

Negotiating Critical Depth and Commercial Success
in Contemporary English Fiction

By

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

The line between mass-market appeal and literary excellence has become more ambiguous in an era when literature is both an artistic pursuit and a commercial commodity. While some works succeed both critically and commercially, others are deemed as lacking literary merit despite their wide popularity. This thesis is the study of the commercialization of contemporary English popular literature that focuses on how certain novels balance mass market appeal with literary merit while some novels fail to achieve excellence despite having enormous popularity. The novels as primary sources are- *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Nam-Joo, *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover and *The Housemaid's Secret* by Freida McFadden. This study is based on feminist literary theories and theories of cultural studies. This study examines how cultural norms and market forces influence literature, raising the question of what constitutes literary worth in a time when books serve as both consumer products and creative expressions. This research questions rigid distinctions between "high" and "low" literature by examining the conflict between business and creativity, providing a nuanced view of the creation, promotion, and consumption of contemporary fiction. In the end, this study aims to add to the continuing discussions over the changing function of literature in a society where success is frequently measured by sales rather than merit.

Key Words: Bestseller, Literary merit, Mass-market, Feminism, Contemporary, Media.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, whose unwavering support and encouragement have guided me through every step of this journey. To my parents, for their endless patience and belief in my abilities; to my friends, for their constant motivation and understanding; and to all the readers and writers who inspire a love for literature—this work is a small tribute to your influence and inspiration.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background: These days, book marketplaces are flooded with new publications, many of which draw readers from all over the world and sell in incredible quantities. Bestsellers are often advertised as must-reads, occupy most of the display shelves, and spread extensively on social media. However, the fundamental question still stands: are these widely read novels only a consequence of market demand, or do they possess genuine artistic and intellectual merit? This topic is fundamental about contemporary fiction, as it has grown more difficult to draw a line between critical acclaim and economic success. One of the most significant turning points in literary history was the Victorian era, especially in terms of how literature, reading, and business interacted. The creation and consumption of books were transformed during this period by fast industrialization, improvements in printing technology, and the emergence of a middle class that was literate. Fiction evolved from an elite-only activity to a popular kind of entertainment. The popularity of three-volume novels, the development of circulating libraries, and the low cost of serialization in periodicals made reading a popular home hobby as well as a lucrative business. Writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Dickens were well-known and had both critical and financial success. Their serialized writings, which combined social critique and moral contemplation, were read by large audiences. Thus, the Victorian literary marketplace prepared the way for contemporary popular fiction, a genre where art and business collided and narrative and commerce met.

There was also a persistent conflict between "high" and "low" kinds of writing throughout this time. Concerns about taste and cultural refinement grew along with literacy. Scholars and reviewers started to distinguish between "merely entertaining" and "morally uplifting" or "artfully complex" literature. A cultural hierarchy that has persisted into the twenty-first

century was established by the growth of penny dreadfuls, serialized romance novels, and spectacular literature. Although writers like Dickens and the Brontë sisters showed that fame and creativity could coexist, detractors frequently charged that they catered too much to the masses. The main contention of this thesis—that the line separating literary excellence from public appeal is not absolute but rather historically and ideologically constructed—is foreshadowed by these early differences between "serious" and "popular" literature.

The publishing business progressively embraced the capitalist methods of branding, advertising, and commodification as the literary market changed over the 20th century. In the global economy of cultural consumption, literature evolved from an art form to a product. The distinction between economic activity and artistic production has become increasingly hazy due to contemporary marketing methods, celebrity authorship, and media endorsements. This dynamic has become more pronounced in the digital era; social media sites and online merchants now have a greater influence on reading habits than do conventional reviewers or educational establishments. Global marketplaces are dominated by bestsellers, whose visibility is increased by influencer culture and algorithms. As a result, criteria for evaluating literary merit have become more arbitrary and are now impacted by factors such as virality and exposure in addition to superiority in terms of aesthetics or intelligence.

Today's book markets are overrun with new releases, many of which attract readers worldwide and achieve remarkable sales figures. Bestsellers are frequently marketed as "must-reads," take up the majority of display shelves, and gain popularity quickly on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. But the basic issue remains: do these popular novels have true creative and intellectual value, or are they merely the result of consumer demand? Since it has grown more challenging to distinguish between critical acclaim and financial success, this subject is central to current literary conversation. In a time when literature is produced for both cultural and economic reasons, the criteria used to assess a novel's worth

are evolving. Here, commercial purposes refer to the commodification of fiction — the process by which novels are produced and marketed as consumer goods within a capitalist system, where financial success often outweighs or even defines cultural significance. Literature today functions within a network of industries: editors, marketers, online influencers, and publishing houses all collaborate to manufacture not only books but also literary trends. This commodification has altered the way readers and critics perceive artistic value. Books that are perceived as "high" literature are often characterized by linguistic complexity, originality, and engagement with universal human questions. By contrast, "low" or "mass" literature tends to be more accessible, emotionally driven, and formulaic.

However, as many theorists contend, this dichotomy has more to do with social hierarchies and cultural elitism than it does with inherent creative merit. Rather than reflecting objective measurements of worth, what is deemed poor or popular frequently reflects institutional prejudices and class-based disparities.

The notion of "high" literature in the nineteenth century was characterized by cultural snobbery. In his well-known work *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Matthew Arnold positioned literature as a moral and intellectual compass for society by describing culture as "the best which has been thought and said in the world." This ideal, continued by modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, elevated difficulty, innovation, and introspection as hallmarks of literary greatness. By valuing intricacy over accessibility and reaffirming the idea that widespread appeal denoted mediocrity, modernism solidified the distinction between art and entertainment. By eliminating works that were considered "commercial" or "formulaic" and canonizing others, academic institutions further solidified this hierarchy. A large portion of the cultural conflict this research looks at is rooted in the historical division between literature as art and literature as pleasure. Nonetheless, this order

has been reexamined in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The idea that artistic value is inevitably diminished by popularity has been contested by postmodern and cultural theorists. Authors like as Colleen Hoover, Cho Nam-Joo, Freida McFadden and Gillian Flynn demonstrate the debate's ongoing significance.

In addition to meditating on difficult societal topics like gender, power, and identity, their works captivate enormous worldwide audiences. This is how modern popular fiction functions at the nexus of art and business, demonstrating how cultural outputs both reflect and influence societal ideals. The goal of this study is to investigate this junction by examining how certain best-selling books maintain literary depth while others put an emphasis on market appeal and emotional immediacy.

The main sources of inspiration for this thesis' theoretical framework are Cultural Studies and Feminist Literary Theory, namely the theories of Judith Butler and Raymond Williams. The idea of cultural materialism, which sees literature as a cultural product inextricably linked to its social and economic setting, was first presented by Raymond Williams, a Marxist critic and a pioneer in the field of Cultural Studies. Williams argued that all forms of cultural expression, including popular fiction, reflect and have an impact on material existence, challenging the elitist idea that culture is the domain of the educated elite. Williams believes that literature represents the ideals, conflicts, and ideologies of its epoch and is a component of a larger social process.

Therefore, even "low" or mass literature has a significant impact on how people think. His viewpoint makes it possible for this research to view popular books as places of negotiation between ideology, creativity, and business rather than as meaningless forms of amusement.

