analyse Popular Literature.

3.4.1 Structuralist Reading of Popular Literature

Structuralism is an intellectual movement which began in France in the 1950s and studies the underlying organisation of texts. **Peter Barry** writes that the Structuralist approach is marked by a “constant movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and a parallel drive towards understanding the larger abstract structures which contain them” (39). Since popular texts often follow a formulaic plot, they made for ideal objects of structuralist analysis. For instance, **Umberto Eco** (1932 – 2016), was an Italian

novelist, literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, and a university professor. He is widely known for his 1980 novel *Il Nome Della Rosa*, (translated in English as *In the Name of the Rose*), a historical mystery combining semiotics in fiction with biblical analysis, medieval studies, and literary theory. Umberto Eco's study of the James Bond novels in his essay titled "Narrative Structure in Fleming" is one of the most iconic structuralist explorations of popular texts. He breaks down these novels into their constituent elements and demonstrates the rules through which these unfold. A similar study was also undertaken by **Tzvetan Todorov** (1939 – 2017), a Bulgarian-French historian, a philosopher, and a structuralist literary critic, a sociologist and an essayist. He authored several books and essays, which influenced the study of anthropology, sociology, semiotics, literary theory, intellectual history and culture theory. In his essay titled "The Typology of Detective Fiction" in the book titled *The Poetics of Prose*, wherein he decodes the many types of detective fiction. In doing so, structuralist critics also study popular texts as part of a larger social order. These texts were seen as being on constant dialogue with social, cultural and political ideologies, paving the way for a sociological critical approach. The next approach that we shall examine is the Sociological reading of a text, in this case one say belonging to the category of popular literature.

3.4.2 Sociological Reading of Popular Literature

Under a sociological approach, popular texts are studied in conjunction with social, cultural, political and economic determinants of a particular society. Such a study attempts to establish connections between socio-cultural phenomenon and how they are depicted in popular literature. It looks for sites where certain ideologies are explored in detail, reiterated or challenged. Within the purview of a sociological critical approach, different modes of analysis are possible including Marxist analysis, cultural materialism etc. **Tony Bennett** (1947), a famous scholars in contemporary western Cultural Studies, and an outstanding Marxist critic on the theory of literature and art; well-known for his research in cultural policies and mechanism, argues that Marxist critics have been largely reluctant to perform a critical analysis of popular texts, thereby replicating the value judgment often conferred on popular literature as being a low or base form of art. However, certain genres have been studied within a Marxist theoretical framework. For instance, Fredric Jameson has performed a comprehensive study of science fiction, wherein he discusses the potential of the genre to conjure empirically grounded alternatives to existing reality. According to Jameson, the rise of science fiction responds to a specific cultural and economic crisis and simultaneously facilitates the possibility of a new world order within a capitalist order. Similarly, the genre of crime narratives has also been studied within a Marxist framework. Under this study, the origins of crime are ascribed to the changing economic order. As capitalism produces a struggle for resources, the dispossessed populace often resorts to crime to fight for some semblance of equality. The category of crime becomes a lens through which the cultural and economic organising principles of a society are explored.

As is evident, the above-mentioned critical approaches consider popular literature as worthy objects of study, doing away with the traditional binary between high and low forms of art. This was further facilitated by the movement of cultural materialism which borrows its core ideology from the British left-wing thinker Raymond Williams. Critics from this school believe that culture is inclusive of

all forms of art including popular texts, television shows, music etc. Unlike earlier thinkers like **Matthew Arnold** (1822 – 88), and **FR Leavis** (1895 – 1978), who was a British literary critic of the early-to-mid-twentieth century, and taught in Downing College, Cambridge, and later at the University of York; who believed that culture was a sanctified realm which could be occupied only by canonical authors, cultural materialists argue for a more inclusive understanding of the term. At the same time, the materialist part of their approach implies that culture cannot “transcend the material forces and relations of production” (Barry 177). In other words, any cultural form of production must be studied in conjunction with the material – social, cultural, economic conditions under which it was produced and which it represents.

