



Peculiaris Lepores: Grotesque as Moment in British Literature

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Abstract: *Beauty has its countless faces to delineate itself. The most familiar face of beauty, in its presentation in literature, is reliable, consistent and coherent. Aquinas defined beauty as *visa placenta* ('the sight that pleases us is beautiful'). Joyce's *Dedalus* envisioned another version of beauty. The gratification of beauty, says he, all depends on the organ with one perceives it. The other face of beauty is very queer and strange. It is, to some extent, misleading and vague. Alexander Pope used a weird appellation ('awful beauty') to sum up Belinda's grace. In Easter 1916 Yeats had more substantiate view of beauty, which originated from the forfeit of Irish patriots: "All that changed, utterly changed, a terrible born". This indistinct and blurred face of beauty can justly be comprehended as something, which is grotesque. This research paper aspires to locate some grotesques as moment that has peculiar charms (***Peculiaris Lepores***) in itself.*

Keywords: *Beauty, Blurred Face, Grotesque, Literary Reception*

There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamoured of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself, and instinct with that vivid life that lurks in all grotesques, and that lends to Gothic art its enduring vitality, this art being, one might fancy, especially the art of those whose minds have been troubled with the malady of reverie.

Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray" (p-131)

I. INTRODUCTION

Beauty has its own parameter to narrate itself. Modern interpretations of beauty may not sound sweet and satisfying. Distortion, it seems, can be the other unpopular face of beauty when one is thinking its modern presentations and interpretations. Such distortion and disorder, when got a chance to impress, impressed us all, mostly to some selected literary artists. Distortion of beauty usually begets a name for itself. Yes, your guess is just and right. I am talking about grotesque. "Grotesque is the vulnerable, pathetic fantasy we distort in our simultaneous search for love and property" (Bloom, p.11). British literature is rich with many famous and unmatched grotesque moments. The presentations of such grotesque moment have the chances of bearing of individual distinctiveness. In those cases, some of the writers and poets may really leave their stamps of originality. Though absurdity and distorted reality and its presentations in literature are belated phenomenon Germany, many date back the cradle of grotesque at Expressionism. Some of the close worshippers of Freud can fabricate a different assumption. The subjective anxiety, ill and ignored libido, fractured mind are handy enough to condense the literary cloud for the evacuation of grotesque. Distortion, blurred, smudge, blistered are the other sister words of grotesque. The inclusions of such perpendicular vocabulary expand and widen the horizon of grotesque. The political critique of Easter Rising and Yeats' enamoured idea of 'terrible beauty' becomes the just meeting ground of beauty where it is perceived from newer and afresh standpoint. This is where beauty loses her all chances as being coherent and full of symmetrical pattern. Beauty loses its colour as being standby and stereotype. The unfamiliar face of beauty becomes a new a face for tomorrow, and that makes the deformation more subjective acceptable.

II. GROTESQUE IN SHAKESPEARE

The fair and the beautiful were not always his business. William Shakespeare has remained the pioneer artist in the successful use of grotesque. The close reading of the literary career of Shakespeare may prove effective in the discussion of this issue. There are numerous passages in the few selected plays of Shakespeare that contain so many enigmatic passages that reveal the dark corners of the artist's heart. The comedies like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* very reasonably titled as the dark comedies or sombre comedies. These dark comedies of Shakespeare inform the darkness of the artist's heart. David Moody is not wrong in his obser-

vation: The epigraph from *Measure for Measure* locates the Limbo the voice comes from; the dry, barren, blocked situation the old man inhabits is invaded by promises of rejuvenation, which are grotesque and inadequate; memories of what might have been recreate an illusion whose temptations only under line failure (112).