A further perspective for examining how gender is portrayed in these texts is provided by

Judith Butler's feminist theory of gender performativity. Butler contends that gender is a socially produced performance, a sequence of repeated behaviours influenced by cultural norms, rather than an underlying character. Examining how books depict, uphold, or challenge conventional gender norms is made possible by applying this idea to popular fiction. In this sense, works like *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and *Gone Girl* are especially pertinent as they examine the commonplace realities of women living under patriarchal structures while still being promoted as easily readable, emotionally stirring stories. Butler's theory highlights the conflict between social critique and marketability by shedding light on how feminist issues are both represented and commercialised in modern publishing.

Terry Eagleton's theories, which build upon these theoretical underpinnings, enhance this study's examination of literary worth within a capitalist framework. By highlighting the ideological aspect of writing, Eagleton, one of the most well-known Marxist literary theorists of the late 20th century, builds on Raymond Williams' observations. Eagleton contends in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) that "literature" is a cultural construct influenced by historical causes and class ideology rather than a neutral or timeless concept. He argues that organizations with economic and cultural clout, such as publishers, reviewers, and academics, frequently decide what constitutes "great" literature. This theory immediately relates to the main focus of this thesis, which is the formation and contestation of the concept of literary greatness under capitalist systems of production and distribution.

Eagleton's theories are especially pertinent to popular fiction today, which blurs the line between mass production and creative creativity. This research is possible to investigate whether today's best-selling novels are praised for their artistic accomplishments or for conforming to market trends because of his assertion that literary value is ideologically generated. Eagleton contends that the publishing business functions as a component of the

ideological apparatus of capitalism, transforming readers into customers and literature into a commodity. As a result, audiences are directed toward books that support prevailing societal ideals, entangling even the act of reading. By bridging the gap between cultural theory and economic research, Eagleton's paradigm provides a way to comprehend how popular fiction simultaneously reflects and defies the ideological circumstances surrounding its creation.

This thesis looks at how some modern novels, such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Nam-Joo, *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover, and *The Housemaid's Secret* by Freida McFadden, illustrate the relationship between literary merit and commercial success within this theoretical framework. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and *Gone Girl* are two instances of works that strike a balance between structural and thematic complexity and mass-market appeal. Nam-Joo's socially aware realism transforms ordinary women's experiences into collective resistance, while Flynn's complex narrative structure and psychological nuance shatter the stereotype that genre fiction cannot have artistic merit. The opposite end of the spectrum is shown by *It Ends With Us* and *The Housemaid's Secret*, which are novels that become extremely successful due to their emotional appeal and digital marketing strategies but lack the intricacy or originality that is typically connected to literary renown.

This thesis aims to shed light on how popular fiction reflects larger social and ideological conflicts by examining these works via the combined lenses of feminist theory and cultural studies. It makes the case that the commercialisation of literature alters the standards by which literary value is assessed rather than just lowering artistic standards. Novels may become both consumer goods and cultural artifacts in a market where social media visibility frequently trumps critical assessment, both influencing and being influenced by capitalist

society. The ultimate goal of this research is to comprehend how, in the current literary environment, popular literature serves as a site of negotiation between art and business, ideology and individualism, critique and consumption.

1.2 Literature Review: Before studying how certain novels establish a balance between popularity and artistic accomplishment, it is crucial to first identify and comprehend what, in the eyes of critics and scholars, makes a literary work meritorious. In the article *Measuring Literary Merit*, Edward Graves states that there is no definitive way to evaluate literary merit. What he believes is that it can be subjective, often shaped by the reader's extent of enjoyment and sense of emotion (Graves, 1928, p. 330). This indicates that unique experiences and emotions greatly influence how one appreciates literature, since a reader may find something profound and impactful while others may not. In contrast, Charles Brandon Repp gives a clearer concept of the possible elements of a valuable literary work in his paper, *Truth, Justification and Literary Merit*. He suggests that a piece of literature would be preferred and considered meritorious if it consists of properties, such as- possessing positive aesthetic qualities, being expressive of emotions, formally complex and coherent, intellectually challenging etc. (Repp, 2013, p. 3) As opposed to depending just on subjective pleasure or emotional resonance, he lists several distinct characteristics that might be used as markers of literary quality. He asserts that these characteristics taken together raise a work's chances of being regarded as "meritorious," particularly in scholarly and critical circles. By providing a set of comparatively objective criteria that transcend popularity or personal preference, this viewpoint contributes to the discussion of literary worth.

In the current book publishing environment, literature is no longer only seen as an intellectual or artistic endeavor; it is now seen as a commercial commodity that is influenced by consumer preferences and market demands. With publishers focusing on the bottom line, it is very common to have books that have been judged based on how well they will sell over how creative or thought-provoking they are. This transformation confuses the difference between literature as art and literature as a commodity and raises serious questions about what literary excellence is and whether or not success in the marketplace is a factor to consider. In the article *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialisation of Literature*, Shuyu Kong observes that the term "consuming literature" is used to describe how literature has come to be a product that can be readily bought, marketed, and disposed of; often at the cost of its creative merit, because of its commodification. By doing so, literature is at risk of becoming less of an art form. The acts of profit-driven publishers, who frequently give preference to books that appeal to the lowest common denominator, demonstrate this tendency and place more emphasis on public appeal than quality. The employment of aggressive marketing strategies and misleading hype, the tendency to stereotype writers or limit their work to certain, marketable categories, and an unsettling emphasis on style over substance are all included. This diminishes the range and depth of literary expression in addition to restricting creative freedom. (Kong, 2005, p. 8). Additionally, creating movie adaptations of those unclaimed bestsellers is another part of commercialisation of literature. Adding to that, nowadays, readers are more interested in the book's plot than its creative merits. With its selection of characters and other elements that will grab the public's attention, particularly readers, cinema greatly aided in the story's dissemination. Inquiring, readers will want to read the book's original version of the movie script. (Benmalek, 2019, p. 9)

The selected primary text for the research includes *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn. It is a powerful illustration of a modern book that strikes a balance between literary value and mass market appeal.

Soon after its release in 2012, Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* went to the top of the bestseller charts. Even though Gillian Flynn had already published two popular books, *Gone Girl* was the literary sensation of 2012 and brought her name to the public's notice. In 2014, the novel was made into a movie, which became an immediate box office success and increased interest among a large audience (Rautiainen, 2021, p. 2). *Gone Girl* can be examined through the lens of feminist literary theories because it critically examines the performance of gender roles, the demands of idealized femininity, and the power disparity within marriage. The character played by Amy Dunne challenges the conventional notion of the "ideal wife," revealing how social norms may suppress women's personalities. The novel also criticizes the way the media portrays women, emphasizing female rage as a form of resistance and blurring the distinction between victim and criminal. The goal of Flynn's *Gone Girl* is to present unpleasant and flawed female characters who society would normally be accused of having undesirable, hideous, and hateful emotions. Flynn was quite direct about her views on gender equality, which she believes is lacking if diverse women in literature are not given equal representation. Therefore, only when women are portrayed realistically and individuals like Amy are accepted in both fiction and reality will genuine liberation be attained (Najam, Jawad & Ishaque, 2022, p. 53)

In the study, *Transforming the Unsaid into Actions in Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Judy Joo Ae-Bae states that silence may frequently become communication through the effort of listening. The 2016 novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Nam Joo inspired a feminist movement in

South Korea. Cho uses many forms of communication, including silence, howling, mental episodes, and footnotes, to talk about gendered inequalities rather than developing a character that is explicitly advocating feminism. Jiyoung's silence externalizes the thoughts and feelings that many Korean women feel but choose not to express. In the end, the novel challenges readers to listen to what is not spoken, respond to the injustices Jiyoung has seen, and transform what Jiyoung found difficult to express into a feminist act, a communal voice, and an act of solidarity (Bae, 2024)