If there is one movement which redefined popular literature and popular culture and opened up new avenues for their critical study, it has to be postmodernism. This movement rose to prominence towards the latter half of the 20th century after the period of high modernism in literature. One of the central tenets of postmodern thought was a militant rejection of the division between high and popular art. It rejected outright, the elitism associated with modernist literature and embraced the popular in all its excess, gaudiness and bad taste. Art became a more democratic field as the primacy of the original masterpiece came under strict scrutiny. Objects of daily use were treated as art pieces when **Andy Warhol** (1928 – 87), an American artist, film director, producer and a leading figure in the visual arts movement known as pop art, famously created an exhibit of Campbell’s soup cans. One of the movement’s important theorists, **Linda Hutcheon** (1947), a Canadian academic of literary theory and criticism, opera, and Canadian studies, and a University Professor Emeritus in the Department of English and the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, argues that “postmodernism is both academic and popular, elitist and accessible” (44)

In the realm of literature, postmodernism amounted to a rejection of established literary genres and styles of writing. **Jean-Francois Lyotard** (1924 – 98), one of the major theorists of the movement defined it as “incredulity towards metanarratives”, i.e. a distrust of any over-arching, totalising stories which explain any aspect of external reality. As opposed to that, postmodernism embraced fragmentation, irony, paradox and favored new forms of expression with experimented with traditional literary values. This meant that popular literature was to be considered as much a part of authentic literature as any other form of writing. Gradually, the difference between popular literature, often known as genre fiction, and what was considered serious literature seemed to be collapsing. Critics like **Lev Grossman** (1969), declared that genre fiction is the technology that will disrupt the literary novel as we know it. In other words, the need of the hour was to redefine existing literary forms and welcome experimentation of different kinds. And popular literature or genre fiction was seen as the tool that can bring about this revolution in literature and literary criticism as well. Having said that, let us move on to examining the role of popular literature in helping create a gender discourse within a society next.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How has the breakdown of the distinction between high and low culture influenced the critical approach to popular literature?

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3.5 GENDER AND POPULAR LITERATURE

Popular literature (and by extension, popular culture) plays an important role in the creation of the dominant gender discourse within a society. Feminist theory has often articulated its discontent with the relative lack of representation of women and female experiences in popular literature. Even when women find representation, it is often in the form of hackneyed stereotypes which propagate the patriarchal mindset of the society. Feminist theorists contend that women are either portrayed as objects of sexual attention or as performers of domestic labour. They are usually confined to the household and their role in the public domain remains marginal and ineffectual.

Such gendered stereotypes can be found in several genres of popular literature. For instance, detective fiction has been called a male based genre where a woman's role is often reduced to the victim or the occasional love interest. Even as the Golden Age of detective fiction was dominated largely by female writers such as **Agatha Christie** (1890 – 1976), and **Dorothy Sayers** (1893 – 1957), critics argued that the visibility and representation of female characters remained rather skewed. Similarly, the romance genre has also been studied by critics like **Tania Modleski** (1949), as an inherently patriarchal inscription where the female protagonist is shown as a young, virginal heroine obsessed with finding romantic love. Interestingly, the romance genre seems to propagate the traditional gender roles of the “angel in the house” or “the devil in the flesh” (**Showalter**), characteristically found in works of Victorian novelists like Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, who are often regarded as the precursors of the popular romance genre. The spy thriller, another important genre of popular literature, is known for sexualising the female body and making it available to the male gaze. Writing about the medium of cinema, **Laura Mulvey** (1942), argues that the female body is objectified for the pleasure of the male viewer. Therefore, a major strand of feminist criticism has argued that by under-representing and misrepresenting women characters and female centric issues, popular cultures furthers gender inequality and patriarchal ideologies.

