

## Locating the Grotesque: A Meta-theoretical Reading

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**Abstract:** Authors and artists have progressively tried to capture the crisis of human life in their works. For such representations an adept tool is required and the ‘*grotesque*’ is artfully brought to fore by authors and artists as the most efficacious artistic weapon for mirroring the intricate reality and inherent contradictions in human life. The *grotesque* has become the most coveted and the, “the most genuine style” of modern art. The word ‘grotesque’ has been received differently across the changing times. The article seeks to understand the multifaceted understanding of the term ‘grotesque’ with reference to the different ideologies, disciplines, thought practices and representations in sync with the spirit of the age it is associated with.

**Keywords:** Grotesque, Literature, Arts, Paintings, Movements

The revolutionary advancement in science and technology over the past few centuries has created drastic changes in the life of human beings. It has redesigned human life and has reinvigorated the way one acts and perceives things. The internet, social media, mobile phones, artificial intelligence, virtual currency and banking, wearable technologies, nuclear power, innovations in genetic engineering, organ transplant and such, has made human life effortless but it has also on the one hand made life more complex. *Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter* and other social media devices are fearlessly infiltrating the media centred life of the human, causing a threat to privacy, in addition to creating psychological pressures. On the other hand, genetic engineering, synthetic biology, nanotechnology and the like, evolve as an ancillary, to the cumulative uneasiness over the apocalyptic concern for the “essence “of humanity as Jacques Derrida elucidates in his essay “The Aforementioned So-Called Human Genome”. He posits:

One has the impression ...that the risk that is run at this unique moment in the history of humanity is the risk of new crimes being committed against humanity and not only... against millions of real human beings as was [previously] the case, but a crime such that a sorcerer’s apprentice who was very cunning, the author of potential genetic manipulations, might in the future commit or supply the means for committing... against man, against the

very humanity of man, no longer against millions of representatives of real humanity but against the essence itself of humanity, against an idea, an essence, a figure of the human race, represented this time by a countless number of beings and generations to come.(207-8)

Apart from these challenges, people lurch and stumble in a web of noxious strings like terrorism, racism, genocide, gender issues, rape, economic crisis, warfare, environmental threat and other predicaments of the time. Thus the rapid changes in social, cultural, economic, environmental, scientific and technical terrain has inevitably fostered uncertainties and contradictions in the human mind. The fact that it has affected and altered one's perception and life in the postmodern world seems to be an absurd and ambiguous one. Man is secluded and alienated within him and with his surroundings. Bernard Mc Elroy's notion of the twentieth century man can be gathered from his work the *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* where he explicates on the plight of man as he comments on the issues reflected in twentieth century literature. He says that man of the twentieth century lives in an "indifferent, meaningless universe" (17). According to him man is surrounded "On every side with violence and brutalisation, offering him values that have lost their credibility, manipulating and dehumanising him through vast faceless institutions, the most ominous of which are science, technology, and the socio economic organisation" (17).

Authors and artists have progressively tried to capture this paradox, this crisis of human life in their works and the representation of such has become an integral element in art forms and literature. For such representations an adept tool is required and the 'grotesque' is then artfully brought to fore by authors and artists as the most efficacious artistic weapon for mirroring the intricate reality and inherent contradictions in human life. The *grotesque* then is the most coveted and the, "the most genuine style" of modern art as Thomas Mann propounds in "Conrad's Secret Agent" (qtd. in Aisenberg 148). As such Friedrich Durrenmatt in his work *Problems of the Theatre: an Essay* rightly articulates that "Our world has led to the grotesque as well as to the atom bomb" (255). The *grotesque*, in the present era, is hailed as a vital literary genre, that provides the author who chooses it, as an unbound space to express his thoughts and in turn helps deepen one's consciousness of the world around him.