It Ends With Us, written in 2016, a bestselling romantic novel by Colleen Hoover, addresses serious topics including trauma, psychological resilience, and domestic violence. Because of its simple language, predictable storyline, and conformity to genre standards, the work has not gained much critical attention in academic circles, even though readers have commended it for its emotional intensity and relatability. As a result, it provides a useful example of how economic success does not necessarily correspond with literary excellence, posing significant queries regarding the influence of accessibility, genre bias, and personal effect on literary worth. Lucy Rouse argues in her article named, *It Ends With Us was never a romance novel*, argues that Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* is a novel that many people on social media reject due to the sharp mismatch between its marketing and its content. Despite its pink, flowery covers, *It Ends with Us* is a novel about domestic abuse that is marketed and stored as a romance. (Rouse, 2024). American novelist Colleen Hoover has written 26 romance books in the young adult and new adult categories. Her controversial and challenging writing subjects are also what have made her most famous. Because of her social media presence, *It Ends with Us* has attracted a lot of reader interest. This was the best-selling print book in 2022 and remained on the New York Times Best Seller List for more than ninety weeks. It was released in forty-three languages. Because *It Ends with Us* is so full of drama and painful

truths, the issue of domestic violence emerged. This has since sparked debate in society because some people think the book romanticizes the abuse. (Hassannudin & Bazlan, 2024). *It Ends with Us*'s reception therefore brings to light a major problem in modern literature: how the demands of social media marketing and broad appeal can blur or distort a novel's thematic meaning, ultimately making it difficult to distinguish between serious fiction and enjoyable reading. This makes it a crucial case study for comprehending how, in the current marketed literary environment, popular literature is read and assessed.

Elisavet Rozaki claimed in his study, *Reading Between the Likes: The Influence of BookTok on Reading Culture*, the fact that *It Ends With Us* wasn't published in 2022 is much more intriguing. The novel was first released in 2016. Due to 21,000 copies being sold in its first month, it briefly appeared on the best-sellers list. However, the sales leveled down right away. *It Ends With Us* saw a comeback in popularity four years later, from 2020 to 2021, in part because of the BookTok community's impact on TikTok. After BookTok users found the book and gave it positive reviews, sales eventually hit an incredible 29,000 copies per week, with 308,000 copies sold in 2021 alone. As of April 2023, videos using the hashtag #ItEndsWithUs had gathered three billion views. (Rozaki, 2023, p. 9). The author adds that Booktok is a community in a popular social medium named TikTok.

The conflict between literary merit and mass appeal has been examined in previous research, but few studies have explicitly contrasted how contemporary bestsellers handle gender politics in this area. Through the comparative analysis of the novels, this study contributes a distinct viewpoint to the discourse on the construction, challenges, and negotiation of literary value in a commercial publishing system. This research stands out for combining feminist literary theories with theory of cultural studies to examine how these writings convey gender

and power, as well as how their popularity, marketing, and reception affect how valuable they appear to be. The objective of this study is to challenge strict dichotomies like "literary vs. commercial" and "serious vs. popular" by demonstrating how these novels blur these distinctions and highlight the role that sociocultural factors play in influencing both reader involvement and literacy assessment. By doing this, it adds to more broad debates on how literature is changing in a society that is driven by the market and dominated by the media.

1.3 Research Gap: The majority of current research looks at *Gone Girl*, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, *It Ends With Us*, *The Housemaid's Secret* separately, despite the fact that they have drawn attention for their themes of gender and popularity. In addition, the combination of feminist literary theory and theories of cultural studies has not been fully applied to the question of why some bestsellers are recognized as having literary merit while others, despite having a large readership, are written off as "low literature." Comparative research on this topic is scarce. By contrasting the novels, this research aims to close that gap by demonstrating how media reception, gender politics, and commercialisation influence modern assessments of literary merit.

1.4 Methodology: Using a qualitative, analytical methodology, this research investigates how contemporary English popular fiction strikes a balance between literary value and mass-market appeal. The four novels; *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Nam-Joo, *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover and *The Housemaid's Secret* by Freida McFadden are closely studied and critically analysed. Raymond Williams's theory of "cultural materialism" and Judith Butler's feminist theory are used to study these works. Williams and Butler offer contrasting frameworks for this research: Williams places the

performances of gender in fiction within the larger cultural field where literature acts as both art and commodity, while Butler emphasizes how gender is acted and disputed in fiction.

1.5 Research question:

1. In what ways do bestselling novels reflect the struggle between literary merit and market demand in contemporary literature?
2. How do some popular novels successfully combine strong storytelling with important social and literary themes?
3. Why are some bestselling novels seen as less valuable even when many readers enjoy them?

1.6 Thesis statement:

This thesis explores the commercialisation of contemporary popular English literature by examining how novels such as *Gone Girl* and *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, successfully balance mass market appeal with literary merit, while others, like *It Ends With Us* and *The Housemaid's Secret*, achieve widespread popularity but fall short of critical acclaim, highlighting the complex relationship between commercial success and literary value. It looks at how, in a capitalist publishing system, literary worth is created, negotiated, and occasionally eclipsed by business concerns. This research examines how commercial factors, social conventions, and cultural ideologies influence these writings' reception and prestige in addition to their aesthetic and thematic aspects.

Chapter 2: Thrills and Truths: Gender, Power and Popularity in Flynn and Cho

Gone Girl (2012), a psychological thriller by Gillian Flynn, uses a dual narrative framework to examine the dissolution of a contemporary marriage. The novel begins with Amy Dunne going missing on her fifth marriage anniversary, and her husband Nick is eventually suspected. The story, which is told in alternating chapters from Nick's point of view and Amy's journal entries, first portrays Nick as a distant and potentially dangerous spouse and Amy as a devoted wife. However, it becomes clear as the storyline develops that neither of the narrators can be trusted completely. The story then takes a complete turn midway into the novel, when we discover that Amy isn't dead at all but is just playing a trick on Nick by pretending. She abducted herself, as a form of revenge for him cheating on her. This plot development allows Amy to have a dominant figure in her life who controls the story, the media, and later her husband instead of being a victim. On a thematic level, *Gone Girl* is a story of how it is possible to embody identity, both personally or publicly. Both Nick and Amy invent an alternate personality: Nick in his media presentation as the heart-broken and mourning husband, and Amy in her carefully prepared journal pages and her "Cool Girl" persona. Flynn laments the way people change their identity to fit in society, especially in relationships that involve love. In her monologue, "Cool Girl", Amy questions more profound gender norms of contemporary culture by describing the ways women are often pressured to emulate male interests to be liked. Another theme of interest is the truth manipulated by the media. With news stories turning the abduction of Amy into popular entertainment, the investigation into her disappearance is reduced to a media frenzy. Flynn shows how easily appearance and emotional appeal can be used to move the masses instead of facts. The tone of Nick, his body language speaks more than the evidence does about whether he is remorseful or not. Power and gender norms are also put to the test in the novel. Although there is some moral ambiguity, Amy is not a passive female victim as depicted as a

stereotype. She shows her authority through lies by playing around with people surrounding her by using stereotypes about women. Her subsequent relationship with Nick and the moment of their reunion result in a truly ironic and disturbing culmination where justice, honesty, and love are lost in the name of pretence and domination. *Gone Girl* utilizes the thriller genre to address some of the significant social problems of the era, including marriage, gender and media-informed reality.

Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn uses a range of literary means and plotting devices to take the thematic plane of the story and the psychological multidimensionality of the novel to the next stage. The dual narrative of the novel, where entries by Amy Dunne are infused with the point of view of Nick Dunne, is one of the most interesting aspects of the novel. Since every narrator provides the reader with a selected, biased piece of events, this structure not only creates tension but also conflicts with the reader's sense of reality. It is revealed that Amy is an unreliable narrator when it is later revealed that the journal entries which had initially been believed to be real were fake. Similarly, Nick is untrustworthy just as he covers up important details, including his affair. By this method, the performance and manipulation themes used in the novel are made stronger by the fact that there will be no distinction between reality and fiction.

Through the frame narrative, Flynn unveils the journal of Amy as a stand-alone narrative that unfolds to form the central plot. This overlaying of tales is what allows dramatic irony and shifting loyalties to occur as readers trust what has been told in the journal until Amy reveals that she is lying and this re-interpretation of what has already been told. The way fiction and real-life stories are told, and how easily readers can be convinced using a powerful narrative approach are all issues that are discussed by the manipulation of storytelling. The use of gifts

and anniversaries is one of the numerous symbolic elements of the novel. A romantic initiative, the treasure hunts that Amy comes up with each year on their wedding anniversaries are found to represent the decaying relationship. In the story, Flynn uses a fictional character of Amy, which is Amy's alter-ego, named "Amazing Amy", a series of children books created by her parents. It is a dualism involving the issue of identity and the social requirement and compulsion of women to live in idealistic lifestyles. Flynn creates a rough-talking, black-humor, and factual description of the psychology style of writing. Flynn emphasizes the distinctions between Nick and Amy and how each character influences readers' perceptions by comparing Amy's more polished and refined journal entries with Nick's straightforward and informal narrative style. By employing these literary techniques, Flynn enhances the novel's investigation of gender roles, media impact, and narrative authenticity, transforming it into a sophisticated examination of the lies individuals tell both themselves and others in addition to an intriguing domestic thriller.

Gone Girl is, additionally, a unique representative of the contemporary novel with mass-market orientation and literary value because of remarkable economic and critical success. The novel immediately hit the top of the New York Bestseller list when it was first released in 2012 and stayed there over 100 weeks. It was translated into more than 40 languages and sold millions of copies overseas. In 2014, it received a film adaptation, starring Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike and directed by David Fincher, which grossed over 350 million dollars at the box office. The interesting plot of the novel, the depth of psychology, and the refined and easy to-read style of writing are not a few reasons that make it popular with both intellectual critics and ordinary readers. This was commercially marketed as a psychological thriller, a genre that is very popular among the masses. It was of special interest to readers of thrillers and domestic drama because of the dramatic focus of the subject (murder, adultery, and disappearance); the tense structure and twists of the plot. In the meantime, it was establishing

a reputation in academic and critical circles as provocative in its approach to marriage, media sensationalism and gender relations. The novel set a cultural buzz, and led to a lot of discussion in literary magazines, book clubs, and online. The feminist, female independence, and female characterization in literature reflected the discussions on feminism, female independence, and the image of women in literature (Flynn, 2013, 2). Critics loved *Gone Girl* and praised it as philosophically rich and creatively narrated. The other critique was that Flynn was so good at playing into the tropes of the genre and unreliable narrators. Magazines like *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Atlantic* also praised it because it is deeply psychological.

The novel received some criticism, however, with feminist scholars and readers arguing over whether bad stereotypes include the manipulative ladies of the novel. These arguments did not diminish the literary believability of the novel because, according to the critics, Flynn had the capacity and skill to move outside of the genre and ask pertinent questions such as gender politics, truth, and identity. Overall, *Gone Girl* is an excellent illustration of how a fictional piece of writing can address important literary and cultural questions but still prevail in the marketplace. Its success shows how consciously, and socially aware fiction has been increasingly welcomed into the mainstream of fiction.

Gone Girl's ability to accomplish a balance between accessibility and literary depth is one of the main factors contributing to its widespread appeal. Thematic depth, stylistic refinement, and critical insight are all present in Gillian Flynn's novel, which is also approachable and captivating for a wide readership. She typically associated quality with literary fiction. From the viewpoint of accessibility, *Gone Girl* follows the formulas of classic thrillers with its suspenseful narrative structure. The narrative intensity created by Nick and Amy's alternating

chapters urges readers to flip the pages in order to learn the truth about Amy's absence. Avoiding too complex or undefined text, the language is straightforward, contemporary, and engaging. In order to preserve narrative suspense and emotional interest, Flynn employs twists and turns, deception, and unexpected developments, including the iconic mid-novel revelation that Amy is still alive. These characteristics contribute to the novel's economic success by making it very approachable. But underneath its fast-paced exterior, *Gone Girl* explores difficult literary subjects like how identity is constructed, how gender roles are theatrical, and how the media shapes public perceptions. For example, Amy's "Cool Girl" monologue serves as a harsh feminist critique of the ways in which women are encouraged to adhere to masculine expectations about their appearance. This scene goes beyond the thriller genre and challenges readers to consider gender and power in a stronger way. Flynn's work is in alignment with the postmodern narrative techniques frequently seen in more "serious" literature, since the novel's inclusion of unreliable narration further distorts the reader's connection with reality and perception. *Gone Girl* therefore proceeds with a balance between enjoyment and criticism. Its compelling story appeals to a wide audience, but its examination of gender politics, media criticism, and narrative structure also encourages attentive reading and critical analysis. It demonstrates that commercial writing may really be an instrument for literary and cultural relevance and that popular fiction does not have to compromise intellectual integrity.

Also, *Gone Girl* provides a rich field for feminist literary theory and cultural studies research. Fundamentally, the novel explores how larger cultural narratives, especially those concerned with marriage, femininity, and media spectacle, influence identity, gender stereotypes, and societal expectations. *Gone Girl* serves as an inspection of contemporary American society from an aspect of cultural studies, specifically the commercialisation of personal life through

consumerism and the mass media. Nick and Amy's marriage turns into a show, influenced by societal norms taken in from the news media, television, and parental influence in addition to personal dissatisfaction. The urge to fit into an idealized, commercial picture of femininity is reflected in Amy's fictitious equivalent in the book series "Amazing Amy", which was created by her parents. In order to get affection, attention, and eventually public pity, Amy must "perform" acceptable and conventional femininity in real life, which is a direct result of this cultural scripting. Flynn emphasizes how the media not only deliberately portrays cultural anxieties but also develops them. The novel's concentration on image; Amy's exploitation of the victim story, Nick's media presence, illustrates how identity turns into something culturally constructed determined by public perception.

Gone Girl offers a thought-provoking analysis of gender politics from a feminist viewpoint. Amy's well-known "Cool Girl" monologue is arguably the novel's most vivid example of feminist criticism. In it, she criticizes women for eliminating themselves to adapt to male standards and acquiring preferences and behaviours not because they like them but rather to seem appealing. In line with Judith Butler's view that gender is not intrinsic but rather performed via repeated acts influenced by social standards, this novel highlights the performative aspect of femininity. Amy's identity, however, transcends traditional feminist interpretations. She rejects being a helpless victim and takes authority over her own narrative, but she accomplishes it by using violence and manipulation, which is indicative of the "monstrous feminine." Whether Gillian Flynn is effectively inverting negative preconceptions by portraying a woman who exploits those same stereotypes to get power or perpetuating them, such as the notion that women are deceptive or excessively sentimental, is a matter of debate among critics. Amy uses the social assumptions that women are naturally good, tender, and honest to turn the tide of power in her marriage. Instead, Nick is an object of failed manhood, passive, dead in emotions and a traitor. In the meantime, he is a victim, an

offender, a man whom Amy despises, who cannot live according to the norms of the patriarch. In that regard, when the author decries the stereotyped norms of masculinity and femininity that are present in this novel, one can see the instruments, and distortions that the gendered norms have spawned.

