

***The Tempest* and Treatment of the Grotesque**

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Abstract

The words dirty, filthy, ugly, monster, giant, witch, evil, dangerous, horrifying are common in our vocabulary. But there is a word that stitches all these words together and other negative words. That word is grotesque. This word is not used as it sounds complex and creates a vast space which needs significant explanation and a proper definition. The word may sound unusual but in literature it is of great significance and importance. Shakespeare in many of his plays shows the significance of the term grotesque. But the grotesque in his plays are reduced to comical beings or marginalised creatures. *The Tempest* (1610) is one of the most important plays portraying the grotesque. The “creatures” have bodies and behaviour unfit for the human world. These creatures remain secluded from society in a hidden island. The word grotesque is similarly hidden away only to be used in literature. Rabelais and Mikhail Bakhtin give the word the much needed significance. Through Bakhtin we come to know how Shakespeare might have treated the grotesque bodies in his plays. Thus the aim of my paper is to show the treatment of the term grotesque in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and through a few marginalised characters.

Keywords: Grotesque, grotesquerie, marginalised, slave, silenced rebel.

Introduction:

The Tempest highlights the struggles and rise of Prospero, the heroic figure who rises to power from death. But is this play only about Prospero and his daughter or does Shakespeare want to highlight some other important aspects? In his masterpiece Shakespeare does highlight other characters but the readers fail to notice. Why do the readers fail to notice characters like Caliban, Sycorax and to some extent even Ariel? The readers do not fail to

notice them, we simply ignore such characters because they are not heroic. They are marginalised as they do not have proper physical features. They are different from humans. They are ¹abhuman. They are grotesque. The word grotesque accurately distinguishes the hailing hero, Prospero from these marginalised characters. It is the meaning of grotesque that varies from reader to reader. As the meaning starts varying, grotesque becomes a vast word which needs a more accurate explanation.

Bakhtin and the Grotesque Body:

The word grotesque does not particularly stand for something which is ugly or hideous to look at. It is something more. Grotesque in literature is expressed through bodies and behaviour. It does not portray beautiful bodies or positive behaviour. It is rather the opposite. There is no visual pleasure in looking at grotesque things or grotesque bodies. It shows the abnormalities in bodies. It portrays abnormal human figures who are often referred to as being monsters. The concept of the Grotesque body was given proper exposure by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Bakhtin's concept is based on Francois Rabelais' work and especially on Rabelais' novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, written in the 16th century is a series of five novels which shows the lives of two giants - Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. The portrayal of these giants connect the terms "grotesque", "abhuman" and "monster". The connection of these words define grotesquerie. Rabelais' giants are not fit to be a part of normal human society yet Pantagruel is referred to be a scholar and Gargantua is known as the "great" giant. Their over exaggerated physical features and humorously awkward social behaviour make them grotesque. But the abundance of ²"toilet humour" and vulgar insults in the books give a glimpse of the Renaissance society and the difficulty of the people in accepting figures labelled to be grotesque and monstrous. Mikhail Bakhtin shows the use of grotesque bodies in Rabelais' novels as a tool to reflect upon social and political conflicts. The ³degradation of the ideal body structure, exaggeration, cursing and laughter emphasising on some elements which are protruding from the body or can be entered are the key elements of grotesquerie. The defects in one's body and social behaviour gives the definition grotesque bodies and this feature is used in abundance by major novelists, playwrights and poets across the world.

Establishing Grotesquerie through examples:

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is a novel known to the world. The man-made creature is dreadful, hideous, monstrous, ugly and unfit for the society. This is the general observation. We forget to observe that he is created. He is created to be frightening. The humans create and define whatever is unfit for the society. The monsters are man-made. The social and physical outlooks of a human being are given a boundary and the "creature" who steps out of the boundary and rebels against such norms is cast out as a monster. The creature's ugly physical descriptions, his social behaviour and the chaos he creates makes him grotesque. The creator flees before the creature awakens because of his repulsive and frightening features. The creature's need to reproduce and his plead for a female partner gives a glimpse of grotesquerie. This novel shows the relation between grotesque bodies and monsters.