These enigmatic passages in the sombre plays give the hints of the absurdity of the relevance of such passages if they are really harmonious with the chief argument of the play. The entry of two enigmatic characters in the 154 sonnets of talks much about the dark and unknown corners of Shakespeare's heart. Scholars have laboured a lot in revealing the truths of the entry of these unknown characters. In a given situation, the unnatural dealing of Petruchio with his wife Catherina in the play *Taming of the Shrew* can be cited as the most explicit moment of psychic absurdity. In his *Critical Companion to William Shakespeare*, Charles Boyce has rightly observed it:

This forces the audience to think about Petruchio's ploys rather than simply watch them and emphasizes that Petruchio's shrew-taming is a kind of education: he teaches Katherina that her evil-tempered ways are not desirable and that another behaviour pattern is superior. He is training Katherina as he would a hawk, as he describes in 4.1.175–198, and the conceit, although comically grotesque, becomes a metaphor for the socializing process (p-542). Caliban, the half savage and half beast figure in *The Tempest* is a fleshly version of grotesque. His blind acceptance of Stephano and Trinculo as heavenly gods is the suitable moment that can be catalogued as the most successful grotesque in Shakespeare. Besides, all the clown characters, their manners, their talks and appearance and unorthodox interpretation of human affairs are enough to authenticate the grotesque in Shakespeare. English as a language had achieved such a rich flavour in the hands of Shakespeare that such expertly managed language had also a bizarre effect in the mind of the audience:

Though most Jacobean tragicomedies are obsessed with grotesque rhetoric and bizarre acts of violence, in a fashion far removed from Shakespeare's work, a number of his plays may nevertheless be classed as tragicomedies in a structural sense, especially *Measure for Measure*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* (Boyce, p-928). When night distances itself from the day, today distances itself from the tomorrow, art changes the most accepted face. It assumes a different level. It may not always sound sweet and satisfactory. Bizarre as an art form writes its own genesis. William Shakespeare is the just and the best among his contemporaries to establish bizarre and grotesque as the most accepted face of literature.

III. FRANKENSTEIN AND THE ART OF NEW GROTESQUE

Mary Shelley knew well and understood well that experimental science is good. It may bring new possibilities to the development of humankind. Her hero in the novel *Frankenstein* believed in the very thing and in the immense prospect of modern experimental science. He went too far with this. He started visiting the charnel houses, slaughterhouses and hospitals to understand the each pulsation of human life. He was keen on understanding the secret principles of life. He invested his days and nights in making the creature with his new experimental science. Finally, when the stitches were done and the thunder came as expected. There was born a new creature with yellow and wrinkle skin. The terrible look of the monster frightened the creator himself. He abandoned the creature sooner. The observation of the Da Lacey family by the creature made him bitten with sorrow. His life without a companion was becoming a complete isolation. The creature of Frankenstein was looking for female creature to remove its alienation. The love yearning of the creature is somewhat queer and bizarre. When Frankenstein was making a female companion for the creature, the laboratory smelt strange and blistered. The moment Frankenstein was disarming the prepared female companion at the suggestion of Henry Clerval, laboratory really looked more as blurred figure. In the final scene of the novel, when the monster killed Elizabeth Lavenza, Frankenstein was making the most sincere effort to bring animation in the dead of body of her. Finally, he did it with discontent. The monster came and demanded her as the mistress. In the most pathetic scene, Elizabeth as newly created character ruined herself, though the reason is partially known. Such meaningless and unexplained corners in *Frankenstein* prepare the right mood for grotesque. Feminist reader like David Punter has smelt the same peculiarity in the bond of the leading characters in Frankenstein.

Despite its overt bond with feminism, the film focuses heavily on the Victor/Creature/Walton/Waldman dynamics. Even the commingling of Waldman's brain with his murderer's body creates a male/male relationship, just as the female rivalry between Justine and Elizabeth over Victor is grotesquely resolved in the monstrous combined female creature (207).

When the creature of Victor was rejected and alienated by the society and the creator himself, he looked pale, helpless, and most suffered from the sense of the guilt of birth why it had with him. This was the case with Mary Shelley herself. Her mother died just after eleven days of her birth. This entire episode survives itself as painful memory in her life. The misery of Mary and the predicament of the creature might seem equal. One thing is understandable for both. When the creation is rejected by the creator and the daughter with her birth has taken the life of her mother, each day comes as trauma. Each night looks bizarre and grotesque.