The term *grotesque* at its outset brings to mind an assortment of terms like absurd, eerie, fantastic, baroque, freakish, monstrous, whimsical and such. But the term initially had its origin as a noun from the Italian word *grottesco* which literally meant 'of a cave'. The term came into existence with the vast excavations that were conducted in Rome at the end of the fifteenth century, which unearthed caves or *grottos* that had paintings which defied the aesthetic norms of the time. Geoffrey Harpham in "The Grotesque: First Principles" observes that, "These excavations unearthed murals dating from the Roman Decadence in which human and animal figures are intertwined with foliage in ways which violate not only the laws of statics and gravity, but common sense and plain observation as well" (461). The unnatural coupling of the human and

animal forms with the foliage that were found inside the caves laid the grounding for the juxtaposition of discordant items that *grotesque* epitomizes. But the *grotesque* drastically evolved with time moving from visual arts to literature, spreading from Rome to other European countries, Italy, France, and to practically every other country, gathering new meanings in its trail. As such, scholars now have an arduous job, in providing a concrete definition for the term. In a humorous vein Mc Elroy says that the term *grotesque* is now “routinely applied to everything from necktie to a relationship” (1). In line with Mc Elroy, Harpham in “The Grotesque First Principles” says that “The grotesque is the slipperiest of the aesthetic categories” (461). He elucidates:

Perhaps the germ, the secret of the grotesque, lies not in the origins or derivations of the word, but in the conditions of a particular cultural climate, a particular artist, a particular audience. Perhaps we should approach the grotesque not as a fixed thing.... because it is an aesthetic orphan, wandering from form to form, era to era. (461)

Harping on how the *grotesque* was received at various stages of time, it can be seen that the sixteenth century Renaissance era was sceptical of the *grotesque* as an artistic genre and considered it an “unreasonable fashion” and a “monstrous form” and as “something ominous and sinister” as Wolfgang Kayser notes in his work *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*” (20). The eighteenth century Neo Classical age did not glean any substantial change in its attitude towards *grotesque* from its previous eras as it was an age of wisdom, reason, control and decorum, and *grotesque* was something that challenged these. The *grotesque* at the time was relegated as mere caricature. The *grotesque* of the age, as Arthur Clayborough points out in *The Grotesque in English Literature* was synonymous with the unnatural, ridiculous and bizarre. He exemplifies:

The word grotesque thus comes to be applied in a more general fashion during the Age of Reason and of Neo-Classicism--when the characteristics of the grotesque style of art—extravagance, fantasy, individual taste, and the rejection of the natural conditions of organization' are the object of ridicule and disapproval. The most general sense which it has developed by the early eighteenth century is therefore that of ridiculous, distorted, unnatural' (adj); 'an absurdity, a distortion of nature' (noun). (6)

The eighteenth century notion of the *grotesque* gradually changed with the rise of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. Romanticism was a post enlightenment age, a fertile period for art and literature with emphasis on freedom, wonder, imagination, and creativity. The preoccupation of the age with the fantastic and ominous ushered an acceptance of the *grotesque* as an aesthetic category. Clayborough in analysing the *grotesque* in the nineteenth century comments on Coleridge's work that “Coleridge employs the *grotesque*, in the form of the strange, the exotic, the preternatural, approvingly, as an echo of the infinite” (233). The *grotesque* provided the artist a freedom to imagination and expression and thereby the derogatory assumptions concerning the

term from earlier periods were largely diluted. Then the nineteenth century Victorian era with its advancement in commerce, industrial revolution, and impatience with new ideas in science, religion and the resultant confusion turned the *grotesque* into a forceful and an effective tool for the representation of the darker side of human life. In turn the twentieth century was a world of paradoxical existence with rigid class systems and liberal socialism that challenged the boundaries of norms. These contradictory and paradoxical feelings of the time were rightly expressed through the use of *grotesque*. The avant garde movements in art and literature like Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism, Expressionism and others found rightful expression through *grotesque* at the time. As in the previous century, the present twenty first century world is also a world of paradoxes and contradictions, as is explicated in the opening paragraphs of this section. It is a world of the 'atom bomb' as Durrenmatt says and explaining the notion of *grotesque* in the present condition he notes:

The grotesque is a way of expressing in a tangible manner, of making us perceive physically the paradoxical: it is the form of the unformed, the visage of a faceless world. And just as our thinking today seems to be unable to do without the concept of paradox, so also art and our world, which still exists because the atom bomb exists: out of fear of the bomb. (12)

