Romantic Novels in Daily Life: The Experience of Female Readers

Mohammad Reza Javadi Yeganeh[1] and Asieh Arhami[2]

Translated by Esmail Yazdanpour

Introduction

Popular works are often overlooked by sociological texts, though recent literary criticism and communications theories have presented a more favorable perception of these works and their readers. However, within the discipline of literary sociology, Adorno and Horkheimer's negative attitudes towards popular works remain influential, resulting in the perception that these works are immune to audience critique and criticism. In this view, popular novels are considered trivial because they are seen as insignificant and

[1] Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Tehran. Email: myeganeh@ut.ac.ir.

[2] M.Sc. in Women's Studies, University of Tehran. Email: a.arhami@yahoo.com.

unimportant examples that have been said to lower the value of serious novels as well as reduce the intellectual capacity or analytical abilities of audiences/readers.[3]

From the perspective of the Frankfurt School, the nature of the patterned and pre-digested,[4] while causing relief from fatigue and effort, also renews individual power to continue with the current conditions. Therefore, individuals partaking in popular culture will not seek to change their working conditions or free themselves from their alienation. Authors such as Louis[5] view these novels as the result of a cultural industry that corrupts the minds of readers and degrades their mental habits. According to his perspective, the prevalence of these books among the public is due to the fact that the language of mass readers is devoid of artistic sources and is full of formulaic and vulgar emotions. In contrast, a good novel challenges readers' preconceptions and mental habits.

Jean-Yves Tadié's book *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1978)[6] describes reading popular novels as a form of addiction. According to him, readers of these romantic stories become addicted to the habit of daydreaming, which ultimately leads to a lack of compatibility with real life.[7] Such novels hinder the expression of genuine emotions and committed thoughts.[8]

In this perspective, popular works have no positive function in the daily lives of the audience and their connection to daily life and reality is lost. This claim is merely theoretical and one-sided, and neglects the experiences of the audience themselves. To

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[3] Modleski, cited in John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Harlow and New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), 140.

[4] Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 2009, 67.

[5] The author "Louis" is not fully identified in the original text. The translator was unable to find and provide further information on the identity of this author or the specific work referenced (translator's note).

[6] Sic: the author attributes Q.D. Leavis's title to the French scholar Jean-Yves Tadié (translator's note).

[7] Jean-Yves Tadié, "Sociology of Literature and its Different Branches," in *An Introduction to Sociology of Literature, Collection of Papers Selected and Translated into Persian by Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh* (Tehran: Jahan Publications, 1998), 124. It should be noted that the translator has translated the text as it is. This would illustrate the type of discussions that are prevalent in the community.

[8] John Storey, "Popular Fiction," trans. Hossein Payandeh, *Organon* 25 (2004): 2.

examine this claim, we need to explore the theories of readers of these types of novels in relation to the function of romantic works in everyday life. In other words, we need to investigate whether these works hinder adaptation to daily life or whether readers use these works to adapt to their daily living conditions. Therefore, the main issue in this study is the question "What is the experience of reading romantic novels in the daily lives of female readers?" Specifically, we aim to explore whether women use romantic novels to adapt to their daily living conditions and what function romantic novels serve in the daily lives of female readers.

Research Background

To date, no research has been conducted in Iran on the function that romantic novels serve in the daily lives of readers. The majority of studies that have been carried out focus on analyzing the content of these stories: several examples are mentioned below. However, in other countries, literature is the 1987 research by Janice Radway, which will be discussed in the theoretical section.[9]

Kim Pettigrew Brackett conducted a study titled "Facework Strategies Among Romance Fiction Readers" at Auburn University, Montgomery.[10] The study focused on the experiences of readers of romantic novels in relation to other people's responses to their reading habits. Brackett believes that others' awareness of one's reading of romantic novels stigmatizes the reader, which, according to Goffman's theory of facework, results in social exclusion. Readers of popular romantic fiction employ two general strategies to resist criticism from others regarding their reading habits and to avoid being ostracized: prevention and correction. In the prevention strategy, readers conceal the nature of their reading habits, while in the correction strategy, they attempt to justify their reading habits.

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[9] Janice Radway, *Reading Popular Romance* (London: Verso, 1987).

[10] Kim B. Pettigrew, "Facework strategies among romance fiction readers," *Social Science Journal* 37, no. 3 (2000): 347-63.

In Iran, Tezha Mirfakhrai[11] conducted research on 21 best-selling Iranian popular novels published in the 1990s. The article can be considered as a genre study and uses the Schatz model as its main theoretical framework. The Schatz model divides all genres into two general categories: the genre of order and the genre of integration. Mirfakhrai also uses Radway's definitions of Romance to define the genre's conventions in literature. The study identifies fourteen textual conventions and searches all sampled novels to estimate the occurrence of each convention. The study concludes that most of the identified conventions accrue in most of the sampled novels. The findings suggest that housewives, as the main readers of such novels, have become opinion leaders on the literature market, which can have consequences for both cultural policy makers and publishers.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the audience for popular fiction, two main approaches can be taken. The first considers the audience as a passive mass that easily falls under the influence of the meaning conveyed in the works and lacks the ability to criticize or judge. This perspective is adopted by supporters of the Frankfurt School. The second approach considers the audience as active individuals in the interpretation of meaning. In this view, readers are never passive. The meanings of texts are not fixed and inherent but are created by the reader. Each reader is a member of the interpretive community who, based on their social knowledge and information, level of education, and lifestyle, may have a different view of the books they read. In this perspective, the audience generates meaning rather than being a mere consumer. The theory of media use in everyday life, and its use and satisfaction in this area, is discussed below: although most of these theories are related to media and not literature, we will use these theories for our analysis as we seek to understand the experiences of readers of romantic novels and the audience is mainly discussed in media theories.