IV. OBSCURITY AS GROTESQUE IN BROWNING

"Grotesque is the mystery we eliminate to create the revolt of simple things, goods, that desire mystery. Grotesque is what we become when we seclude ourselves in the suburban community closed to wonder,

the mechanical mirage of technological comfort”(Bloom, p.11). Obscurity always hangs in the skirt of Brownian dramatic monologues. Browning endeavoured from all absolute corners to contribute in improvising such touch obscurity. In his mostly read poem *The Laboratory* Browning has created such complex situation. Once again we encounter a woman with disturbed psyche. A love-starved wife comes to a chemist to prepare a chemical compound. She knows well that husband is hankering after a woman with beautiful face. By preparing such chemical compound she wants to create a beauty-based panic so that her husband does not dare to approach to any other beautiful face. In that case, this deprived woman is proved another woman with strange and odd desire. She looks for an absurd revenge. Such abnormal appetite of this love-starved woman establishes her female gothic, if to the society, at least to her own husband. *The Last Rider Together* is another poem Browning with the same touch of obscurity. This poem also focuses on the unusual desire of another frustrated male lover. He does not wish marry the woman he really loves. Rather he wishes to ride with her for a moment. Such unusual desire for riding with the beloved instead of marrying her for ever doubtlessly raises him as a gothic. *A Bishop Orders His Tomb* deals with the same unusual appetite of a Bishop. The strict profession of the bishop has kept him aloof from the earthly desires. At his death bed he wishes his son to set up tombstone on his grave with a black stone upon it. This black stone will become an eternal plea for the hidden urges of this religious man. This black stone may also suggest the secret erotic desire of this bishop. Here the bishop is a religious man with unusual death wish. This abnormal final wish of the bishop raises him from the common judgement and the wish of ordinary man. Here, the bishop is a religious man with a bizarre desire. “For me, the great modern master of the Grotesque was the now rather neglected Victorian poet Robert Browning (1812-1889). Our era dumbs down with shocking ferocity, and the neglect of Browning largely reflects his intellectual energy and the authentic, achieved difficulty of his best poems. His particular masterpiece in the Grotesque mode is the superb Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came, a dramatic monologue that is also an internalized quest-romance”(xv).

V. DICKENS AND GROTESQUE IN FEMALE GOTHIC

Grotesque may not always ridicule. “Though caricature is traditionally satiric, exaggerating grotesque or ugly features, Dickens did not always employ such exaggeration for ridicule (Davis, p-486). Charles Dickens is a master artist in creating such grotesque situation in literature. He did it successfully and effectively. In his most popular novel *Great Expectations* he has experimented with this in a female character, Miss Havisham. She was secretly in love with Compeyson. She made up her mind to marry the she loved. On the wedding day she waited for her man to turn up. The man remained absent in that wedding day. Miss Havisham decided her mind to retain her same wedding decorations, same wedding dress, wedding candle, wedding doll, the disordered clock etc. In the time being, she decides to burn the wedding decorations and the wedding dolls. During the heavy rain she did this intentionally. Such intentional action creates enough ground for grotesque. The burnt wedding decorations, wedding dolls and the disordered clock have been picked by literary critics as the suitable moment for grotesque. Whole action of Miss Havisham may sound somewhat absurd and awkward. Her later moves are proved more meaningless and more strangely unknown and unfamiliar. She adopts a girl Estella, and trains her in such a way so that latter can break the hearts of many. One man has broken the heart of Miss Havisham, and she wishes to break the hearts of many taking Estella as tool. Such abnormal desire of punishing the male gets no immediate explanation. Such jealousy may sound strange and unknown. At this juncture, Miss Havisham is proved to be a female gothic. She is a woman who has become a source of fear for the whole male race. In creating fear among the race she experiments successfully when she adopts Pip. Nobody can ever forget the moment when Estella, a budding female gothic prepared by Miss Havisham, heartlessly receives Pip at the castle gate. “Universal made a talking picture in 1934, an adaptation by Gladys Unger directed by Stuart Walker, in which the grotesque elements in the novel are given realistic treatment; Miss Havisham wears her wedding dress, for example, only on each anniversary of the day on which she was jilted”(David, p-147). The treatment of the children in *Little Dorrit* held another side of grotesque. “These staples of the inheritance plots that produced the happy endings in so many of Dickens’s earlier novels are parodied in the grotesque exaggerations in the story of Arthur’s parentage and the codicil that improbably makes Amy an heiress” (177).