In addition to tracing the historical trajectory of the term *grotesque*, it is also pertinent that one should look into critical genealogies that shaped and gave the *grotesque* an aesthetic form. Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* is an influential work on the *grotesque*. It offers a deep study of the term as he traverses from Renaissance to nineteenth century realism and from poetry to dream narration and painting. He has based his opinions on the analysis of the works of Martin Wieland, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann and other prominent figures of the time as they provided materials for the better understanding of the nature of *grotesque*. He says that in Wieland's view there exists three types of caricature; the true caricature where the painter paints the distortions as it is seen, the exaggerated caricature, where the monstrosity of the object is highlighted while retaining its original form, and the purely fantastic caricature where the painter disregards the true form of the object and gives into an unchecked fancy. Of the three forms, Wieland recognised the purely fantastic caricature as the true form of *grotesque*, because such caricatures provided the artist an unconditional freedom with which they can freely evoke varied emotions. In his view, the *grotesque* was a form that was capable of arousing contradictory feelings. This notion of the *grotesque* is important, as it has helped Kayser to formulate his own theory of the *grotesque*. According to him the *grotesque*, like the purely fantastic caricature refutes the very canons one abides in his accustomed world. He states that when one encounters the *grotesque*, his primary feeling is one of awe and apprehension brought about by the demolition of the normative structures he once embraced and is now foreign and unreachable. For Wieland the *grotesque* was something that was completely detached from its reality, but for Kayser, the presence of the horrible and the monstrous never makes a person detached from his

reality. On the other hand, he says that, when one confronts the *grotesque* he is horrified by its presence but is soon able to see beyond the horrid situation as he recognises a reality, a truth which he can relate with himself and his world. In short, he recognises a hidden truth beneath all the *grotesqueness* that is projected. To affirm his point he quotes Mann who says in his *Reflection of an Unpolitical Man* that the *grotesque* is that “which is excessively true and excessively real, not that which is arbitrary, false, unreal and absurd” (qtd. in Kayser 158).

Kayser in discussing Pieter Bruegel the Elder's paintings, adds another perspective to the *grotesque* that of the anxiety which the abysmal forces of *grotesque* may embolden in a person. A *grotesque* painting such as Bruegel's can turn a person's normal daily life into an estranged one and evoke inexplicable and incomprehensible fear. He says that other than the ridiculousness that the absurdity and distortion of *grotesque* creates, one may also be steeped into a fear propelled by the acceptance that the life of a man is insecure and ambiguous in the world in which he lives. Kayser stresses that the *grotesque* may evoke varied emotions like horror and humour and thus while annotating the fundamental facets of the *grotesque*; it is pertinent that one should pay attention to its reception, which cannot be ignored under any circumstances.

Further, on deliberating about the absurdities of human life, Kayser says that “Man is a blind creature” whose life is the “dream of an absurd being” (142). He enlists certain themes which a *grotesque* writer may employ to create grotesqueness in the modern world. One of them is that the instruments of technology may be closely blended with the organic such as plants, animals and humans to create a feeling of weirdness. Such bizarreness in turn will effectively help the writer to convey portentous evil in the world around him. In his view, in blending the animate with the inanimate, the animate will be estranged of its essence by the infiltration of the inanimate and the inanimate in turn will become equally strange and ominous by being granted a life. As such Kayser says that in the most persistent motif of *grotesque*, one finds the human beings “reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks” (182). In such an atmosphere one finds the world to be an apocalyptic one where the *grotesque* thrives amiably.

Kayser, in another attempt to define the *grotesque* proposes that the *grotesque* is a “structure”, the essence of which could be summed up in the phrase “The Grotesque Is The Estranged World” (184). To explicate his statement he brings to fore the world of the fairy tale. He says that a world of fairy tale when seen from outside may at times strike the readers to be an extrinsic and absurd one but in truth it is not an outlandish but an agreeable world, as it has natural and familiar elements in it which the readers can easily connect with. The familiar elements in the tale do not suddenly turn the world to be an alienated and bizarre one. The world of the fairy tale is therefore not an estranged but an engaging one. In this regard he states that it is not the fictional world but the world in which one survives that has to be changed.

Kayser asserts that “Suddenness and surprise are essential elements of the grotesque” (184). According to him the *grotesque* should create a sudden change from surprise to awe and fear in a moment of time to evoke a situation filled with foreboding consternation. Recalling Kafka, He affirms that one is strongly affected by the sudden estrangement that *grotesque* creates because he starts seeing his estranged world to be an undependable and deceptive one. His unimpeachable trust is lost and he fears that his life in an altered world will be an unreliable one. He goes on to state that the *grotesque*, rather than making one dread death, often makes him anxious about his life and his living. In his view, the *grotesque* structurally presupposes a world view which is extraneous under normal circumstances. He professes that the *grotesque* alienates people from their world by “The fusion of realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the law of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of the natural size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality and the fragmentation of historical order.”(184-5).