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[11] Tezha Mirfakhraei, "Iranian popular novels, domestic toleration," *Cultural Studies & Communication* 2, no. 4 (2006): 197–221.

The use of media in everyday life

This theory seeks to explore how people use the media in their daily lives. This theory creates research methods that analyze the lived cultural practices of people's daily lives rather than just examining the text.[12] In other words, our habits and activities are interdependent and can be understood through each other. Many consumption patterns in daily life have their roots in social roles that we are responsible for as men or women in our daily lives. In this new perspective, readers of popular stories can gain an understanding of reality, find ways to change, and gain critical perspectives. Readers are no longer seen as passive and unaware, but as aware and rational individuals who actively engage in choosing this genre of literature. According to Baker, how readers choose novels is actually a reflection of how they express themselves in society.[13] They use the novel's image as a means of expressing their views on society. Modleski suggests that popular narratives reveal very tangible issues and tensions in women's lives.[14] In other words, by reading these books, women come to define their ideal mythical man, as portrayed in these books. As Radway has pointed out, the most important aspect of reading romantic stories for women is to achieve the fundamental myth of the ideal man[15] in these books, they are looking for the man they want in real life.

According to Michel de Certeau, marginalized individuals and groups create ways in their everyday life practices to cope with oppression and domination, and through various forms of resistance, they effectively reverse the relationship.[16] Reading romantic novels is one such way. Women who are frustrated with their relationships with men (whether as wives or as daughters and sisters) seek a way to escape their dissatisfaction, as these men do not match the idealized image of men in their minds. Choosing these

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[12] Storey, "Popular Fiction," 2004: 1-43.

[13] Marjorie L. DeVault, Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research, trans. Hooshang Nayebi (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 2006), 121–2.

[14] Storey, 2004.

[15] Radway, 1987, 34.

[16] Quoted in Nafiseh Hamidi, "Body and everyday life" (Master's thesis, University of Tehran, 2006).

novels can be a suitable covert way to protest the current conditions, as these novels depict the men they desire: kind, caring, and always available. In contrast, men do not have a positive view of these types of books.

Reading and the Consumption of Romantic Novels

Janice Radway is a literature professor at Duke University who previously taught in the Department of American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a professor of cultural studies and feminist theories. *Reading the Romance* was her first book, published in two editions with a print run of 3000 copies. Using reception theory, Radway studied romance novel readers. She sought to understand how women interpret these novels. Based on her study of forty-two married women living in the Smithton area in 1984, Radway concluded that the men in these novels are intelligent, witty, caring, and good-natured. They are men who rush to help women in difficult situations and provide assistance. They even endanger themselves for the women.[17] Using Nancy Chodorow's theories on how the "relational self" develops in girls and the "independent self" in boys during childhood, Radway argues that these stories imaginatively and emotionally transport readers to a time when a deeply loving person was entirely focused on them. According to Chodorow, the female self is a relational self, while the male self is an independent self, and this relates back to childhood and the relationship between children and their mothers: the mother is the first person every child is in contact with, and therefore children are highly dependent on her. However, as they grow up, the infant boy realizes his differentiation from the mother and no longer seeks to identify with her, making him an independent self, while infant girls, due to their identification with their mother, become a relational and interdependent self.[18] The relationship between the male and female protagonists in romantic stories is a means for women to benefit from the same affectionate care and affection that they

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[17] Storey, 2004.

[18] Heide, 2005; Giddens, 1997.

themselves must offer unilaterally to others in their everyday lives.[19] By reading these books, women can be someone else for at least a short time and live in another world. They come to the feeling at the end of these novels that men and marriage are really good.[20] Radway believes that women reading these books does not indicate satisfaction with patriarchy, but rather acts as a kind of imaginary protest indicative of a desire for a better world.[21] She argues that the most important psychological benefit of such books is the repetition of the unchanging and fundamental cultural myth of the loving man. The women she studied consider these books as gifts to themselves to reclaim time from household and family chores. Through reading, they release the tensions caused by daily problems and responsibilities and create time and space for themselves that enables them to pay attention to their personal needs and pleasures. Radway differentiates between the act of reading and the imaginative interpretation resulting from reading texts. Reading leads to imagination and immersion in the world of the novel, and as a result, it conceals the truth. However, reading is actually a political act of subversion because it supports the social role of women, which is based on denying themselves, while imagination creates and affirms patriarchy, ideologies, and social behaviors.[22]

Janice Radway was mainly interested in exploring women's interpretations of popular romance novels. She aimed to understand how women, as a community of interpreters, made meaning from these books based on their own cognitive, cultural, and social experiences. Radway delved into the issue of reader escapism in romance novels, arguing that this escapism allowed readers to tolerate the reality of their social lives, specifically playing the role of the housewife in patriarchal relationships. However, she also noted that romance novel readers gained significant knowledge from them,

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[19] Storey, 2004: 32.

[20] Storey, 2004: 34.

[21] Radway, 1987, 36.

[22] Radway, 1987, 35.

whether in improving their own married lives or guiding their children.[23] In the same vein, Fiske argues that, contrary to common belief, escapism is not a frivolous and feminine task, but part of the reality of resistance.[24] In other words, in this perspective, the reader enjoys the cultural commodity they possess by interpreting the text based on their everyday experiences.