VI. HARDY AND DISTURBED MALE AS GROTESQUE

Along with Roman Jakobson, the entire school of Russian formalist believed that every literature talks of the angst of the age. If any good literary artist remains faithful to art, the angst of the age will automatically be reflected. Russian formalists had their complete in the art’s capability of defamiliarization. Successful art cannot create anything new. It is not answer to any crisis. Art is mere imitation. Art is an improvement upon nature. Successful artists know how to stoop and conquer a moment so that they can present it in its most unknown form with the help of the literary dominants of the concerned age. If orphanism, prostitution, extramarital love, failed marriages were the angst of the Victorian England, Industrialization was the social dominant. Industrialization ruined the greenness of the agricultural England. It is a great disorder to the natural rule of nature. This great abnormality in nature echoed effectively in the fictional works of Thomas Hardy in the guise

of human psychic disorder. *Far from the Madding Crowd* is an early fiction by Hardy and it talks much of this great disorder in human mind. Mr. William Boldwood is a well-to-do gentle, decided to remain unmarried even in his forties. The sudden arrival of valentine letter functions as a spark in the mind of Boldwood. Each day and night appears to him almost as the other sides of misery. His nightmarish experiences of the night come almost as shock to him. One love letter kills the peace of mind of a man. This ruin of peace is a disturbance of human sanity. It is a kind of primordial instability to the male identity which finally becomes the disturbed equilibrium of a confirmed bachelor. A time comes in his life when he is maddened by his unrestrained emotion for Bathsheba and ultimately kills Sergeant Troy. During his asylum days he is proved to be a human being with strange mind. Society calls such human being as grotesque. Charles E. May is very judicious in his observation of Victorian grotesque:

In a typical Hardy pastoral novel, such as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, nature is not divinely ordered, as it is in the classical pastoral. Although on the surface the story seems to fit the pastoral mode—it is set in a rural community, the main character is a shepherd, and the inhabitants seem content with their lives—the clash of Hardy's atheistic view with the traditional pastoral creates a grotesque inversion of the form. (Magill's, p-1133). Tess of D'Urbervilles is another novel by Thomas reminds us of such moment which is beyond explanations. Alec is a young man with evil working within him. Tess is already ruined by him. And in the being, he goes to kiss to Tess and the latter rejects the kiss. At this rejection, he does neither respond nor does he react in anyway. The moment where Alec remains un-responded can be picked as the moment beyond explanation. Hardy in novel has very often proved himself as the most successful maker of grotesque art:

Moreover, the accidents and coincidences that dominate the plot have been the source of much critical disagreement, called both the fault of weaknesses in the characters and the result of Hardy's philosophic determinism, while the framework of magic and superstition that surrounds the action of the work has been termed both grotesque parody and animistic gratuitousness (1135).

VII. EMILY BRONTE AND NIGHTMARISH DREAM AS GROTESQUE

Even female writers like Emile Bronte did not far from the air of using grotesque in fiction. In her only *Wuthering Heights* Mrs Bronte set up the right ambience of creating gothic sentiment. She balanced it well. She utilized old and broken temples as its location. Bloodshed and murder, hide and seek, appearance and disappearance of the ghostly figures are frequently seen in it. They are quite fitting with the purpose. But, the moment she favoured any one of these aforesaid devices gothic crosses boundary of its own, where gothic ends, grotesque begins. Mrs Bronte took a moment from history which was a recent past for him. She accommodated two narrators to picturize the story. Mr. Lockwood is the newcomer tenant in the Wuthering heights. He is the proposed narrator in the novel. In the opening day as newly come tenant in this aforesaid place he saw the vision of a girl who started smothering her hands on broken window glass. The more the hands were bleeding the more intensely she was repeating the same. The episode sounded to Lockwood as somewhat unnatural and gothic. Gilbert and Gubar are not wrong in their observation:

If we understand all the action that takes place at Thrushcross Grange between Edgar, Catherine, and Heathcliff from the moment of Heathcliff's reappearance until the time of Catherine's death to be ultimately psychodramatic, a grotesque playing out of Catherine's emotional fragmentation on a "real" stage, then further discussion of her sometimes genteelly Victorian, sometimes fiercely Byronic decline becomes almost unnecessary, its meaning is so obvious (p-60).