Kayser goes on to say that the people fail to orient themselves with the alienated world because such a world is an absurd one. According to him the creator of the *grotesque* must not and cannot offer any meaning. He argues that the *grotesque* consists of “an unimpassioned view of life on earth as an empty, meaningless puppet play or a caricatural marionette theatre (186). He avows that “The Grotesque Is A Play With The Absurd” (187). He says that the *grotesque* may begin in an animated and buoyant manner. But the person who experiences the *grotesque* may soon be carried away and be deprived of his freedom. It instilled in him a fear which he had tenuously called upon. Thus when one confronts the *grotesque*, he laughs, but it is not a laughter that is free. It will be laughter that is stringent or suffused with distress. He observes that the *grotesque* has the power to call upon and bring under control the infernal elements that wander around the world. He explains:

In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal affects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: AN ATTEMPT TO INVOKE AND SUBDUE THE DEMONIC ASPECTS OF THE WORLD. (188)

His analysis of the *grotesque* as a structural principle and its expression and reception in literature offers a better understanding of the term but is not comprehensive enough as he has focused more on the ‘terrifying aspect’ of the *grotesque* not elaborating on the comic. As a term in constant evolution, the *grotesque* has gathered varied meanings from numerous critics.

Arthur Clayborough, is another notable critic on the *grotesque* who has laid valuable insights on the term. He in his work *Grotesque in English Literature* states that the *grotesque* is

obvious in anything that contests normality to evoke emotions. According to him the *grotesque* works in a psychologically inclined way. Clayborough's perspective of the *grotesque* from a psychological standpoint is widely accepted among the major practitioners of *grotesque*. He has tried to define the term from Carl Jung's concepts of progression and regression concerning the conscious and unconscious mind. Clayborough says that one of the characteristics of the progressive aspect of mind is that it should either reject the deliberate juxtapositions, which are central to *grotesque*, as pointless or they should try to find a logical connection in them. On the other hand, he deliberates that the regressive aspect of mind wallows in things beyond comprehension projected by the *grotesque* juxtapositions. Clayborough then finds different manifestations of the *grotesque* in the progressive and regressive aspects and in accordance classifies them into four types of *grotesque* that is the progressive positive, the progressive negative, the regressive positive and the regressive negative. Of these he finds the progressive negative and regressive negative states as the most appropriate forms for the *grotesque*. In progressive negative *grotesque* there is a distortion of reality but one can still relate it to the real world. He cites satire as a model for this form. He explains the regressive negative *grotesque* in relation to the regressive positive one. According to him both may hint at each other and both can devise a perfunctory response in the reader. He says that the regressive positive *grotesque* is voluntary but impulsive in nature. On the other hand, the regressive negative *grotesque* is intentional and is more refined than the regressive positive *grotesque*. Irene Rima Makaryk in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* neatly sums up Clayborough's notion of the *grotesque* that it is "most usually produced from a 'progressive negative' or 'regressive negative' state of mind, that is, from the artists conscious or unconscious conflicts between his religious sense of the eternal and his perception of the real world" (87).

The *grotesque* from its psychological standpoint has also been analysed by Michael Steig in his "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis". According to him the *grotesque* arouses anxiety by giving expression to the "infantile fears, fantasies and impulses", but it also at the same time is liberating as the "threatening material is distorted in the direction of the harmlessness" (258). He explains that the threatening infantile material is often diminished of its threat by using comic techniques such as caricature and ridicule. The *grotesque* in his view is ironic. While it attempts at liberation from fear and anxiety, there is still a vacillating tension brought into existence by internal psychological conflicts that remains unresolved. He argues that the "grotesque involves the managing of the uncanny by the comic" (259).

Lily. B.Campbell in *The Grotesque in the Poetry of Robert Browning*, on studying the history of *grotesque*, detects several tendencies in the nature of *grotesque* which she assumes is important. Firstly she notes the *grotesque* to be closely connected with caricature as both give priority to aberration of things. Secondly she considers the *grotesque* to be the ugly in that it espouses the characteristics of the abhorrent and the humorous. Finally she says that the pagan symbols in Christian beliefs which tended to be demonic produced much of the material for the

*grotesque*. According to Campbell the *grotesque* adopts the peculiarities of both the ugly and the comic elements. She then classifies the *grotesque* into three; the great *grotesque*, which is produced through the imagination, the fanciful *grotesque*, which is conceived through fancy and the purely artificial *grotesque*, which is created through the intentional muddling of the facts. Explaining the three forms she says that the artist attempts the great *grotesque* when he tries to portray the incomprehensible. He attempts the fanciful *grotesque* when he uses the ugly to arouse *grotesque* and the artificial *grotesque* is produced by him when he “knowingly constructs incongruities”, grotesque rhymes” and “absolutely incoherent” matter (15).