Thus, like many aspects of everyday life, novels are not just a recreational activity or a pastime. Rather, readers deliberately choose a particular genre based on the type of need they feel within themselves. Romance novels are no exception to this rule.

In this study, in order to understand the tangible presence of romantic novels in everyday life and their function, reader evaluations of the characters and events in the stories and their realism were first examined. Then, we focused on an examination of the ethical characteristics that the heroes should possess to understand their demands in daily life. We believe that readers use fictional images as a means of expressing themselves about society. In other words, they express their demands from society through reading novels.

Research Method

As no study in Iran has examined the experiences of romance novel readers in their everyday lives, there was no reliable data available in this area; this presents researchers with many challenges. The diverse dimensions of the study, such as understanding the type of audience, their behaviors, motivations, interests, etc. required a comprehensive and accurate approach. Finding readers of romantic novels in a structured way was another challenge. Through face-to-face and structured interviews, we were able to gain insights into the behaviors, motivations, and reasons of readers of romantic novels, who are mostly women. The reason for not using a questionnaire in this study was the exploratory nature of the research topic. Interviews provided the authors of this study

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[23] Tezha Mirfakhraei, "Fiction literature and cultural discourse" in *Society and Culture* (collection of papers) vol. 4 (2005): 277-315.

[24] Fiske, 286.

with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the behaviors and interests of readers of romantic novels through face-to-face contact.

The interviews were collected by the second author of the article from Ibn Sina Book City, a large bookstore in south Tehran, so caution should be exercised in generalizing the results of this study. Since this study was exploratory, these results should be seen as preliminary, opening the way for research in the field of audience analysis of popular romance readers.

The interviews were based on Janice Radway's questionnaire, which she used on readers of romance novels in *Reading Popular Romance*.[25] The questions were translated and standardized based on the conditions of Iranian society. Radway used various research methods including individual questionnaires, open discussions, oral interviews, personal conversations, and observing the interactions of various members of the symbolic community of romance readers.[26]

The sampling method in this study is quota sampling. The age of individuals was used as the criterion for determining the quota. Based on previous observations, romance novel readers were classified into three groups: teenagers, young adults, and adults. The sample population for this study consisted only of women (as the majority of romance novel readers are women, as confirmed by the authors' observations) who were either single or married. However, the non-random nature of this kind of sampling clearly precludes generalizing to a larger population.

Reaching saturation in terms of responses is a prerequisite for conducting interviews, when the researcher feels that the responses of the interviewees have become similar and no new answers are obtained. This homogeneity was achieved after conducting 42 interviews.

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[25] Radway, 1987, 231–40.

[26] Storey, 2004.

It took about two months to conduct the interviews, from December 5, 2008 to March 3, 2009. Specifically, the interviewer was present every afternoon for those two months at Ibn Sina Bookstore to interview purchasers of popular romance novels. The interviewer's presence at the bookstore was akin to that of an employee.

Two methods were used to analyze the data. Some of the interview questions had the ability to be closed-ended questions after the interview. That is, the answers were not beyond 3 or 4 options. Therefore, they were like closed-ended questions that could be converted into codes and analyzed using SPSS. However, reader answers and their explanations were also complementary. Some of the participants' answers that were more informative were also noted along with their age, marital status, and occupation. Some other questions that could not be converted into codes were analyzed qualitatively. For the analysis stage, the data were first recorded separately and then categorized based on their semantic and theoretical units and interpreted accordingly. Therefore, the research method is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research Findings

The study sample consisted of readers from Ibn Sina Book City. The interview participants ranged in age from 13 to 78 years old. The readers can broadly be categorized into three age groups: teenagers (ages 13 to 20) making up 38.1% of the sample, young adults (ages 20 to 30) comprising 35.7%, and adults (ages 30 to 65) representing 26.2%. Since only one elderly person (aged 78) was in the sample, we grouped her with the adults. Among the interviewees, 26% were housewives, 21% were employed, 26% were university students, and 26% were school students. In terms of marital status, 57% were single, 16% were married without children, and 26% were married with children.

Evaluation of Readers' Assessment of Novel Characters

To understand the tangibility of the novels and their events, readers were asked, "Do you think the characters in the novel are similar to your ordinary life?" The majority of respondents (69%) answered that they were "somewhat" similar. Only one person

believed that these events were "completely" similar to her life, and 16% believed that they were "very similar" to their lives. However, most respondents saw a "huge difference" between their surroundings and the novel's characters.

Some answers to this question are presented below:[27]

13-year-old schoolgirl: "Since I mainly read newly published novels, the characters are around 99% similar. The characters in Moadabpour's novels are mostly like the people we see in our everyday lives. They are like my relatives, especially my cousins."

19-year-old university student: "They are very rarely similar to the people around me. But sometimes, the characters are similar to myself, like the girl Ghazal because of her behavior and attitudes towards boys."

29-year-old communications student, single: "No! They are very different. Often, slogans are used, but I think there may be some things that have a slogan-like aspect, but it seems that they should be expressed, even if we know that they don't really exist. Because just expressing them gives people hope, and characters and events in novels are often like this."

20-year-old hospital employee, married: "No! They are not very similar. Because most of the characters in stories are either wealthy, very poor, or very beautiful! But I'm not like that, and the people around me are not like that either."