At the same time, certain feminist critics have stressed the need to use popular culture as a tool of resistance against the dominant patriarchal order. **Michele Barrett** (1949), asserts that feminists must attempt to influence mass media and reach a wider audience by creating a distinctly feminine mode of expression (Makinen 9). Besides conceptualising novel forms of writing, critics like **Merja Makinen** (1953), have attempted to read popular genres against the grain and

look for latent feminist impulses. Attention has also shifted towards analysing women’s roles as consumers or readers of a huge body of popular literature. Instead of being seen as passive consumers of patriarchal norms, women are understood as active readers capable of subversive alternative interpretations of texts. Over the years, there has been a marked shift in the registers of representation of gender and sexuality in popular literature from all genres. It is now commonplace for women and female experiences to occupy center stage; at the same time, popular literature has also explored the fluidity of sexualities and has become more inclusive of queer experiences.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Comment on the relationship between popular literature and feminist theory?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

As contemporary critical approaches have opened up new realms of study and analysis, popular literature has occupied a very significant position within the larger cultural realm. It is now seen as a body of writing which both shapes and responds to contemporary ideological beliefs about different issues like politics, gender, environment etc. Popular literature has also become more politically conscious and inclusive in nature as it caters to a more diverse set of audiences. It has grown prolifically in terms of its richness and variety as new genres have been added and traditional genres have been modified over the years. The digital turn in popular culture has also brought about massive changes in the constitution of popular culture which has now moved to digital platforms and publishing methods. Consequently, not only have the content and themes undergone a paradigm shift, but the forms of writing have also evolved as internet blogs and micro-fiction are now immensely popular among the masses. Clearly, the growing legitimacy received by popular literature has led to a proliferation in this field. As the body of literature grows and diversifies, this is accompanied by an evolution in the critical methodologies as well. These are some of the aspects we have looked at in this unit.

3.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read section 3.2 carefully and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read section 3.3 carefully and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read section 3.4 carefully and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Read section 3.5 carefully and then answer in your own words.

3.8 GLOSSARY

- Enlightenment** : an intellectual movement of the late 17th and early 18th century which prioritized human reason, rationality and individualism. The Age of Enlightenment was marked by great developments in the scientific, political and philosophical fields.
- Feminism** : Feminism is a set of beliefs and a movement which is premised on the equality of the sexes. In its rich history of struggle, several movements have been launched which have fought for women's rights in the personal and the political realm.
- Genre** : genre is a category of literary composition or a particular style of writing. This categorization is done on the basis of content or form. For example, detective fiction and science fiction are some examples of genres of popular literature.
- Ideology** : Ideology is a set of ideas and beliefs through which the external world is understood. This concept has played a major role in political and philosophical thought, especially in Marxist theory where it has been equated with 'false consciousness' among other things.
- Marxism** : Marxism is an economic or social system which is premised in the theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Among other things, it employs a materialistic approach and analyses the modes and relations to production to understand social and economic phenomenon.
- Metanarratives** : Metanarrative is an overarching story or a grand narrative that seeks to explain historical, social and cultural phenomenon which have heavily influenced people's beliefs and experiences.

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UNIT 4 POPULAR LITERATURE TODAY

Structure

- 4.0 Objective
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Brief History of Popular Literature
- 4.3 Visual Turn in Popular Literature
- 4.4 Young Adult Literature
- 4.5 Digital Texts and Popular Literature
- 4.6 Gender Politics and Popular Literature
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.9 Glossary
- 4.10 Suggested Readings & References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will take a comprehensive look at the current trends in popular literature, which is constituted by a vast number of literary genres. This body of writing is inherently dynamic in nature as it constantly responds to social, cultural, political and economic changes. At the same time, several transformations are influenced by changes in production, distribution and consumption of literary texts.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

With advances in technology, modes of publishing and readership have also shifted, resulting in iconic changes in the very nature of texts. Considering all these factors, this unit will look at some key developments in the field of popular literature, both in terms of the thematic thrust of literary works and the formal mechanics of representation and distribution of texts. Let us begin with a brief history of Popular Literature.