Simply put, it stretches far into cultural as well as feminist criticism of gender, media and identity. This is a complex and crucial novel about the forces of power at work in the way people conform and are conditioned to the cultural norms to which they are subjected and there is no simple and empowering story here. In such a way Flynn confuses victim and villain and asks some hard questions as to how best we can represent them, as to whether we are free or not, and whether it is worth being in a commanding position in a society where the real opinion of the people is the lawgiver.

Published in 2016, immediately preceding the 2017-2020 regressive feminist discourse resurgence in South Korea, *Kim Jiyoung, born 1982* is a novel, which coincided with a renaissance of feminist discourse in the country. Kim Jiyoung is a 33-year-old lady, who, unintentionally, begins to behave improperly: she imitates other women, both living and dead. Initially shocked, but motivated, her husband takes her to a doctor. The novel provides a thorough, chronological description of the systematic prejudice Jiyoung has experienced at every point in her life as she narrates her life story throughout the sessions. Jiyoung is an image of significance rather than a single character since the novel depicts the wider journeys of South Korean women via her relatively conventional existence.

Beginning with Jiyoung's early years in the 1980s, the narrative emphasizes how gender prejudice begins at a young age. It is evident that her parents, especially her grandmother,

love her elder brother. Her brother's schooling is given priority when finances are rigid, and Jiyoung and her sister are supposed to assist with household chores. Despite her academic achievements, Jiyoung learns to hide her thoughts and is discouraged from making a statement in class. The gendered restrictions that will accompany her towards adulthood are shaped by these early encounters.

Jiyoung observes how female students are sexually harassed and receive little proper attention in male-dominated classes as a university student. When she starts working, she realises that enquiries about her relationship status and plans for children are frequently discussed during job interviews, something that does not occur with male applicants. She adds that even after being employed, women are expected to leave after getting married or having children, given less significant responsibilities, and passed over for advancement. Despite being extremely talented, Jiyoung herself quits her marketing career after having children due to the unsupportive workplace atmosphere and unavailability of daycare choices.

The story is founded on factual truth, and the social significance is supported by the smooth blend of these human experiences with government documents, news reports, and real-life data. Cho Nam-Joo combines real information such as wage differences, educational differences, work-related discrimination, and the social expectations related to marriage and having children. In this way, it is hard to create a line between fiction and reality as it is evident that millions of South Korean women experience what Jiyoung did.

The setting of the novel was also affected by the feminist movement in Korea in the middle of the 2010s. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, a bestseller, a breakthrough, as people were furious about the things that happened to them like the 2016 murder at the Gangnam Station, people were more conscious of internet-related sex crimes and sexism. It was the cause of protests,

book clubs, discussions around the country, and even anti-feminist audience backlash. The novel is so deeply submerged in its socio-political context. It depicts the daily lives of those women who are expected to be docile daughters, self-sacrificing mothers and silent workers. By putting the personal experience of Kim Jiyoung into a context of culture, Cho Nam-Joo transforms a fictional story into a critique of gender norms in modern South Korea.

Basically, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a feminist novel that breaks the gender inequality perpetrated by the South Koreans. As the protagonist goes through the journey of her life, Cho Nam-Joo reveals how the lives of women are influenced by male-dominated systems since they were born in this world. Feminism is demonstrated in the unspoken accumulation of day-to-day injustice Kim Jiyoung experiences as instances of discriminatory behaviour that are so widespread that they are invisible most of the time. What is remarkable about the novel is how it records commonplace events and how injustice can make commonplace life difficult. Feminism is present in the novel through the way Kim Jiyoung begins to understand how limited her options are, even though she is growing up in an allegedly modernized and civilized society. She is a good student, she has a good career and lives up to the standards set by society, but she never has a choice about how she would live her life. She suffers a failure at every turn: having become a mother, she is supposed to quit her job; she is dismissed in school and during the job interviews, she is interrogated about whether she intends to get married or not. These obstacles are simply a sign of the greater social system in which women, as mothers, wives and daughters cannot be evaluated based on their own qualities but through their functions as mothers, wives and daughters.

Both the conventional gender norms and aspects of social expectations are related. Kim Jiyoung has been submissive, silent and tolerant since childhood. Her family, her professors,

her employer are all interested in the will of the brother, in her successes, and in the reality that she will leave them after the marriage. Even in cases when she grows up to be a mother herself, she is expected to be thankful in her circumstances rather than in anger at the loneliness and loss of liberty that they encourage. These norms imposed by both males and other females demonstrate how patriarchy is transgenerational.

The second big challenge is that of identity, especially when we consider the fact that Kim Jiyoung is slowly losing her identity. She speaks as a representative of her mother, a friend and other women, and her mental condition is an expression of the way social forces have formed and corrupted her identity. She is made an instrument of the lives of other women, as though she had been devoured by the unity of Korean womanhood.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982, strikes a culture in which women are meant to obey, but where they have few opportunities to be independent, or respected, through these interwoven themes. Lastly, the novel demands that the suffering of women and their right to live as complete human beings be considered.

Since its publication in 2016, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* has invited a multitude of reactions both in the East and the West. The novel has sold more than a million copies in South Korea and caused a gender discrimination debate at the national level, hence a cultural phenomenon. However, together with its popularity came severe criticism and opposition, particularly against the anti-feminist parties. Rather, the Western reader celebrated both the transcendence and the relevance of the novel to the world gender discourse and viewed the novel as an essential piece of feminism.

In South Korea the response was extremely varied. The novel became a great reflection of what women experienced in their everyday lives, especially millennials and the younger generations. Those readers who had experienced some form of institutional sexism were

found to feel sympathy for the way Kim Jiyoung was ignored at work, humiliated at school and forced out of her career when she gave birth. The novel was a huge success and was credited with bringing feminist issues to the mainstream. The success of it, however, brought a great deal of criticism. Some well-known personalities, including male celebrities, who were spotted reading the novel also had to endure harassment online after a few male readers alleged that it promoted sexism. Evidence of such violence was indicative of provocative and controversial terms used by feminists in modern Korean society.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 was also popular and read in other countries of East Asia such as China, Japan and Taiwan, where many readers saw parallels between the struggles of Kim Jiyoung and the social constraints they were under. The novel helped the ongoing discourse on the role of gender and tension between traditional and modern practices in East Asian societies, although slightly less strongly than in South Korea.

Readers and scholars in the West praised the novel not only because of its clarity, emotional restraint and social relevance but also because of its availability in the English language in 2020. The novel was a bestseller and was described by popular magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and NPR as a successful exposition of popular misogyny. Western readers were accustomed to these ideas in those moments when they tried to discuss the cultural diversity of female injustice, but they were not accustomed to such cultural diversity in Korean culture. The craft of narration that binds together political and personal fact to create a mixture of fiction and fact is also praised in the novel.