It is true that most people believed that the characters in novels are less observable in everyday life, but when asked about them and who they resemble, the answers were very diverse. 69% saw them as similar to their family members, friends, and even themselves, and only 31% believed that characters are primarily idealistic and not observable in everyday life. Interestingly, 19% of the respondents saw female characters

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[27] The text of the interviews has been summarized. For the full text, see Asia Arhami, "Audience studies of romance novels" (Master's thesis, University of Tehran, 2009).

in the story as similar to themselves; this group of readers were mostly adults (40%). 50% of those who saw the novel characters as idealistic were also adults.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of people who considered the characters of the novel close to their family members and friends are in the age range of teenagers and young adults. Young people believe that stories are similar to their own lives and those around them, which explains the popularity of novels among this age group. In other words, the proximity of the novel's space to the personal experiences of readers (such as romantic experiences that mostly occur for young people), makes the novel's space tangible, and the reader can easily put themselves in the place of the main character and identify with them.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by the Type of Evaluation of the Novel's Characters, Categorized by Age

	Options	Teens	Young Adults	Adults	Total
Who are the characters in the novel most like?	Friends	26/7	35/7	-	23/1
	Family members	20/0	14/3	10/0	15/4
	The boys in the family	13/3	7/1	-	7/7
	They are ideal characters	33/3	21/4	50/0	33/3
	Myself	6/7	21/4	40/0	20/5

Similarity of the Novel to Everyday Life

Regarding the extent to which the events in a story are similar to everyday life, the majority of people (64%) believed that the level of similarity to their personal life was low, and they mostly saw the issues of the novel as separate from their own. 16% of people also believed that they are not similar to our lives at all.

Therefore, the majority of individuals do not perceive a similarity between their own life experiences and the events depicted in the stories of fictional characters. This may be attributed to the fact that writers tend to highlight specific, rather than

commonplace, experiences of ordinary individuals. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of most individuals, the absence of such events in their immediate surroundings does not imply that they are unreal, but rather that they have not yet encountered them.

Many readers believed that the importance of novels lies not in the similarity of their events to real life, but rather in the practicality of their themes and topics in everyday life. They believe that Iranian stories are instructive and can serve as educational or problem-solving resources.

Some of the responses given by individuals are as follows:

A 40-year-old married housewife: "It's very similar, even if it hasn't happened to me personally, but it's still instructive. Wherever the writers are getting ideas from, it must exist and has been written, and people should learn a lesson from them. For example, it taught me how to deal with situations and how to alleviate discomfort. It's not important that the exact event happens, what's important is the overall lesson it teaches people."

A 22-year-old chemistry student, unmarried: "Yes, in some novels, I feel like it's similar to my own life, like the way the Green Spell expresses emotions was very close to me."

A 19-year-old diploma holder, married: "It depends on the writer. For example, because Moadabpour writes more about social problems such as poverty and addiction, it's very close and people see it repeatedly in ordinary life, but some writers don't write very realistically."

A 19-year-old graphic design student, unmarried: "Yes, sometimes it's similar, but in my opinion, the educational aspect is more important than being similar. For example, it teaches us how to be patient and how to handle difficulties, and over time, the problem will be solved. Or when we look at the hardships that the characters in the story endure, our problems seem smaller."

Regarding whether there is a relationship between the age or marital status of the respondents and the type of answer they gave to this question, as represented in Table

2, no significant relationship was observed. The main focus of the responses in all age groups was on option 2 (some resemblance).:

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Respondents Regarding the Degree of Similarity of Story Events to Real-Life Events

	Options	Teens	Young Adults	Adults	Total
To what extent do the events in the story resemble actual real-life events?	No resemblance	12/5	13/3	27/3	16/7
	Some resemblance	81/3	53/3	54/5	64/3
	Great resemblance	—	20/0	18/2	11/9
	Total resemblance	6/3	13/3	-	7/1

Comparison of Male Characters' Reactions with Real-life Male Behavior

Regarding how similar the emotional reactions of male characters are to the men in respondents' lives, it should be noted that the term "men" here refers to the husbands of married respondents and their boyfriends if they are unmarried. If respondents did not have a boyfriend, the option "I don't have a man in my life right now" was used. Because the goal of this question was to determine the similarity between the emotional behaviors of male characters in the story and the men with whom individuals have emotional relationships in real life, comparisons with male relatives such as brothers and fathers were avoided. This question was also asked of adolescents, but since few of them had boyfriends, we concluded after analysis that it was better to remove their responses. 81.8% of adult respondents (all married) believed that their spouses' behaviors bore no resemblance to male characters in the stories and saw a huge difference between the male characters in the story and the men in their lives. Only one adult believed that there are sometimes similarities, and one adult (an 87-year-old woman who is divorced and had no man in her life) also believed that there was no similarity between the male characters in the story and her ex-husband. It became clear from her interview that she

was very dissatisfied with her ex-spouse, and therefore she also believed that there was no similarity between the male characters in the story and her ex-husband. In contrast, 46% of young people believed that the man in their life (whether spouse or boyfriend) was sometimes similar to the characters in the stories, and 20% of young people had no emotional relationship with any man. The majority of adult respondents believed that there is no similarity between male characters in romantic fiction and their spouses, which itself can be a reason for their interest in reading these types of books because they can search for what they desire in real life, i.e., a caring and loving man (see Table 3).

The relationship between age and the similarity of emotional behaviors of male characters in the story with the men in romance readers' lives was also significant. In other words, as individuals got older, they saw less similarity between the male character in the story and their spouse. One of the reasons for this can be the youthfulness of the story characters, which makes them less comparable. That is, adults see themselves as less similar to them because of the age gap between them and the fictional characters.