4.2 BRIEF HISTORY OF POPULAR LITERATURE

As a body of writing, popular literature has evolved drastically over the years, as has the critical body of writing surrounding it. Earlier, it was conventional to dismiss popular literature as being formulaic or reductive in nature, something which did not merit rigorous critical study. This prejudice existed as early as the nineteenth century when Matthew Arnold established a binary between “popular” and “culture” in his book titled *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold blamed popular literature for the growing social decay in London while cultural works written by canonical authors like **John Milton** and **William Shakespeare** were deemed capable of educating and enlightening the masses. A similar, albeit more nuanced, stance was adopted by the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School who coined the term “Culture Industry” to refer to all products of popular culture including literature, music, television etc. Theodore Ardono believed that popular culture was governed by the logic of profitability and had lost any sense of artistic

autonomy. This led him to declare that products of popular culture further strengthen existing status quo and numb the masses into cultural, social and political submission.

However, dominant critical understanding of popular literature has changed radically over the years. It was precisely the formulaic nature of certain genres of popular fiction like detective fiction and science fiction that made them ideal for a structuralist study. Such an approach studied these genres for patterns and structures and how these interacted with social, cultural and political frameworks. Popular literature was now being seen as a body of writing which reflects the deeper undercurrents of a society. The decisive change came with the emergence of postmodernism which challenged the rigid division between high and low forms of art. As Dominic Strinati argues, "There are no longer any agreed or inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture" (213). Postmodernism encouraged experimentation in writing practices and rejected the supremacy of established canonical forms of literature. As a result, genre fiction, which was early relegated to the margins of literary writing, now assumed center stage. The age-old distinction between serious and elite forms of literature on the one hand, and mass-produced, low art on the other hand, begins to collapse towards the end of the twentieth century. This phenomenon gave a huge impetus to the field of popular literature which witnessed a major phase of growth and renewal. Newer forms of writing emerged while certain traditional ones were redefined to fit the needs of the present generation. These changes, which are discussed in detail in the following sections, were felt both in the content and form of popular literature. In the following sections, we will look at certain key trends in contemporary popular literature by discussing the most prominent forms and genres of representations.

4.3 VISUAL TURN IN POPULAR LITERATURE

The last few decades have witnessed the rise of visual forms of storytelling. One can argue that such forms like comics and cartoons have always existed; however, they now command a more authoritative role in the literary domain. In order to better understand such forms of representations, we will trace a literary history of the comic form. After much deliberation, **Scott McCloud**, in his pioneering work on comics titled *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, defines the comic form as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (9). The fact that the term comic was still in need of a concrete definition as late as 1993 (the year of publication of the abovementioned book) hints towards its relative novelty as a recognised academic discipline. Even though comics have been in circulation for a long time, they have sparked academic interest only in recent times. As McCloud attempts to trace a formal history of the medium, he goes back to a pre-Columbian picture manuscript discovered in 1519 and a 230 foot long tapestry detailing the Norman Conquest as possible antecedents (McCloud 10-12). Perhaps, a more contemporary corollary would be the comic strip which emerged in the United States of America just before the twentieth century in the form of recurring narratives in newspapers. *The Yellow Kid*, created by **Richard F Outcault** and published in Joseph Pulitzer's New York World is often regarded as the first of such comic strips. This was followed by the emergence of the comic book in the 1930's. A comic book, usually thirty-two pages long, is either a 'collection of comic strip stories or is made up of one sustained story, often an installment in a series" (Chute 453). At around the same time, we saw the rise of

the superhero trope in comics as the character of Superman was first introduced in 1938.

The beginning of the Golden Age of the Comic Book is said to have been in 1938 with the debut of the Superman Series. Two American comic book companies merged to create what is now famously known as the DC Comics. Superman as you must be aware is a fictional superhero, created by **Jerry Siegel** and the artist **Joe Shuster**, in 1938. *Superman* is a DC comic superhero whose adventures have also been adapted to a number of radio serials, movies, and television shows.