The varied conceptions and perceptions of the term *grotesque* have also been explored by Frances. K.Barasch in *The Grotesque: A Study of Meanings*. She affirms that the meaning of the *grotesque* is so diverse that it is almost impossible to decipher its implications. But she recognises that many of the varied meanings acquired by the *grotesque* in the course of the past five centuries shifted in the present century.. Attempting to generate an all inclusive meaning for the *grotesque*, she says that “for the artists of different ages, instinctively or consciously, expressed in fantasies of mixed humor and fear, the common perception that the total human experience is beyond logical ordering” (164). For her the *grotesque* has become a characteristic element in expressing the distortions and inexplicable realities of life. In her view, the grotesqueness in literature and art are expressed through “the grotesque mingling of the ludicrous and the terrible, the use of incongruities, the juxtapositions of low comedy, sordid reality, and the noble delusions of the inner man” (161). She stresses that the world of the *grotesque* is an indefinite one. In her view a writer of the *grotesque* who portrays life from the point of view of the absurd should occupy a discreet position. In adopting such a stand he will experience a synchronic feeling of delight and terror by what he perceives. Recalling Karl Guthke, who made a differentiation between tragicomedy and the *grotesque* absurd, Barasch, in her work divides the *grotesque* into two types: the tragicomic-*grotesque* and the *grotesque* absurd. She asserts that, in the *grotesque* absurd, “the philosophic view and the medium coincide” and that in the tragicomedy grotesque “the real literary worlds suggest absurd meanings” (163). In her view, the *grotesque* is the most appropriate means to identify and understand strife and disorientation in art and literature. To her the modern *grotesque* is an “eternal device to protest against and to shield man from the deep inner anguish of his human condition in a world turned upside down” (164).

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, an influential critic of the *grotesque*, as mentioned in the initial section, in his work *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* offers his readers a more positive view, unlike Kayser, who thought the *grotesque* to be an estranged one. For him, the *grotesque* is something that has a soul of its own, whose presence is always felt in the world around. According to him the *grotesque* is infused with an energy which aborts any other energy which it cannot tolerate, alternatively aiding in the creation of ambivalent reactions. In his view the *grotesque* works on the model of metaphorical imagination, “perceiving similarity in dissimilar things”, catering on a mind that is able to see the “far and the near, the concrete and the



abstract” and the “sacred and the unclean on the same plane” (126). He stresses on the contradiction that operates in a *grotesque* and says that while the *grotesque* prevents the reader from understanding its meaning, it alternatively invites them into it. He postulates that the *grotesque* operates by a charter that is unique and restricted to itself. As a bottom line, he notes that the “Grotesque is a word for the paralysis of language” (6).

Unlike most critics of the *grotesque* who were focussed on defining the term, Philip Thomson in his work *The Grotesque* charts out the different functions and purposes of the *grotesque* in art and literature. He enlists them as; aggressiveness and alienation, the psychological effect, tension and unresolvability, playfulness and unintentional *grotesque*. He says that the *grotesque*, in most literature, appears as an aggressive weapon to shock the readers, “to bewilder and disorient, to bring the reader up short, jolt him out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective” (58). He argues that the sum effect of the use of such an aggressive weapon is alienation as things which are familiar are suddenly made strange and disturbing to the reader. He says that such a technique is often found in satiric and burlesque contexts. Moving on, Thomson finds the effect of the *grotesque* at the psychological level to be problematic. Stressing on Michael Steig’s notion of *grotesque*, he says that the *grotesque* has both liberating and inhibiting effects on the reader. He says that one laughs at the *grotesque*, but it is not an unrestrained one, but a restrained one. The horrifying aspects may turn the burst of laughter into a frown. But the horrifying experience may be cut down by the appreciation of the comic element in the *grotesque*. Discussing tension and unresolvability in *grotesque*, he asserts that the *grotesque* is the battle of variances. He explains this through the *grotesque* fusion of tragedy and comedy in plays. He argues that the “vale of tears and the circus are one, that tragedy is in some ways comic and all comedy in some way tragic and pathetic” (63). He postulates the playfulness in *grotesque* or the experimental *grotesque* to be a strong element in literature. In his view, the purely playful *grotesque*, while disorienting the readers, will frequently give them second thoughts about the frivolousness projected. He then goes on to say that the *grotesque* may also be ‘unintentional’ or ‘purposeless’. It may be created by mistake by the author and he says that such lapses are more prominent in poetry.