The deeper brooding over such kind incident will madden anybody. The revenge motives of Heathcliffe will never sound to any as expected and a poetic justice. He is a slum, who was wronged his childhood. The maltreated childhood gifted such manhood with grotesque kind of mind. His intention marrying Isabella instead of Catherine, his beloved is another unnatural response of mind. Nancy Armstrong observed the same: "Given that the family history in this novel is also a genealogy of political myths, this grotesque combination of features can only represent what results from the interpenetration of capitalism and the process of dynastic succession"(99).

VIII. ELIOT AND THE ART OF GROTESQUE

Some critics have identified modernism the spirit of which is essentially comic and grotesque. In Eliot "the seductive power of life, for example, finds its own parody and grotesque debasement in the seductive power of sexuality for sexuality's sake" (Murphy, p- 466). Eliot made the thorough use of poetry to establish grotesque as standard form of art that can give literature a better flavour. *The Prelude* by Eliot is the most successful poem in the matter of establishing the authenticity of grotesque as art. It was a foggy evening, says Eliot. The streets were less peopled or half deserted. Lonely men in shirts and sleeve were seen smelling the nocturnal odour of the evening. Streetwalkers were making some gossips. The drizzling rain of the evening added extra flavour to the oddity of the atmosphere. A lonely cabhorse was resting by the wallside. The skin of it was spouted with rain. Eliot's "strategy indeed exploits the disjunction between wanting and doing, and, by exploiting it consciously, pushes sentiment and melodrama into irony and the grotesque"(Moody,p-110). Eliot as a modernist experimented a lot with the technical qualities of modern poetry. Such experimentation finally upgraded the

standard of modernist poetry. What configures a successful modern poetry is its technical innovation and newness. Allusion, intertextuality, backgrounding, foregrounding, imagism etc are so rampant in the poetry of Eliot. Who can say? The overuse of such innovative technique and newness has created a sense of burden. This very feeling of burden has generated a new pace in modernist poetry. This gives birth of new sense of feeling of beauty, which is peculiar and to some extent grotesque. In Eliot technical newness and 'the tissue of allusion and quotation becomes too heavy for the burden of meaning and replaces it with something merely grotesque and disgusting' (Moody, p-115). The death of the drowned Phinician sailor, in *The Waste Land*, is both poetry and a peculiar charm. At the same time, this alludes to the macabre end of the businesspersons who were headed fully by trade and commerce. Eliot executed the same 'the grotesque intensity of every element in *Sweeney*' (p-173). In *Sweeney*, Eliot experiment a lot even with the musical and sonorous quality. This trick did a miracle for him. The richness and cadences of *Sweeney* are 'at times arrested by snatches of rich melody rising from the general grotesqueness with an effect as much of oddity as of beauty, as if saxophones were suddenly soaring in ecstasy' (Howard, p-265).

IX. CONCLUSION

Grotesque as an art form might have been experimented first in the field of painting. The greater serious concentration on the grotesque has widened the horizon of its use. In our days, the use of grotesque has become inter-artistic. Other branches of learning have liberally accepted grotesque as temporal relief from the chronic boredom of description and narration. By the word relief, I simply mean a kind of improvement through refreshments. All good literature is an improvement upon the existing look that everything has. Some Russian formalist might have discovered another possibility here in the very making of grotesque. Defamiliarization is the word that my argument hints. As it is deeply believed by the Formalist that genuine literature cannot create anything new. If literature is an improvement upon the existing thing, defamiliarization is the easiest way that any artist can look for. A diabetes patient becomes an old familiar face to a dewdrop. However, an artist notices a dewdrop, imitates it, and then makes an improvement upon it by defamiliarizing the familiar. The grotesque presentations of human situations in literature seem me more than reality-effect. This is made possible when we feel that even grotesque is also a kind of partial defamiliarization of the familiar. What happens when a thing is presented as grotesque? A grotesque is both defamiliarization of the familiar and distortion of the fair. Therefore, the presentations of the grotesque moments in literature really teach and surprise us like a lamppost with two lights different colours that removes the mist and penetrates the retina.

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