

On Entrepreneurship and Fiction: the case of Abdul Wali's *They Die Strangers*

Dr. Abdul Aziz Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Muhammed Salim, Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Bedoor Sharaf al- Deen, Ph. D. Research Scholar, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

Abstract

Entrepreneurship and Fiction are two unrelated disciplines. Literary works are full of events, attitudes and characters. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to bridge the gap between the two differing disciplines. It utilizes and applies a psychological entrepreneurship model to the novella *They Die Stranger*. Particularly, it examines the qualities and traits of Abdou Said, the entrepreneur and the main character. It concludes that the Entrepreneurship models works well in the literary text. The study also reveals that there is a possibility of establishing Entrepreneurship fiction that comprises literary works about entrepreneurship and Entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship fiction, *They Die Strangers*, Entrepreneurship and fiction.

Introduction

Fiction has been used widely in social science and it is a recently growing field in management science. Narrative fiction is of most interest when it does not necessarily make a claim to mirror or imitate reality, but rather suggests alternative plots, accounts and representations, which may go against dominant ideas and beliefs in society and business. It is thus in building alternative realities that may seem more or less “realistic” or “utopian” that novels can generate new readings of topics such as entrepreneurship (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004) and institutional change (Czarniawska, 1999). Like in a more conventional entrepreneurial act, such as starting a new organization, or rejuvenating an old one, there is potential power in the novel and the novelist to change norms, values and beliefs that are seen as constraining social development. ‘The narrative of entrepreneurship is the generation of hypotheses of how the

world might be: how the future might look and act', Gartner (2007: 624) contends. Hjorth (2007:718) further suggests a notion of entrepreneurship 'as creative social energy, as a desire to become the other.' Following Hjorth, (2007: 727), entrepreneurship as narrative gives a way to think of both the novelist and the novel as 'carrying transformative power of creating new worlds.' The basic motivation is that that narrative fiction such as novels can offer understandings of social and institutional changes in a way that traditional research methods and empirical material cannot and it can open different windows to approaching entrepreneurship. Before proceeding further, one has to give a short note about the novella.

They Die Strangers is the masterpiece novella of Muhammed Abdul-Wali. It narrates the experience of Abdou Said, who travels to Ethiopia, and works as a merchant. Due to financial problems, he migrates to Ethiopia and settles in Addis Ababa, specifically in Sodset Kilo. He works non-stop as a shopkeeper with the hope to return to his homeland as a wealthy man. He is successful and is very keen to save every penny. The narrative starts upon the arrival of Abdou Said in Sodest Kilo in Addis Ababa, the capital city, to open a shop. It mainly highlights the lifestyle and values and personal traits that enabled Abdou Said to be a good Entrepreneur.

The purpose of the research

The idea is to investigate such genres by using entrepreneurship approaches and models and to contemplate how fiction could trigger new ideas and shape entrepreneurship. Our basic argument is that there is a potential for having an interdisciplinary field of study between literature and entrepreneurship that could provide new insights about how entrepreneurship should be and opens horizons for examining the multi- facet dimensions of entrepreneurship.

This study is basically carried out to bridge the gap between fiction and Entrepreneurship. It starts with shedding light on the importance of fiction especially scientific fiction to an Entrepreneur. In particular, this study tries to accomplish the following aims:

- a. To consider the possibility of bringing Entrepreneurship approaches and models to a literary work and establish Entrepreneurship fiction an interdisciplinary field and list some of the literary works that are depict, highlight, and reflect on entrepreneurship and entrepreneur(s).

- b. To determine what are the personal traits and characteristics that make Abdou Said a good entrepreneur?

Methodology

Entrepreneurs are argued to have a number of qualities and traits (Mueller and Thomas, 2000, Baron, 2000). This study draws on the most common entrepreneurial qualities that have been listed in Kuratko and Hodgetts, 1998) which are given in (1).

(1)

1. self confidence	22. reliability
2. constancy	23. Prevision
3. Being active and energetic	24. honesty
4. skill	25 commonality
5. Risk taking	26. being profit minded
6. Dynamism & leadership	27. the ability of learning from mistakes
7. optimism	28. desire for power
8. Ambition	29. good personality
9. versatility	30. self- centeredness
10. creativity	31. courage
11. the ability of manipulation	32. imagination
12. the ability to communicate with people	33. understanding/ sympathy
13. initiative	34. the tolerance against uncertainty
14. flexibility	35. Aggression
15. intelligence	36. satisfaction
16. focusing on clear objectives	37. advantage
17. Being competitive	38. being promising
18. independency	39. the ability to rely on employees
19. sensitivity to critical situations	40. sensitivity
20. efficiency	41. integrity
21. being decisive	42. Maturity

Given this, the next section examines the personal traits that Abdou Said have as a representative of Entrepreneur.

Entrepreneurship and fiction

Fiction is considered the memory of nations. It can be a representation of the society and social actors. That is why we find different types of characters such as king and queen, wife and husband, friend and enemy, father and son, teacher and student, and last but not least customer and entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship and fiction are two fields of study that are completely different in ontology and epistemology, that is in goals, scope, approaches, models, and nature of

knowledge. But it seems that interdisciplinarity is a growing trend. Interdisciplinary studies are those studies in which two or more academic disciplines are combined into one activity, drawing knowledge from several other fields. It is about creating something by thinking across boundaries. Given this, Entrepreneurship fiction as an emerging field is logically justified. It can be defined as a literary genre that fictionalizes entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs, innovation, and entrepreneurship status and prospectus. Some representative literary works of this Entrepreneurship fiction are written in different languages:

- a. *They Die Strangers*, a novella by Muhammed Abdul- Wali, (Arabic).
- b. *Snow Crash*, a novel by Neal Stephenson, (English).
- c. *The merchant of Venice*, a drama by Shakespeare, (English).
- d. *The Vendor of Sweets*, a novel by Mr. R. K. Narayan (Hindi).
- e. Why Not! (Det går an!, 1839), a novella by Carl-Johan Love Almqvist (Swedish).
- f. Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları “Cevdet Bey and His Sons” by Orhan Pamuk (Turkish).