Frankenstein is a satisfying glimpse of grotesquerie but William Shakespeare gives an insight to what grotesque bodies stand for. He defines the word grotesque through various marginal characters in his plays. In *Macbeth* (1623), the three witches or ⁴the three evil sisters conduct the play and lead Macbeth towards his downfall. They are often called the "weird" sisters. Their physical representation is abnormal and ugly. They are defined to be creatures from another world. They are evil, chaotic and represent darkness. They are old and filthy and they create a moral confusion throughout the play where good and evil seem similar. The line – "Double, double, toil and trouble" makes their intensions clear. They are evil but supernatural beings. They have the ability to look into the future. They are immortal. All these features make them abhuman. Here Shakespeare builds a bridge between the terms abhuman and grotesque. Grotesque represents everything the witches are and the presence of dark humour confirms it. The inclusion of the witches draws a picture of the society and its powerful but evil representatives. The witches are minor characters yet they define "grotesque bodies" beautifully through their physical features, mental outlook, and the way they are looked at and treated by society and the protagonist himself. It is not only *Macbeth* which portrays grotesquerie, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) is another such play where grotesque bodies are shown. In this play the grotesque is accompanied by laughter. The unimportant characters define grotesque in this play. A stage actor is given an ass' head and the queen of fairies is made to fall in love with her. All these activities take place with the help of magic. The ass' head plays a huge significance in defining grotesque through Shakespeare's narrative. The head of an animal on top of a human body makes it grotesque. The comical

appearance is absurd, unreal, ugly but funny and the presence of magic which is a supernatural element makes it grotesque in nature. The unacceptance of such things in society is strongly portrayed in this play as all these incidents take place in a forest with hidden supernatural presence. The creatures did not dwell amongst humans as their presence was frightening and abnormal to the humans. This is how Shakespeare defines the grotesque in his plays but only through marginalised characters.

Treatment of Grotesque in *The Tempest*:

The Tempest is the avenging tale of Prospero. Prospero, his daughter, the wrong deeds against him and his forgiveness are the key features of the play. But there are deeper aspects which we fail to give importance to. The suffering marginalised characters suffer in silence throughout the play. They are unable to rise against the usurper of the island, Prospero. Prospero's torturous control over the inhabitants of the island is completely overlooked. Caliban, Sycorax and Ariel become props in Prospero's story. Their abhuman identity and unnatural activities make them unimportant. Caliban is defined to be monstrous and vulgar, Sycorax is just remembered as an evil witch and Ariel becomes the silent slave. Shakespeare, through his narrative shows the readers how the grotesque characters were treated by society. *The Tempest* brings out the struggles of the three marginalised characters- Caliban, his mother Sycorax and the spirit, Ariel. They are portrayals of grotesque bodies. Their abhuman appearance, abnormal behaviour and abilities and the rectification offered to them by Prospero proves it. Shakespeare's treatment of the grotesque is the main motif behind the portrayal of these characters.

Caliban is the unfortunate rebel who is silenced by Prospero. He is the alleged bastard child of an evil creature. He even accepts his title of being a rapist. Through Caliban Shakespeare brings out the rebellious nature of the "creatures" cast out of society for being grotesque. Prospero's attempt in improving Caliban's social behaviour shows how he is forcefully made to change his own characteristic features. His rebellion is of no use. He is silenced and punished. He is sympathised. He is mistreated. He endures all of these tortures because of the difference in his physical appearance. American writer Russell Hoban says "Caliban is one of the hungry ideas, he's always looking for someone to word him into being... Caliban is a necessary idea". Before Prospero, he was the ruler of his island but Prospero usurps his leadership and forces him into slavery. In the play, his half human and half monstrous

appearance makes him an abhuman. His animalistic behaviour, his beastly ways, the deformities in his body and his abnormal parentage makes him grotesque. He is given the name of every other wild creature but is not once called a human being but strangely is the single manly inhabitant of his island. This shows how the human thinking, treatment and the influence of the so called civic society is grotesque. It is our way to look at someone who is different from us, which makes them grotesque and not their bodies and behaviour. Caliban is different from Prospero and his daughter and therefore he is grotesque. In Caliban's view, Prospero could also be grotesque. Caliban's exploitation and repeated body shaming for being "grotesque" brings out the negativity in the treatment of the grotesque. As Prospero remains in power Caliban is unable to protest and remains an exploited grotesque creature throughout the play. Caliban serves the function of an irrelevant and beastly clown who ends up being destroyed physically and morally by the hero.