Superman was born on the planet Krypton and sent to earth as a baby, in a small spaceship just before his home planet was destroyed. His spaceship lands in a fictional town in rural America and he is adopted by farmers Jonathan and Martha Kent, who name him Clark Kent. Eventually he develops superhuman strength and abilities, and his foster parents advise him to use his abilities to serve and benefit humanity, and he becomes a vigilante crime fighter. He then creates an alter ego of sorts to protect his secret he changes into a colorful costume and becomes the “*Superman*” when fighting crime. The normal guy Clark Kent works as a journalist for the Daily Planet and he has a love interest Lois Lane who is a fellow journalist. Superman was not the first superhero character, but he was able to popularise the archetype of the superhero and he became the standard and was to become the best-selling superhero character in American comic books right up to the 1980s. The first big budget *Superman* Film (1978), starred **Christopher Reeves** and was the most successful Superman feature film till today. Superman was followed by *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983) and *Super Girl* (1984) starring **Helen Slater** as Super Girl (Superman’s Cousin), *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987), and *Superman Returns* (2006). The kind of success that the Superman comics and later films were to receive spawned a new industry altogether – a new genre of characters with secret identities, with superhuman capabilities, powers and colorful outfits – the superhero. So we had, *Batman*, *Batman and Robin*, *Wonder Woman*, *Plastic Man*, *Green Lantern* and *Flash* amongst the superheroes who followed in the footsteps of *Superman*. *Captain Marvel* was another extremely popular superhero comic during the 1940s. Strangely enough the sales of comic books increased during World War II, as they were cost effective, easy to carry, inspired patriotism and depicted good triumphing over evil hence, the huge popularity as the narratives reflected the events and values of the times. Because of World War I and now II, Pro-American characters became very popular, and *Captain America*, was one such superhero whose creation was as a result of trying to aid America’s war efforts. Needless to say *Captain America* wore the stars and stripes as his costume. *Captain America* (1941) was a Marvel Comic publication. From its first publication to the *Avengers* movie series the popularity of Marvel Comics and *Captain America* is well documented modern popular literary history.

Going back to tracing the history of the comic book as a genre in popular literature, we realise that the two decades of the 1940s and the 1950s were also marked by widespread protest against the macabre and gory content of comic books. These protests were conducted by groups of educationalists, journalists and psychologists, who raised concerns about the graphic description of violence and sexually provocative content in comics. Such content was considered inappropriate for moral and ethical reasons, especially in the case of young

children. As a result, a Comic Code Authority was formed in 1954 aimed at regulating the content of comics. The Underground Comics movement (also called the Comix movement), known for its *avant-gardism*, emerged in response to the censorship imposed by the Comic Code Authority. Comic artists created content related to themes like drug use, violence etc., which were expressly forbidden by the prevailing comic code. In the choice of their unconventional subject matter and their satirical mode of expression, the comix movement laid down the groundwork for the graphic novel.

In 1978, **Will Eisner's** *A Contract with God* was marketed as a graphic novel, the first recognised usage of the term. Though there is no strict definition of the term, it usually refers to a complete story told in one go in the comic form as opposed to a comic strip which is periodical in nature. Additionally, a graphic novel is usually associated with more serious and sophisticated thematic concerns unlike comic strips or books which were meant for consumption by children or teenagers. This genre tried to redeem comics from the accusations of moral depravity and carve a respectable place within literary circles and society at large. Today, the graphic novel is a well-recognized literary category, both within academic circles and within the commercial marketplace. In Block IV we will be looking at an Indian Graphic Novel – *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* by artists **Durgabai Vyam, Subhash Vyam** and writers **Srividya Natarajan** and **S Anand**.