Certainly, there is a difference between the expression of emotions in youth and old age. Real life is very different from novels; when people start a relationship and time passes, the type of emotions and feelings that arise will also be different. Therefore, married individuals saw less similarity. In other words, it seems that as individuals get older, they express their emotions less like what the characters in novels do, and this caused older readers to see less similarity in comparison to themselves.

Some of the responses from participants are presented below:

A 35-year-old married housewife: "They are not similar at all. Unfortunately, Iranian men are mostly similar in their infidelity, and they are all the same, just bad and worse."

A 43-year-old married employee: "Unfortunately, most Iranian men are not romantic, while the male characters in novels are generally romantic and emotional. For this reason, they are not very similar."

A 29-year-old unmarried employee in the private sector: "No, they are not similar at all to my friends and acquaintances. The male characters in novels have very idealistic and good personalities, while men in our society are not like that."

A 19-year-old participant: "Yes, they are very similar to the boys in my family, most specifically the characters in Moadabpour's works."

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Respondents Based on the Comparison of Male Character with the Behavior of Men in their Real Life, by Age Group

Are the emotional reactions of the male character in the story similar to the real men in your life?	Options	Young Adults	Adults	Total
	No resemblance to him	26/7	81/8	50/0
	Sometimes resembles him	46/7	9/1	30/8
	Great resemblance	6/7	-	3/8
	I don't have any close male relationships	20/0	9/1	15/4

The Experience of Ridicule for Reading Popular Novels

Part of the study explored the experience of ridicule among individuals who read romantic novels. The findings indicated that 57% of the participants reported experiencing ridicule, while 42% had not experienced any negative reactions. Those who experienced ridicule were more likely to have peers who also read novels in this genre or lacked social circles with an interest in reading. The majority of the ridicule came from men who referred to these novels as a waste of time.

Some responses from participants include:

A 19-year-old married high school graduate: "No, not at all! In fact, I constantly recommend them to others and they all enjoy them."

A 24-year-old unmarried Russian language student: "Yes, very much. But mostly my family. Sometimes I take the book with me when I go out because people make fun of you or look at you askance when they see you reading it."

A 22-year-old unmarried English language student: "Yes! My boyfriend always tells me that reading these novels has a negative effect on me and that I constantly compare myself to the characters in the story and say, 'learn from them.'"

A 40-year-old housewife: "Yes, many of my friends and acquaintances tell me to read something improving, but I believe these books are also informative enough."

Overall, these findings suggest that individuals who read romantic novels may face ridicule, particularly from those who view such books as lacking in value. Further research is needed to explore the underlying reasons for this negative reaction and how individuals can better cope with it.

Table 4 shows that the least ridiculed groups are teenagers (31%), while both the young adult and adult groups experienced ridicule or lack thereof to an equal extent. It seems that because teenagers are generally in contact with their own age group, they are less likely to be ridiculed because they also read romance fiction. Since the category serves as an introduction to the world of fiction, reading these novels is not considered negatively by society for teenagers, assuming that as they progress, they will naturally move towards more serious reading. Another point is that less critical thinking is observed among individuals in this age group, and it seems that they do not have the ability to critically evaluate romantic novels, let alone ridicule each other for reading them. However, there was no significant relationship between these two questions.

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Frequency of Experiencing Ridicule for Reading Romantic Novels, by Age Group

Have you ever been mocked or ridiculed for reading romance novels?	Options	Teens	Young Adults	Adults	Total
	Yes	68/8	53/3	45/5	57/1
	No	31/3	46/7	54/5	42/9

Reader Interests

In this section, we discuss the interests and tastes of readers regarding the subject of the novels they read, character design (both male and female), and narrative style. People's

interests in certain topics can affect their choice of novel when buying or borrowing. Although the main theme of this spectrum of novels is romance, any romantic theme can be combined with other topics. Two questions were designed to explore this issue further: first, the respondents were asked to identify themes that they believed would not be appropriate for a romance novel. Here is an analysis of the responses:

– The majority of the respondents did not find it appealing when female characters were portrayed as ordinary or lacking in exceptional qualities, as this reduced the overall attractiveness of the novel (17% of all cases mentioned). Respondents, in general, disliked a woman who was helpless and unable to manage her own life.

– 12% of respondents did not like male characters who were portrayed as weak and unable to manage their own lives. Additionally, 11% of respondents found topics such as physical torture, rape, and other forms of violence to be unappealing and reduced the overall attractiveness of the novel.

– Oppressive men constituted the next option with 9%, followed by negative and gloomy men in 8% of cases, and men who are stronger than the woman. Unrealistic elements in the novel were considered a negative aspect (6%).

– Mentioning sexual relationships, absent-mindedness, repetition, suicide, pessimism, and portraying a woman stronger than a man were all mentioned once as unappealing (less than 1%).

– An interesting point is that readers do not enjoy stories where weak men and women are portrayed. They want strong characters to manage the problems of life. In other words, they want heroism. If the story's heroes cannot overcome their problems, the story loses its moral purpose. Readers expect to find hope in the story, not to constantly be frustrated by the characters' weaknesses!

Excerpts from readers' responses about topics that can reduce the attractiveness of the story are given here:

A 14-year-old schoolgirl: "The story should not have too many bad events, and the characters of the story should not be ugly or evil. In addition, the girl in the story

should not be stupid, the type that cannot do anything, as this would make the novel less attractive."