Sycorax is the vicious witch and the mother of the beastly Caliban. She is not even a character in *The Tempest*. She is only a bad memory. She is remembered through Prospero, Ariel and Caliban. She is hated by Prospero and labelled to be evil. According to legends she was banished to the island for practicing dark magic. She was very powerful and tortured and captured the spirits of the island. Ariel was captured and punished by her for being disobedient. Practicing something beyond human control and being more powerful than fellow men and women made her grotesque. Prospero narrates her story and makes her unacceptable in human society. But we do not notice that Prospero is very much similar to Sycorax. He practices magic and enslaves spirits. He does not even spare Sycorax's son and therefore in a way Prospero's treatment of Sycorax and her son is wrong. Shakespeare shows how confusing the treatment of a grotesque creature is through Prospero and Sycorax. Prospero's source of information does not remain trustworthy as he becomes an abhuman. The narrative shows how Prospero defines Sycorax to be grotesque as she not a proper lady. She is powerful and different from a normal acceptable human being. Her beastly son makes her grotesque biologically and the story of having abnormal physical features and supernatural powers make her grotesque to the readers.

Ariel is the ⁵indoctrinated slave in the play. Physical deformities play a key role in the identification and treatment of grotesque bodies but Ariel lacks a physical shape in the play. Ariel is a spirit with no specific physical appearance. He lacks a hump, a limp, an

immobilised body part or any other visual disability. But he is still mistreated for being grotesque. What makes him grotesque? He is not human and nobody is aware of his actual shape and size. He might be monstrous. He might be ugly. These assumptions make him grotesque and he is thus exploited by Prospero. He follows Prospero's every command and fulfils all his wishes- good or bad but is denied freedom. He is always reminded of his imprisonment by Sycorax and how he was saved by Prospero. He pays a huge price by surrendering himself to Prospero's wishes only for freedom. His abhuman qualities are mischievous, humorous and troublesome. His ability to perform tasks impossible for human beings and his identity of being a spirit make him grotesque.

Conclusion:

The Tempest shows a detailed treatment of the grotesque. Grotesquerie not only includes physical deformities but also mental deformities and social outlooks. It includes monsters and abhuman creatures. The grotesque are not always monstrous but monsters are always grotesque. Similarly, the abhuman creatures are always grotesque as they are separate from normal human existence. Throughout *The Tempest* Caliban's narrative is presented with language taken from the demonic nightmare of ⁶Renaissance witchcraft and ridiculous prodigies of the ⁷Protestant Reformation. Through the treatment of the grotesque in his play, Shakespeare asks us to differentiate between animalistic and inhuman. Thus the meaning of grotesque becomes complex suggesting the whole spectrum of living beings from powerful kings to lowly animals and offering a comprehensive vision of life from gruesome to comical, from good to evil and from high to low. In William Shakespeare as in Rabelais, the forms of grotesque alter and represent an essential dichotomy. Farce characters seem at first to incarnate "grotesque realism" that Mikhail Bakhtin defined as an insurgent and popular principle of enjoyment but grotesque reveals tragic aspects when the principle of ridicule and deformation takes an uncomfortable turn. Grotesque is defined in Shakespeare's works to the instability of significant values. Shakespeare seems to initialise a trial-and-error of ridicule that gives grotesque both an aesthetic and instructive role.

Notes

- 1- Abhuman – This term is used to distinguish the separation from normal human existence and it does not relate to being inhuman here in this paper. The term is used

in this paper to refer to the bodies of the creatures and not specifically to Gothic fiction.

- 2- Toilet humour – Off colour humour dealing with defecation, urination, flatulence and other similar body functions. It is the crossover with sexual humour. This term is very significant in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.
- 3- Degradation of the ideal body structure – By referring to grotesque the ideal structure of the human body is insulted. The ideal structure has perfect shape and smooth skin and is pleasing to the eyes. This structure is defined by human beings themselves. Grotesque comically insults this perfect human body, degrades it and the body becomes a tool of ridicule.
- 4- The three evil sisters - Their inclusion is not only related to Macbeth, they are influenced from the Old Norse tales and they represent faith. In this paper these sisters are shown as they control the fate of a hero in spite of being grotesque. They show how humans depend on the creatures they cast out of society.
- 5- Indoctrinated slave - Ariel accepts the authority of Prospero even if he is reduced to a slave. He is subjected to mental torture through indoctrination. Ariel has to endure such behaviour for being grotesque- a spirit having powers beyond human control. In this paper the term indoctrinated slave shows how Shakespeare's plays put such creatures in negative situations under human mercy. Grotesque are feared to be powerful but in *The Tempest*, they are tortured and marginalised.
- 6- Renaissance witchcraft – Renaissance humanism (15th and 16th century) saw a resurgence in hermiticism and neo-platonic varieties of ceremonial magic mainly practiced by women. These women were called witches and the magic they practised was seen as craft. Hence the term witchcraft is used.
- 7- Protestant reformation – The protestant reformation was the 16th century religious, political, intellectual and cultural upheaval that splintered Catholic Europe, setting in place the structures and beliefs that would define the continent of Europe in modern era.

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