For a large part of its history, the comic medium has been associated with juvenile entertainment. In the past, its subject matter had been limited to fantastical worlds, cartoon characters, superheroes, all of which had one thing in common- they were essentially a flight from reality. It was with the publication of works like **Art Spiegelman's** *Maus* (which narrates the tale of a Jewish Holocaust survivor) and **Marjane Sartapi's** *Persepolis* (an autobiographical narrative of a young girl in Iran) that the comic medium was employed for depicting serious subject matter which was firmly placed in a socio-historical context. Today, the graphic mode of storytelling has become a fundamental form of representation and the comic medium itself has grown by leaps and bounds. Hillary Chute has argues that 'graphic narrative' is a more appropriate term for the huge body of writing which uses the visual medium to tell stories. Besides Spiegelman's *Maus*, which received the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, several other graphic narratives have received popular and critical acclaim including **Joe Sacco's** *Palestine*, **Alison Bechdel's** *Fun Home*, **Alan Moore's** *Watchmen* etc. We shall briefly look at Young Adult Literature here at this point by way of introduction as we will be dealing with this category in Block 2 as well as Block 3 when we talk about Children's Literature and when we talk about **Shyam Selvadurai's** *Funny Boy* in Block 3.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How has the comic form evolved to become an integral part of popular literature today?

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4.4 YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

In order to truly understand the category of young adult literature, one has to understand the dynamics of the term ‘young adult’. The category of young adult literature is a fairly recent one. Earlier, it was understood as a subset of adolescent or children’s literature. It is important to study the various ideas which have historically informed the construction of childhood in order to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of young adult literature. Traditionally dominant representations of children are symptomatic of prevailing conceptions of childhood as much as they shape or create them. Childhood is a socially constructed category and its representations fall under certain preordained tropes – children as innocent, angelic creatures, children as vulnerable beings in need of adult protection or children as wise seers uncontaminated by the constraining rational knowledge of the adult world. However, critics of childhood studies believe that this was not always the case. **Phillipe Aries**, a social historian, demonstrates how attitudes to children have changed over time thereby creating the category of childhood. Aries argues that “in medieval society..., as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society” (Aries 125). According to Aries, attitudes regarding childhood, child rearing and families changed decisively in the sixteenth century with the emergence of capitalism. Aries’ study demonstrates that childhood is a socially and culturally constructed category and the prevalent attitudes toward childhood in a particular age are symptomatic of certain cultural and social discourses.

In recent times, several studies have focused on the investment of adults in defining childhood. **Diana Gittins** argues that “childhood, rather than a real or material state of being, is more an adult construction that, while apparently simple, in fact disguises a multitude of contradictory memories, desires and myths” (36). **Kincaid** argues that the child becomes an increasingly vacant category that maybe “a repository of cultural needs or fear not adequately disposed of elsewhere” (78). “The vacuity of the child” implies that the child “carries for us things we somehow cannot carry for ourselves” (Kincaid 79). One can infer that the myth of innocence is also a value that is enforced on the figure of the child by the adults and institution of the Victorian age.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, critics began to establish a difference between childhood and adolescence. According to **Karen Coats**, the term adolescence comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means to mature or become established (31). Earlier critics associated this stage of life with volatile behaviour, mood disruptions, and conflict with parents etc. (Hall). Literature which caters to this group of people often encapsulates the journey of growing up and the conflict between the demands of the society and the development of a unique, individual self. Alternatively, they offer imaginative release and wish fulfillment through fantasy and also indoctrinate certain social and cultural norms (Coats 30). Several dominant social and literary narratives including the *bildungsroman* invest a lot of faith in the idea of natural growth of children, according to which children are expected to grow up to become socially informed adults. Adolescence is seen as an interim period wherein children receive training which is meant to equip them for the adult world. This category of adolescence gradually took the name ‘young adult’ and has now become a staple genre of popular literature.

Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, published in 1942, is often recognised as the first novel written exclusively for teenagers. While earlier works dealt with romance, adventure and drug abuse, later works in the last decades of the twentieth century embraced the genres of horror, dystopia and fantasy. Today, YA literature is a broad spectrum of writing that includes iconic works like the *Harry Potter* Series, the *Hunger Games* series, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* etc. While young adult literature usually concerns itself with the life of a teenage or adolescent protagonist, its readership can vary across ages. Research has shown that 55 percent of the readers of YA literature are 18 years or older while the largest demographic of readers comes from the 30-44 age group (Hill 5).