A 28-year-old married graphic design student: "Topics such as addiction, divorce, or cultural differences are part of all of our lives, and it is good for them to be addressed, but the type of love in the stories is very unrealistic. Suddenly, the person falls in love at first sight! In addition, the girls in the story do very ordinary things and are not high-flying. They are limited to a small world, just looking for a good boy to get married to, which I don't like at all. I want the girl in the story to be high-flying."

A 40-year-old married housewife with a master's degree in midwifery: "Rape, physical torture of characters, and the fact that a beautiful woman in stories is constantly a model with all the good qualities is too clichéd. All the people around her are very ordinary and sometimes ugly, and only she is extraordinary. This makes it seem like the writers believe that the readers are stupid."

The second issue was what kind of topics the readers like to encounter in a novel. Here too, there were various responses:

–The topic most commonly mentioned by respondents was the use of romantic elements to increase the attractiveness of the story, at 23%.

–The second most commonly mentioned topic was the presence of conflict between characters at the beginning, which gradually transforms into love over the course of the story (14%).

–13% of respondents mentioned that they prefer novels set in a specific historical period, with most of them referring to the novel Bamdad-e Khomar.

–Confrontation with a specific type of male or female hero in the story was the next option (8%). However, all respondents who chose this option emphasized that the characters should not be so different as to appear unrealistic or imaginary.

– Punishment of negative characters, unexpected events, and a happy ending were also among the topics that respondents paid attention to (7% each). Regarding unexpected events, many respondents mentioned that the story should be highly unpredictable.

– A detailed description of the character's personal life and interests was also among reader preferences, at 6%.

– Other topics that were mentioned included realism, emotional impact, and the use of grey characters (i.e., not completely negative or positive) to make the story more realistic.

According to respondents, the romantic element is what mostly makes a story attractive. In all the myths and stories that have been passed down to the present generation, love has played a central role. In modern novels, although the themes are generally social and diverse, traces of love can still be found. In romantic novels, love is the center of everything and all events revolve around it. Love still holds many secrets for everyone, and it is this aspect that attracts readers to romantic novels.

Some reader responses regarding what makes a story interesting are presented here:

Thirteen-year-old schoolgirl: "The story should have an adventure, it should confuse the reader to become interesting. For example, the main characters of the story may get lost for a while and then find each other again."

Thirty-year-old housewife: "I would like to see a woman who can stand on her own without relying on her family's money and wealth and move forward without being too beautiful and relying on her looks, showing that ordinary people can also succeed."

Forty-year-old housewife, master's degree in nursing: "The characters should be similar to us, not far from us, and the story should not be exaggerated. It should happen in a particular historical period."

As the above quotations indicate, readers are mostly looking for subjects that make stories attractive and interesting. These subjects include romantic relationships, conflicts and disputes between the characters of the story that later lead to love, having different and unexpected subjects that make the story interesting, and so on. Women who read romantic novels are looking for pleasure and prefer this pleasure to be emotional and sentimental.

Desirable Characteristics of Story Characters

One of the topics related to reader interests is the main male and female characters of the story. What kind of characteristics the male and female heroes of the story have is important, which, of course, depends to a large extent on readers' previous experiences with other novels and their own lived experience in everyday life. Initially, female readers focus on the qualities that the female protagonist should possess and then on the male protagonist's characteristics. To understand this, respondents were asked, "What qualities and moral characteristics do you want the female character in the story to have?" The following were mentioned by respondents:

– strength of character, not bending in the face of difficulties (25%)

– independence as a woman (12%)

– physical appearance, such as beauty (9%)

– nobility (7%)

– logical decision-making (7%)

– good social position (6%)

– education and not being emotional in different situations (4%)

– having religious beliefs, being an advocate for women's rights, being humorous, not being ordinary, being boastful, being loyal, sincere, and being emotional (each 1%).

As mentioned, women mainly wanted to read a strong and independent woman who could handle her life alone. Respondents even suggested that the female

protagonist's strength of character should be so significant that any other perceived weaknesses, such as physical appearance, would be overshadowed by it. From this research perspective, our society has understood that the most important feature that a woman needs today is independence and personal strength, not physical beauty. Furthermore, many women are dissatisfied with the excessive emphasis on women's physical appearance in novels. They demand that writers should portray women as they are and not ignore ordinary women. Another interesting point is that teenagers mainly emphasized the physical appearance of women, while women over thirty questioned the importance of female characters' physical features in the stories.

In response to the question 'What characteristics do you want the female protagonist to have?', some women stated:

17-year-old student: "She should be strong, not too emotional, have a resilient personality, and be able to stand up to her family for the sake of her love. For example, the female character in the novel Dalan-e-Behesht was very naive and made the readers nervous; she should be stronger in the face of difficulties."

28-year-old married graphic design student: "She should not be submissive, be active, have a good social status, be ambitious, and be strong, while the girls in our novels are weak and accept everything that comes their way."

35-year-old housewife: "She should be independent and strong, able to make decisions for herself, and act wisely. One problem with Iranian novels is that they try too hard to make women beautiful. Everyone falls in love with them, and the boys are always handsome and fit, as if they are not good enough if they are not beautiful. They always link goodness to physical features."

Now we turn to the characteristics that women want in a male protagonist:

– The largest share (13%) wanted a man who is loyal and committed to love.

– Physical attractiveness received 10% of votes.

– The man's strength in the face of difficulties was also important (10%).