The question that poses itself is what the benefit of bringing together these two fields is. To attempt an answer, it is well known that there are different theories and models of Entrepreneurship. Some of these theories are listed in (2).

- (2) a. Psychological theories of Entrepreneurship such as Need for achievement and power by McClelland(1961) and Locus of control by Rotter (1966).
- b. Sociological Theories of Entrepreneurship such as the inter-generation inheritance of enterprise culture, social marginality and ethnicity.
- c. Economic theories
- d. Cultural theories such as Hoselitz’s Theory
- e. Entrepreneurship Innovation theory

For those who work on fiction, Entrepreneurship models and theories bring about new readings and interesting interpretations. For Entrepreneurs, I think it suffices to quote Ben Narasin’s view about hard-science science fiction in his article entitled “*The importance of science fiction to entrepreneurship*”. He admits that:

When I started fashionmall.com in 1993, there were few people trying to commercialize the newly born web, and widely conflicting views on how, or even if, it could be done. A single science fiction paperback preemptively helped me understand how the web would evolve — without it, I may not have been able to take my company public six years later.

He adds that:

When I read Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (a book I later learned Reid Hoffman and Peter Thiel spent a weekend discussing before PayPal was created), I saw a more geographic metaphor; one where the point of entry was the most valuable land and the further away you were from that point, in a series of single clicks, the more remote and barren your neighbourhood would be.

Having listed the representative works and highlighted the significance of fiction to entrepreneurs. The remaining of this section will adopt and apply an Entrepreneurship psychological perspective to the literary text with focus on the salient traits listed on the chart in (1). The chart indicates that there are certain traits that a successful Entrepreneur should have. Having Abdou Said as a merchant, we will examine the most features that Abdou Said have. First of all, he is very ambitious. Living in deteriorating condition that is full of suffering and struggle, he decides to migrate to earn a good living and build a beautiful house. Second, risk taking and self- confidence seems to be the most salient feature. Abdou Said migrates from Yemen to Ethiopia and arrives in Sodset Kilo. The second day he arrives to Sodset Kilo in Ethiopia, "he was moving his goods and opening his store" (Abdul-Wali, p. 24) although "the Armenian (...) owned a well-equipped shop"(Abdul-Wali, p.9) at the other side of the street. Third, he is active and energetic. His motto is "work first, eat later" (Abdul-Wali, p. 18). He is devoted to his profession as "he works nonstop" (Abdul-Wali, p.19) and "he dropped whatever he was doing to wait on the customer" (Abdul-Wali, p. 18). Even in holidays, "he does not leave until ten in the morning and only after giving his customers all they required" (Abdul-Wali, p.20). Fourth, he is good in communication with people. "He smiled at all of them" (Abdul-Wali, p.10) and "responded to the slur with a friendly smile"(Abdul-Wali, p.18). Fifth, he is very skilful and is intelligent. Intelligence is reported by the Armenian when he describes him as "genius" (Abdul-Wali, p.19). "Though he had never been to school, he knows how much each

one should pay” (Abdul-Wali, p.19). Also, “he bought all the goods his clients requested and prepared their orders one by one. A kilo of rice for Abraham, a kilo of flour for Neruto, a kilo of sugar: each got what he or she needed” (Abdul-Wali, p.19). Sixth, he can manipulate and influence others. “He did not present his accounts every year as he should”(Abdul-Wali, p.29). When the Armenian wants to expose him, he goes to the wife of a government officer and requests her to convince her husband to help him, “You know, I am a poor man; I work hard to earn every cent. Will you talk to your husband for me? He is a high ranking civil servant. He could manage my case” (Abdul-Wali, p. 33). Seventh, he is helpful and sympathetic. This is indicated by his good treatment of the children “he whispered something in the heart of the children and poured out a handful of sweets” (Abdul-Wali, p.61), “He loved the children of the quarter” (Abdul-Wali, p.37), “was kinder than the other shopkeepers”(Abdul-Wali, p.17) and “his tolerance attracted many customers”(Abdul-Wali, p.18). Eighth, he is profit-minded. He “work(s) hard to earn every cent”(Abdul-Wali, p.33). Ninth, He is self-centered. This is clear as “he never gave donations or attended community meetings. He lives in complete isolation” (Abdul-Wali, p.47) and “he confide in no one” (Abdul-Wali, p.24). An important trait is maturity. Abdou Said spent at least forty years in business. Last but not least is that he is honest “I own an honest business” (Abdul-Wali, p.73).

Conclusion

The study highlighted the importance of fiction to entrepreneurship .Then we draw on Abdul Wali’s *They Die Strangers* and examine it using the psychological model of entrepreneurship. It has been found that Entrepreneurship fiction is an emerging field in literary works. This paper lays the foundation stone for such interdisciplinary field in the hope that more research would be conducted to arrive at provoking new ideas for entrepreneurship.

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