The age bracket of the readership is one of the significant markers of defining young adult literature. While there is no single authoritative understanding of what constitutes this genre, several critics have identified certain salient features. **Bushman and Haas** define it as “literature for and about adolescents” (2) while **Stephens** argues that it is “a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent’s journey towards identity” (41). **Trites** writes “YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual” (20). YA literature is usually written as realistic fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, mystery, memoir etc. Over the years, YA fiction has played a pivotal role in “fomenting public opinion, cultural understandings of race, class and power” (Garcia 5). It simultaneously reinforces and challenges status quo in multiple social fields like gender, class, race etc. In the recent past, there has been a concerted effort to make YA more inclusive of diversity along gender, race and national lines. Contemporary YA literature responds to changing socio-cultural and political developments and mediates the relationship between youth and the world. According to Coats, today’s YA literature focuses on intersectionality and looks at the creation of social identities through a combination of class, race, ethnicity gender and sexual orientation. Let us now quickly move onto the digital world in the next section.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Contextualise the term ‘young adult’ and comment on its emergence. How has young adult literature carved its place within popular literature?

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4.5 DIGITAL TEXTS AND POPULAR LITERATURE

The interaction of technology and literature has resulted in several paradigm shifts in terms of production, distribution and consumption of works of literature. More importantly, it has forced us to re-think the fundamental qualities of a work of art. Broadly speaking, we will consider two kinds of transformations – firstly, cases where existing forms or genres of writing are revised and revamped

by the use of technology. The second category is constituted by the emergence of a distinct field sometimes known as electronic literature.

With modern means of communication, it is now possible for data to be shared instantly across the globe. This has facilitated a significant range of changes in the literary publishing industry. It is now possible to distribute and read literature via the internet or through specialised devices or platforms which are connected to each other through the internet. This has produced new styles of writing like internet blogs where individuals regularly upload content belonging to a broad range of writing. Similarly, other genres like microfiction have gained popularity. As the term itself indicates, these are small pieces of writing, sometimes only a few sentences long, ideal for sharing and reading on internet platforms. This mode of producing and consuming literature has also influenced the very ethos of the field of popular literature. One can argue that it has democratised this space in hitherto unknown ways and made it popular in the true sense of the word. It is now possible for any individual to find an audience for their literary creations online. By doing so, they bypass publishing houses, which have always acted as gatekeepers in the industry. Some of the most iconic books of popular literature in the recent past were in fact self-published including *Fifty Shades of Grey* by **E L James** which was originally featured as a piece of fan-fiction (a category of writing discussed later in the unit). Other examples include **Andy Weir's** *The Martian*, which began as a blog and later went on to become a literary bestseller and a successful Hollywood movie and **Rupi Kaur's** *milk and honey*, a collection of digital poems which were originally shared on social media platforms. This list is representative not only of a new model of publishing but it also speaks volumes about new sub-genres of popular literature which have become immensely popular.

Besides these developments, one has also witnessed the growth of electronic literature which excludes print literature that has been digitised. Instead, it is constituted by works that are 'digital born' i.e. first-generation digital objects created on a computer and usually meant to be read on a computer (Hayles). Electronic literature is in itself a rich body of writing and is further divided into categories like hypertext fiction which is characterised by linking structures and interactive fiction which has stronger game elements and narrative elements.

The sharing economy of the internet has also facilitated the formation of a strong body of fan-fiction, usually defined as "fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by someone else" (Pugh 9). This kind of fiction is created by impassioned readers and it usually combines different media and genre. Fan-fiction writers usually communicate with each other through the internet and create online communities for exchange and collaboration. Live Journal is one such immensely popular online platform where fans often transform their favorite books into different kinds of creative pieces and publish them online. Fan-fiction blurs the boundary between the author and the reader as the text becomes a live entity, constantly being reworked and revised. It is essential that the gender discourse is not relegated to the background so we shall look at gender next.