–8% of women wanted a witty and humorous man like the characters in Moadabpour's novels.

– Being supportive was also a feature that received attention (6%).

– Logical reactions and behaviors (6%) were considered important.

– Emotional aspects of the male character (6%) were also mentioned.

– 4% of respondents wanted a male character who is kind-hearted and gentle.

– Being serious, showing a sense of honor, being social, educated, etc. were also mentioned as other valued characteristics.

It should be noted that the younger the respondents were, the more attention they paid to the physical features of male characters. As the respondents grew older, being loyal to family and being truthful, having appropriate ethics, etc. received more attention. None of the women over thirty paid attention to the male character's physical features. Interestingly, the majority of women wanted men to be committed and loyal, rather than see the heroine fall in love with a passionate man, as Radway found. Radway believes that the most important aspect of reading romance novels is the reconstruction of the myth of the passionate man, but this hypothesis was refuted in this study.

Based on Radway's findings, women enjoy romantic stories in which an intelligent, independent, and witty woman ultimately surrenders to the love of a man who is both intelligent and loving, and who constantly pines for her after much hesitation and some disagreement. However, in this study, women mostly preferred stories in which a strong, independent, and beautiful woman receives the attention of a loyal, attractive, and powerful man. When the most enjoyable thing for readers is romantic relationships, anything that harms this love (such as men's lack of commitment to personal relationships) is strongly rejected.

Here are some responses from the interviewees:

A 14-year-old girl: He should be handsome and tall, and not strict or arrogant and constantly bothering people. He should also be intelligent and sociable.

A 17-year-old student: Being serious and proud; it's not enough to say idly that they love someone, they should demonstrate it through their actions as well.

A 29-year-old communications student, unmarried: I like novels where the characters strive to be better than the current conditions of society. I like it when they demonstrate honesty, loyalty and adherence to our ideals.

A 53-year-old divorcee, retired: A responsible young man who should not make a woman a plaything.

A 35-year-old housewife: Loyal, better-mannered than current social conditions.

Reasons for Choosing Romance Novels

One of the fundamental points in understanding the behavior of romance novel readers is to understand why they are drawn to such books. Respondents were asked, "Have you ever thought about why you choose romance novels from among the vast spectrum of novels available?" This was an open-ended question. The reasons that respondents mentioned regarding their reading can be divided into the following categories: satisfying emotional needs, gaining experience and knowledge, identity formation, self-reflection, overcoming loneliness, and psychological relaxation.

We will now elaborate on each of the reasons based on the responses:

Emotional Reasons

These reasons refer to cases where individuals have mentioned their emotional connection to the theme and subject of the book, or their desire to achieve a romantic lifestyle. In other words, these books fulfill some of the emotional needs of individuals.

15-year-old student, unmarried: "Maybe because of my age, these books bring up issues that I relate to more at this age, such as love. Besides, other books require more patience and time, which I don't have, like The Three Musketeers. I started reading those at my father's suggestion, but I couldn't finish them."

30-year-old housewife: "Because I believe that love is the essence of everything in life, and since we don't have a romantic life ourselves, reading these kinds of

books makes us hopeful about life. That's why I don't like it to be too sad and gloomy."

27-year-old pharmacy employee, married: "Due to the lack of love in our lives, individuals deceive themselves and indulge in these books for a while, but after a while, that feeling fades away, and they feel the need to start another one."

40-year-old housewife: "These books make you feel like you're living in a dream, and you can't help but wish your life and relationship with men were just as romantic as in the stories."

Acquiring Information and Experience

One reason that many readers mentioned for reading novels is to gain knowledge and experience. For example, some respondents referred to gaining a better understanding of other people's difficulties and experiences in order to establish better relationships with their friends. Books have always been a way to discover new worlds and gain fresh experiences. Many critics believe that popular novels, due to their simple and polarized worldview, cannot increase the experience of their audience. However, it remains to be seen how readers themselves feel, and if these books provide them with knowledge, what areas that knowledge pertains to.

15-year-old student, unmarried: "Because when one experiences the difficulties that everyone goes through in life, they gain knowledge and realize that they are not alone. Moreover, they are very instructive in teaching one to be loyal and committed under any circumstances and to do whatever it takes for the other person."

29-year-old private company employee, unmarried: "Reading these novels actually helps me figure out how to live. It has a lot of moral lessons, such as how making decisions based on emotions can have consequences and cause regret."

35-year-old housewife: "I really love reading books. When I finish reading them, I feel a void. It is very instructive for me to learn how to stand firm against

difficulties, and I want my daughter to read them and see what unexpected things can happen in life. It is very hopeful."

Escaping Loneliness

Escaping Loneliness can also be mentioned as another reason for reading novels, particularly for those who feel very lonely, such as retirees. Since these women spent most of their lives working and busy outside the home, they now have a lot of free time and often feel lonelier than others.

> *78-year-old retiree, married*: "I read all kinds of novels. The events are important to me. When you're alone all the time, you try to do something, and I read novels to get to know my past."

> *53-year-old retiree, divorced*: "Because I feel very lonely, I turn to books. I don't just read romance novels, I also read historical novels and psychology books because they really help me."

Identification through Story Characters

Identification through story characters is another aspect mentioned by respondents. In these books, readers can easily place themselves in the position of the characters and engage in self-reflection.

19-year-old student, single: "Because I enjoy getting lost in the story and constantly placing myself in the position of the characters, these books provide more opportunities for me to do so."