The novel is an interactive story in that it does not follow the conventional narrative format but uses historical facts, documents created by the government, news publications, and social research to build its fictional narrative. As one example of how many Korean women still do not work after giving birth, Cho, in an article discussing the topic of discrimination in the

workplace, provides a 2014 study by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which is referenced in a footnote. Similarly, when presenting her schooling years, Kim Jiyoung refers to the data on gender disparities in jobs and unemployment of university graduates. It is possible to read these moments, which combine fiction with established truth and prove the point that what Kim Jiyoung is experiencing is not an isolated experience, as footnotes or as the data woven into the text of the novel.

The tone of the story of the novel is deliberately modest, and quiet in line with the character of the gender biases that Kim Jiyoung is subjected to. The tone of the plain, clear style of writing by Cho is that of someone who became accustomed to being sidelined. This understating makes the story look like a documentary and the pain of the central character looks much more natural than the author would like a reader to assume. It could be mentioned that it is not the disaster which has broken the mind of Kim Jiyoung but the injustice she has experienced throughout her entire life. This unwinding is a beautiful metaphor to understand that women have more chances to internalize the wrong in the system and reap the benefits of this wrong without speaking.

This intergenerational suffering is another reason why we can say that this novel is a literary work. Gender injustice has never appeared as a single group in the novel, and it never existed in the memory of Jiyoung, her mother and grandmother has been added and justified. This multigenerational approach is moved to the peripheral margins of the story, and perhaps more importantly, the concern is with transformation and the routinization of structural oppression.

Among those who have taken culture seriously in South Korea, perhaps the most important is *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. Immediately after its publication it became a national bestseller and a debate was sparked about women, workplace discrimination and gendering. For young Korean women, the novel gave them a lot of validation about their struggles and experiences.

Not even the novel was safe, especially in the anti-feminist circles where the novel was considered a destabilizing force. The scandal that resulted showed not only how unequal gender relations are in South Korea but also how intolerant of feminist ideas a still-patriarchal society is.

However, the novel had a huge impact on the literary world and its message became even more popular in 2019 when it was adapted into a blockbuster film. The novel was written in the form of a novel, as a sort of declaration for a feminist renaissance in South Korea.

The novel was an instant bestseller and is now published in more than 20 languages. The West glorified it because it was international in nature and because it recognized the gender relationship prevailing in modern society. Although her tragedy is culturally specific, Kim Jiyoung's sufferings resonated with all readers and made this novel an invaluable addition to modern world feminist literature.

Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 is a literary and social masterpiece. Indeed, it is right on the borderlines of activism and literature, in the sense that it not only brings to light women's struggles, which they perceive or know not, but also those which they are not aware of.

Chapter 3: Between Hype and Substance: The Story of Hoover and McFadden

It Ends with Us is the modern-day romance novel and fiction book that was published in 2016 by an American author Colleen Hoover and which helps to answer the question how delicate and sensitive the subject of domestic violence could be. Although the novel is generally described as popular, or even genre fiction, it is a distinguished piece of commercial writing, with its semi-autobiographical structure and its depiction of key concerns in society in a realistic manner. The story in the novel is centred on a young woman Lily Bloom, who is in love with a rich neurosurgeon, Ryle Kincaid and is emotionally and physically abused by him. The return of Atlas Corrigan, her first love, and the challenging choices that Lily has to make in order to end the cycle of violence add to the complexity of the story.

Hoover, who has openly acknowledged that the plot was influenced by her own early years lived in a home troubled by domestic abuse, has made the novel extremely personal. According to Hoover's author's note, Lily's narrative is similar to her mother's, which gives the novel an autobiographical dimension that is relatively rare in popular romance novels. The novel's appeal to a broad readership, particularly to young adults and female audiences, has been facilitated by its direct and emotional tone.

In contrast to conventional feminist writing, Hoover's narrative retains its emphasis on individual growth rather than structural criticism. Instead of emphasizing political activism or structural change, the narrative focuses more on emotional compassion, healing, and determination. The novel achieved commercial success because of its relatability and emotional intensity. Following its publication, it received popularity by the BookTok community, became widely recognized worldwide, and continued to rank on lists of best sellers for years.

It Ends with Us falls between commercial romance and socially aware narrative in terms of literature. It has received praise for bringing domestic abuse to light in an approachable manner, but it also encountered criticism for its oversimplification of complex topics and dependence on romantic common phrases. However, its pervasive influence demonstrates that passionate and emotional stories may successfully engage readers with contemporary societal issues.

The novel is organised chronologically and sequentially, with Lily Bloom as its sole protagonist. Her choice to end the vicious process of abuse is the culmination of the storyline progression, which follows her path from childhood trauma to relationships as an adult. A protagonist who is emotionally committed, two romantic partners who reflect opposite impulses (Ryle and Atlas), and an ending that sets an emphasis on emotional closure as well as personal development are characteristics of the romance and "new adult" genres. In order to avoid using unconventional storytelling techniques that could cause the reader to reflect more deeply or interact with the plot in a different way, such as shifting perspectives, time jumps, or breaking the fourth wall, the novel adheres closely to a traditional style.

Additionally, the novel's tone is quite approachable due to its simple, conversational writing style. This stylistic decision reduces the novel's literary potential even while it assures emotional clarity and resemblance. Instead of encouraging analytical depth, the internal monologue, and discourse frequently emphasize sentiment over depth, enhancing emotional impact. The novel's widespread appeal can be attributed in part to its connectivity, but it also places the novel in the category of "low literature," where reader satisfaction is frequently prioritized over innovative development.

It Ends with Us is a thematically creative novel that tries to address domestic violence as a socially pertinent problem but does so in a manner that advances individualism and not

societal or systemic explanations. Though Ryle, the abusive figure, has been granted a fair amount of psychological depth, the novel does not focus on more broad-based condemnations of gender power relations, patriarchy, or institutional and legal failure to prevent abuse. Rather, the fight of Lily is being foisted essentially as an ethically motivated personal decision, and thus a matter of personal capability and will. Further, the problem Lily has is resolved as per a typical empowered storyline. The ending provides a resolution which is not likely to cause any revolution or significance. It is not so vague and indeterminate as can be more literary or artistic stories, instead it gives a straightforward resolution.

The novel is an excellent example of all the good and bad aspects of the story in commercial romance literature. The novel is too minimalistic in form and too deferential to genre conventions to be included in any literary discussion, despite being successful in evoking feelings in readers. By doing so it provides a fun example of how social issues are commodified in a market-regulated literary space.

The second collision that is also characteristic of contemporary popular writing, especially novels by Colleen Hoover, including *It Ends with Us*, is the dislocation between popular culture and critical writing. Although the novel receives a fairly significant portion of attention and recognition in the general audience, it can frequently top the bestseller list and dominate the social media feed of the BookTok section of Tik Tok. Literary critics have responded to it with indifferent or absurd reactions. This resistance is one way of getting into the bigger debate of what literary merit means and how even without any formal or thematic agenda, popular reading practices can be fueled by the availability, psychological relatability, and readership cultures generated by social media.

It Ends with Us is frequently praised by its readers due to its brash emotional truth-telling and a simple and easy to-read writing style that addresses such a taboo topic as domestic violence.

Emotional tone and opinion help the readers to create close emotional bonds with the protagonist Lily Bloom, and connect their relationships or problems with her. The novel can target a very broad audience, particularly younger audiences or those who have never read a romance novel, and are drawn by its familiarity, its bluntness in moral instruction, and its satisfactory ending. It is often believed that the simplicity of the novel is its best aspect since it tells an important story in an original and pure form.