4.6 GENDER POLITICS AND POPULAR LITERATURE

Popular literature has always played a significant role in both establishing and questioning societal gender norms. Literature of the twenty-first century has

reflected the paradigm shifts that have taken place with regards to gender and sexuality. One sub-genre of popular fiction that has been massively popular in the last few decades is known as “Chick Lit”, a form of writing which features single women in their twenties or thirties living in an urban metropolis and managing the demands of a professional career and personal relationships. Chick Lit is a huge departure from the more traditional representations of women tinged with passivity and domesticity. In Chick Lit, the female characters are independent, ambitious, and they simultaneously seek romantic relationships. As with several other forms of popular genre fiction, Chick Lit is often derided as formulaic, trashy literature. However, its unprecedented popularity deserves to be studied as a cultural and academic phenomenon.

Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and HBO’s *Sex and the City* are often regarded as the precursors of this genre. Critics like **Stephanie Harzewski** believe that Chick Lit borrows elements from Jane Austen’s novel and the novel of manners of the eighteenth century. Novels categorised as Chick Lit are often characterised by a certain sense of intimacy and candor because of the use of the diary form of writing or the confessional first-person narrative. They reflect the lives of the modern-day woman the anxieties, desires and conflicts faced by her. While a majority of criticism has centred on the literary merit of such novels, it is perhaps more productive to study them as reflections of gender politics of the contemporary age. The popularity of Chick Lit has been analysed as a “re-feminization” of sorts (Dowd) which leads to the formation of a “woman’s culture” (Berlant) as it functions as a “commodified genre of intimacy” (Berlant). In other words, Chick Lit allows women to share their experiences with others and develop a collective of feelings and emotions.

This form of writing also raises several questions about the status of feminism as a political philosophy. Instead of championing the women’s cause and fighting for equality and justice, Chick Lit is more invested in portraying the real struggles faced by women in this day and age. This is also resonant of post feminism, defined as a sensibility constituted by a number of inter-related themes concerning gender relations (Gill). **Gill** argues that we have progressed to a stage where there is no single, authoritative understanding of feminism. Instead, multiple interpretations of what it means to be feminist can coinhere within the same framework. Chick Lit has been studied within this paradigm as a form of writing where representation of women is not constricted by the demands of feminism or patriarchy. It strives to portray the authenticity of the female experience while also raising issues about sexuality, identity, agency etc.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Gender norms are often cemented and challenged through works of popular literature? Discuss Chick Lit as a genre of popular literature with special emphasis on its gender politics.

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4.7 LET US SUM UP

Popular literature is traditionally defined in terms of its mass appeal and commercial success. Owing to its intimate relationship with market forces and demands of capitalism, the ethos of this form of writing is always influenced by contemporary socio-cultural phenomenon. The key shifts discussed in detail in this unit are a result of such negotiations. Interestingly, the current landscape of popular literature is a curious blend of the old and the new, the traditional and the experimental. On the one hand, certain older forms of writing have been re-invented; for example, comics have given way to full length graphic novels; while on the other hand, new media technology has given rise to new forms of representation altogether like blogs, microfiction etc. Contemporary popular literature is also characterised by an increased degree of audience participation as the culture of fandom has made its way into production practices. As common people vocalised their opinion with vigour, popular literature also acknowledged its lack of diversity, making way for a rich spectrum of representation of marginalities of all kinds. It suffices to say that these are exciting times for popular literature which is poised to grow both quantitatively and qualitatively in the near future.

4.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read section 4.3 carefully, and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read section 4.4 carefully, and then answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read section 4.6 carefully, and then answer in your own words.

4.9 GLOSSARY

Bildungsroman : Narrative which charts the process of physical and psychological growth and development of a young protagonist. A bildungsroman is characterized by the relationship between an individual and the society he or she inhabits.

Frankfurt School : The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923 by a group of Jewish German intellectuals including the likes of Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. One of the major ideological focus of the Frankfurt School was the critique of Enlightenment, an intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th century which sought to comprehend the world through human reason and rationality.

Postmodernism : This movement rose to prominence towards the latter half of the twentieth century after the period of high modernism in literature. One of the central tenets of postmodern thought was a militant rejection of the division between high and popular art

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