54-year-old retiree: "Because this series of books is very gentle and emotional, they express the relationships between people well, and you can constantly place yourself in the position of the characters."

Easy Prose and the Ability to Read under Any Circumstances

Easy Prose and the ability to read under any circumstances was also mentioned by respondents. Elite literature requires time and concentration. Many have complicated prose that cannot be easily read like a newspaper, and readers must stop and think about each sentence.

The use of language games in the works of elite writers, such as stream of consciousness and intellectual expression in Hooshang Golshiri and the use of expressionism, surrealism, and absurd themes in the writings of Sadeq Hedayat, constantly challenges readers and prevents them from finding concentration. Readers who are less inclined to challenge and create mental engagement for themselves turn to romantic novels that have very easy prose to read. In this range of books, if you lose your concentration while reading, you will still be able to follow the events.

> *20-year-old clinic worker, married*: "Romantic novels end quickly and come to a conclusion soon, so I don't need a lot of time to read them."

> *35-year-old state employee, married*: "Because these books are easier to read and require less concentration. For example, when I read The Enchanted Soul, I enjoyed it a lot, but it really required time and concentration that I, as an employee, don't have. Besides, these books end the way we want and give us peace of mind."

Psychological Relaxation

Psychological Relaxation was also mentioned as another reason. Modern life comes with numerous exhausting pressures that cannot be escaped. In these circumstances, each person seeks ways to reduce the pressures and relax, according to their living conditions and personality. Reading can be one of these ways, and popular fiction, with its easy prose, provides the reader with the possibility of psychological relaxation. According to the Frankfurt School, the nature of popular works as "pre-digested and pre-processed" provides comfort from fatigue and effort, and serves to renew the individual's strength to continue with the existing conditions (Benette 2007). As a result, the individual may not seek to change their working conditions. By consuming popular products, in addition to seeking comfort from "fatigue and effort", readers can also achieve maximum rest and rejuvenation to start working again, as there is no need to think while consuming these products:

> *26-year-old private company employee*: "Because these books are emotional and you enjoy reading them more, they provide a calming effect. When your nerves are shot, they really help you calm down."

> *43-year-old housewife*: "It's not that I love these romantic books, but I want to be calmer and soothe my nerves. I turn to books; in these circumstances, it's not possible to read difficult books. These books have easy prose that can be read in any situation."

As a result, the majority of the respondents indicated that they turn to romantic novels to meet their emotional needs, demonstrating a great emotional deficit that readers feel in their personal lives.

Each person seeks a solution to their own problems, and for women, reading romantic novels is one of those solutions. By reading these books, they seek what they lack in their own lives.

Additionally, the majority of those who mentioned an increase in their experience and knowledge referred to their awareness of how the opposite sex functions in relation to the problems and conflicts of other women. In other words, romantic novels cannot change a reader's worldview and can only increase experience in minor matters. However, it should be noted that this issue (i.e., understanding the opposite sex or other peoples' problems) is not just a minor issue for women but rather a significant part of their lives, as emotional relationships and understanding ways to improve them are of great importance. As Radway pointed out, readers of romantic novels gain vast knowledge of life experiences in society through which to improve their marital life or guide their children.

In 1972, McQuail, Blumler, and Brown[28] proposed the following framework after studying a number of television and radio programs in England, which encompasses the most important dimensions of satisfaction with media (use and gratification theory):

- Entertainment: Escape from boredom or life problems; emotional release

- Personal relationships: Companionship and social utility

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[28] Denis McQuail, *Audience studies* (Tehran: Media Research Center, 2008).

– Personal identity: Self-presentation, reinforcement of values, and discovery of truth

– Surveillance: Various forms of information seeking

As we can see, we find these same issues among the respondents. Reading romantic novels is not just a form of entertainment, but also a selective and motivating activity.[29] From this perspective, any use of media is accompanied by satisfaction. In other words, as active audiences, we make choices with the goal of achieving satisfaction and fulfilling our social and psychological needs.

Conclusion

Considering the audience as passive or active plays an important role in our research approach. In the first approach, the reader plays no significant role in the reading process, and their engagement with these works is merely a result of media owners' choices for profit or feeding public opinion, not as a conscious choice of readers themselves. Therefore, in the passive approach, the reasons for readerly engagement with these works, as well as their motivations and habits in reading, are not debatable or investigable since the audience has no role in selecting them. In contrast, in the second approach, the reader is perceived as an active individual in creating meaning and consciously makes choices based on their needs.

The responses in this study show that romance readers consciously choose these novels to fill gaps in their daily lives. Based on the responses received, a reader's choice of novels reflects their expression of society. They use the fictional story as a means to express their ideals and moral characteristics that they wish to see in both men and women in society (e.g. loyalty in men and capable personalities in women).

As Radway states, women can be someone else for a short time by reading these books and living in another world. At the end of these novels, they feel that men and

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[29] Ong, 2001: 255.

marriage are truly good. Romantic stories are a means for women to experience the same affection and love that they are supposed to give to others unilaterally in their daily lives. Through this, they escape the tensions caused by everyday problems and responsibilities and create time and space for themselves to fulfill their personal needs and pleasures. Escape allows the audience to tolerate the role of a housewife in patriarchal relationships. It also indicates that readers of romance novels gain immense knowledge from life experiences in society to improve their marital life or guide their children.

Therefore, these stories not only serve a purpose in the lives of women but also increase their level of adaptability in daily life. These novels, in fact, enable women to free themselves from the pressures of their daily routines and become hopeful about life.