However, literary critics have questioned the literary merit of the novel because of its simplistic nature, the use of generic clichés, and linear plot. There is relatively little critical insight into systemic issues or artistic exploration of the work. This story is concerned mainly with the conflict of love and self-rehabilitation rather than with the critical examination of institutional and social factors that legitimize domestic violence. Its language is emotive, but it is not literary, and often it is rather melodramatic than subtle.

Very popular novels, not the focus of critical or scholarly attention, are also called low literature. This includes genres with a long tradition of being perceived as easy-reading and therefore emotionally sensuous and commercially successful: romance, thrillers and young-adult novels. This genre covers such novels as *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover. Although its love, violence, and reconciliation themes have touched the hearts of so many people who have read it, the literary substance of the novel is often dismissed. This distinction between widespread acclaim and widespread popularity shows a long-standing bias in the literary community about the kind of stories that are appreciated.

Implications related to this type are dramatic. Even so-called novels, however popular they may be and however controversial the messages they convey may be, tend to be overlooked in schools, removed from the list of awards, and dropped out of reviews. This leads to a very limited definition of what can be called real literature. But BookTok and the development of

virtual book communities are putting pressure on these conventional boundaries. The literary community is responding to the literary community of today and this indicates that the three concepts of availability, relatability and emotional connection are all concepts of literature that are applicable.

The labelling of a book as low literature is not only a declaration of the genre or style of the book but also diminishes the audience of the book, the worth of the book and is often a reflection of a previous and outdated view of gender and artistic achievement. Though novels like *It Ends with Us* are not composed under the guidelines of experimental literature, the impact that they make on their audience and their capability to raise interesting discussions on their part prove that they are worth more than mere revitalization as far as the royalties are concerned.

The novel *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover is an excellent example of a book that enjoyed tremendous economic success despite initially receiving rather mediocre reviews. The novel slowly grew in popularity following its publication in 2016 until experiencing a massive rise in popularity several years later, in large part due to its resurgence on social media platforms such as TikTok, especially within the BookTok subculture. There, many young readers shared their emotional responses to emotional suffering and family violence portrayed in the novel and contributed to its return to the bestseller lists and new cultural applause. As a result, decades after it was first published, *It Ends with Us* topped the New York Times bestseller list: the first time something like this has ever happened in the publishing world.

Successful advertising was not the only factor in this huge spike. Readers found personal resonance in Hoover's words. Her simple writing style, intensely emotional story, and interesting characters made for an instant and personal reading experience. The novel's

straightforward discussion of delicate subjects, particularly the vicious process of abuse and the emotional conflict between self-defence and love, won compliments from readers. This emotional effect produced viral reviews, referrals from others, and eventually immense sales numbers. The novel's widespread popularity was confirmed by the fact that it sold more than 4 million copies globally by 2023 and has been translated into multiple other languages.

Hoover gained more prominence in the publishing sector because of her achievement. With many of her publications simultaneously topping sales lists, the author rose to prominence in contemporary literature. The announcement of an *It Ends with Us* movie significantly raised awareness of the novel and reinforced its position in popular culture. Despite the novel's lack of support from traditional reviewers, its economic success cannot be doubted.

It Ends with Us is a powerful depiction of domestic violence from a feminist perspective, going beyond melodrama to look at the subtle emotional reality of survivors. The protagonist of Colleen Hoover's story is Lily Bloom, a woman who develops a romantic relationship with Ryle Kincaid, an attractive and successful neurosurgeon whose actions eventually degenerate into violence. The novel depicts the psychological imprisonment and conflicts of emotions that frequently make it challenging for women to depart from abusive relationships, rather than just the physical aspects of abuse.

The novel's resistance to oversimplifying Lily's experience is one of its most significant feminist contributions. After he slaps her the first time, Lily is still with Ryle. Instead, she goes over the abuse slowly, wondering if it was a one-time thing, considering her mother's history of domestic violence and dealing with her own intense emotional investment in the relationship. Furthermore, as the screen responds to victim-blaming discourses that ask why she didn't just leave it, it recalls the affective multiplicity that characterizes the everyday for

most women. Hoover demonstrates how love, fear, shame, and hope coexist when such a situation occurs where violence cannot be detected easily by others.

The other theme that the novel addresses is that of intergenerational trauma. Lily makes her decisions based on what she experienced during her childhood when she witnessed her father beating her mother. Together with it is the multifaceted feminist approach of knowing that the very power and control in males which is bequeathed is transferred to and that the perception of survival of women and their desire and need for love is realised at the mode of survival they would want to engage in. Lastly, the choice that Lily made to leave Ryle, not just for herself, but to herself on behalf of her child is said to be a form of empowerment. It is a feminist theme of speaking up and violence being eradicated.

Although the novel reveals abuse, to Ryle the novel makes it romantic, and that is the risk of making the abuser a hero. It poses some of the most significant feminist issues regarding what to do with the content of violent men in the press and whether or not the emotional vulnerability within which this content generally falls is a component of the general discourse of violence against women. However, Hoover establishes the story in lived experience and emphasizes its goal to connect truthfully with readers by including a survivor's note at the end of the narrative, which is based on her mother's experience.

It elevates the survivors, reveals the emotional complexities associated with these relationships, and promotes individual independence using a feminist viewpoint. Its truthful representation fosters compassion and understanding instead of punishment, creating a significant contribution to current issues around gender and power.

It Ends With Us can be interpreted as a cultural product created for wide market appeal rather than as a radical feminist work when viewed through the perspective of Raymond Williams' cultural materialism. The novel discusses domestic abuse, but it does it in a very emotional

approach rather than offering a structural or systemic critique. Its enormous popularity on sites like BookTok and many other platforms like facebook, goodreads and book-selling websites shows how literature is a part of consumer society, where emotional appeal frequently takes priority over political or critical nuance. Williams' theory, which reflects the commercialisation of literature in capitalist publishing, where storylines are moulded to optimize accessibility and sales, helps explain why the novel succeeds in the mass market but stays confined in its cultural critique.

The distinction separating popular fiction from literary merit has been increasingly disputed in recent years. There are many novels in current book marketplaces that are wildly successful commercially, but not all of them receive favorable criticism. Some best-selling novels are often written off as "low literature," while others, like Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, have received recognition for integrating social criticism with captivating narrative. One such book is *The Housemaid's Secret* (2023), a psychological thriller written by Freida McFadden that gained a lot of popularity but has hardly been studied in academic or literary communities. Analysing the novel makes the conflict between literary excellence and commercial appeal in modern publication more understandable. The novel starts with the maid, Millie, who gets married to a mechanic named Enzo. Due to their financial difficulties, Millie gets a second job cleaning the home. Douglas Garrick, a rich businessman, hires her to clean his magnificent penthouse apartment. It feels uncomfortable right from the start. Wendy, Douglas's wife, never leaves her bedroom, and Douglas is charming but dominating. Millie is instructed not to bother her in any way. Millie's curiosity overwhelms her, and she starts to believe Wendy's husband is abusing her

or locking her up. Wendy slips Millie messages in private, saying she needs help and that Douglas is abusive. Millie feels sorry for Wendy, wants to keep her safe, and even starts making plans to get her out of the poisonous marriage. But as the narrative goes on, Millie learns disturbing facts. Wendy is deceptive and has a troubled past; she is not the defenceless victim she appears to be. Millie becomes caught up in a treacherous web of deception between husband and wife, and Douglas is also concealing secrets. Every individual contributes to the others' deception, and Millie discovers she has once again entered a scenario that is far more complex than she had anticipated. The novel develops to a number of unexpected turns as alliances change and trust is continually betrayed. The plot changes again just as Millie thinks she has identified the true enemy. She ultimately makes it through the fatal game between the Garricks, but not without repercussions. The final chapters show that nobody in the penthouse is completely innocent and that looks may be misleading. The novel progresses with a number of astonishing disclosures, surprising turns, and heated exchanges. As the Garrick family's secrets are gradually exposed, it becomes clear that nothing in the house is as it seems. Following McFadden's approach, the novel uses cliffhangers, dramatic twists, and brief chapters to build tension and keep readers wondering right up to the very end. In the end, lovers of domestic thrillers will find *The Housemaid's Secret* to be a fast-paced, captivating tale. The Housemaid's Secret's strong dependence on repetition is one of the primary characteristics that make it substandard. It has a recognizable narrative with secrets, treachery, and unexpected turns, just like a lot of other home suspense thrillers. Although this formula guarantees rapid reader engagement and helps explain why it became a blockbuster, it lacks the formal creativity and complexity that reviewers frequently attribute to works of great literary merit. Meritorious writing is typically visually pleasing, formally cohesive, and intellectually stimulating. McFadden's novel, on the other hand, places more emphasis on suspense and shock value than on character or thematic depth.

Although the novel is simple to read, its critical relevance is limited since it does not encourage deeper thought or various interpretations. Its emphasis on entertainment over social critique is another crucial aspect. *The Housemaid's Secret* provides barely anything in the way of broader cultural or feminist analysis, in contrast to *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which tackles structural gender inequity, or *Gone Girl*, which challenges conventional standards of femininity. Although it depicts power conflicts and violent relationships in a home, these themes are mostly used as story devices rather than as topics for in-depth analysis. This lack of thematic depth is a reflection of what Shuyu Kong (2005) refers to as the "commodification of literature," in which stories are written to appeal to readers' needs rather than to examine human complexity or societal reality. In this way, the novel is more aligned with the logic of the market than with the quest for creative excellence. Its classification as low literature is also influenced by the writing style. McFadden writes with an easy-to-read, quick-paced style. Accessibility might be advantageous, but in this instance, it adds to the feeling of insufficient depth. However, the main purpose of the language of *The Housemaid's Secret* is to develop the story. The novel may be read quickly but is rarely examined in depth due to its lack of stylistic depth. Because of this, it finds it difficult to satisfy critics who believe that literary worth is correlated with language and creative competence (Repp, 2013). The novel's reception also highlights the difference between its critical and popular value. Thousands of people have praised *The Housemaid's Secret* as "gripping" and "unputdownable," and it has done incredibly well on sites like Amazon and Goodreads. However, it has received little to no interest from literary magazines, scholars, or well-known reviewers. This discrepancy between public support and critical silence exemplifies Edward Graves's (1928) assertion that literary value involves more than just reader delight; it also involves wider cultural acceptance. Without critical acclaim, a novel stays on the outside of serious literary debate even if it sells millions of copies and dominates

internet platforms. It's also important to note how marketing tactics support the novel's popularity. comparable to *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover, McFadden's novel is marketed to readers who like comparable thrillers by algorithms, has a catchy cover, and is very visible on social media. These techniques are being used more and more by the publishing business to increase sales, but they frequently prioritize books that are simple to promote over those that are difficult or complicated. *The Housemaid's Secret* illustrates how commercial forces influence what becomes popular, frequently at the expense of pieces that may have more creative merit but have a smaller appeal. In today's book market, *The Housemaid's Secret* is a significant illustration of mediocre literature. Its monotonous structure, minimal philosophical depth, straightforward writing, and commercial success stand in stark contrast to works like *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and *Gone Girl*, which blend critical acclaim with popular appeal. The difficulties of separating literary worth from popularity in the era of social media marketing and fast consumption are brought to light by comparing McFadden's novel with Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*. Scholars can gain a better understanding of how the publishing industry prioritizes amusement above artistic merit and why certain best-selling books fall short of achieving enduring cultural or scholarly relevance by classifying such works as low literature.

When investigated through the lens of Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, *The Housemaid's Secret* serves more as a commercial product than as a long-term cultural criticism. The pressures of a publishing industry that places more emphasis on entertainment value and immediate consumption than on intellectual depth are reflected in its generic structure and fast-paced suspense. Plot twists in the novel provide readers with instant satisfaction, but larger social or cultural implications are not explored. Williams's contention that literature in a capitalist society is frequently influenced by consumer demand and commodified as a product for mass consumption is demonstrated by its popularity. In this

sense, the novel illustrates how marketing might reduce fiction to consumable pleasure and undermine its literary or cultural value.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In order to uncover the various ways that popular fiction asserts both cultural significance and marketability, this study examined how modern popular novels like *Gone Girl*, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, *It Ends With Us*, and *The Housemaid's Secret* balance the conflict between literary excellence and commercial appeal. Among these works, *Gone Girl* is notable for its creative sophistication, thematic depth, and formal complexity, proving that a work that is commercially popular may also win critical acclaim. By skillfully fusing the structural intricacy of a psychological thriller with incisive social criticism, Gillian Flynn defies the conventional wisdom that genre literature is not literary. While retaining mass-market appeal, the novel's deft construction—from its dual narrative and unreliable narrators to its suspenseful pacing—allows it to address more general social themes, including gender dynamics and cultural expectations. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, demonstrates that literary merit may arise from social relevance and thematic resonance, even within a commercially accessible novel, by highlighting the widespread repercussions of patriarchy through realistic characterisation and a straightforward story. Novels like *It Ends With Us* and *The Housemaid's Secret*, on the other hand, are highly popular yet frequently fail to receive critical praise, demonstrating how commercial pressures may elevate emotionally compelling but artistically traditional works. This study highlights that literary excellence is not set nor only established by critical opinion by contrasting these situations, shedding light on the intricate relationship between aesthetic judgment and market needs. All things considered, this study emphasizes how modern popular fiction functions within a cultural and economic context in which artistic merit and financial success are continuously negotiated and redefined rather than mutually incompatible.

A contrasting paradigm is provided by *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and illustrates how political aim and accessibility may coexist. The novel is broadly readable due to Cho Nam-Joo's brief,

realistic language, and it gains academic weight from its inclusion of social information. Its popularity serves as an example of how a work can utilize commercial readability to make social criticism, especially on gender inequality.

On the other hand, *It Ends With Us* puts more emphasis on storytelling that appeals to readers and has emotional impact. Although Colleen Hoover's simple, first-person story resonates strongly with readers, its literary sophistication is limited by its reliance on wellknown romantic clichés and a linear format. Although the novel brings attention to domestic violence, its critical reaction shows how commercial interests can overpower creativity.

The Housemaid's Secret by Freida McFadden serves as another example of this conflict between literary merit and commercial success. The novel mainly relies on conventional storytelling and spectacular clichés, even as it thrives on tension, twists, and addictive readability. Its enormous success shows how popular "low literature" thrillers are in today's market, but it also emphasizes how hard it is to equate widespread appeal with lasting literary value.

It is evident from these examples that there is more flexibility than rigidity in the high/low literature split. Literary excellence is not always diminished by commercial success; rather, a work's position in the cultural hierarchy is determined by the harmony between commercial concerns and creative ambitions. Market factors can drive decisions that put public appeal ahead of formal innovation, while in other instances they improve accessibility without compromising thematic depth.

In the end, popularity and artistic ability may coexist, but it takes conscious negotiation, which each of these novels tackles in unique and illuminating ways.

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