An essay on the various expressions of *grotesque* from such a critical stance also calls for a discussion of the same from a theoretical frame purported by major writers like Mikhail Bakhtin, John Ruskin, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin is a Russian philosopher well known for his theories on the *grotesque* and carnivalesque. The *grotesque* and carnivalesque, which were initially part of his doctoral dissertation, later gained acclaim with the publication of his work *Rabelais and His World*. Philip Thomson rightly avers that for Bakhtin, “the grotesque is essentially physical”, for Bakhtin’s work is focussed more on the *grotesque* body in his analysis of the grotesque (56). Speaking of the *grotesque* body, he emphasises on the open apertures in a body, the interstices that link the body to the outside world. For him the *grotesque* body is open to and linked with the rest of the world. It is an incomplete unit that outgrows and infringes its

boundaries. This is because, the various apertures of the body like the “open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” asserts the body as a “principle of growth” when it eats, drinks, defecates and copulates (26). For him the people are caught in a constant process of being evolved and renewed. Thus Bakhtin argues that:

The bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. (19)

Thus the *grotesque* bodily element has a universal quality, a character that can be attributed to all people.

Bakhtin argues that the “essence of grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double faced fullness of life” (62). Analysing the destructive and regenerative aspects of *grotesque realism*, he says that death is inseparable from birth. He argues that the *grotesque* lower sections of the body such as the genital organs is intensely positive in its nature as it is linked to notions of birth and life. For him, degradation is steadily fastened with regeneration as degradation being concerned with the lower section of the body, is linked with procreation, pregnancy and birth. He contends, “Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (21). By asserting that the body engulfs both the destructive and regenerative aspects, he says that the *grotesque* is a fertile earth which always creates. For him, the perpetually contriving body of the *grotesque* that devours and defecates cyclically, demolishes hierarchies and brings down boundaries between life and death. The *grotesque* thus, for him is a celebration of the cyclical nature of life and death and for him, *grotesque realism*, by degrading, actively bring about the “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” to the material level, “to the sphere of the earth and body” (21).

In analysing *grotesque*, it is hard to exclude John Ruskin’s writings on the concept. In *Stones of Venice Volume 111: The Fall*, Ruskin while examining the nature of *grotesque*, finds that in most cases the *grotesque* is composed of two elements, the ludicrous and the fearful. Based on the dominance of either one of them, in a particular *grotesque*, he classifies them into the sportive *grotesque* and the terrible *grotesque*. But he in the same breath also warns against legitimizing such classification because in most cases strict distinctions are not found. Ruskin then works on the kinds of *grotesque* that are produced when the instinct of playfulness in *grotesque* is indulged or repressed in mankind. He says that the man who plays wisely produces the most adequate form of *grotesque*. For Ruskin, those who play inordinately often produce *grotesque* that is refined, feeble and sensual. Those who play necessarily may create *grotesque* through his imprudent and arid fancy and on the other hand, those who do not play at all will find expression in “bitterness and mockery” and the *grotesque* will belong “to the class of terrible, rather than of

playful grotesque” (136). Further, He brings in a classification that addresses the ongoing disagreement in assessing the *grotesque* as a base form and *grotesque* as the highest artistic expression. He brings in a clear distinction by distinguishing between the noble and the ignoble form of the *grotesque*. The noble or the true *grotesque*, being an expression of a serious mind, evokes in one a genuine horror but he at the same time is also led to experience the true recognition of beauty. The ignoble or the false *grotesque* is on the other hand opposed to the noble *grotesque* and never creates a genuine terror. It is a frivolous and unrealistic one according to Ruskin.

Ruskin then grazing on various levels of *grotesque* has also explored the *symbolic grotesque* as a representational form of *grotesque* and discusses it in the third volume of *Modern Painters*. He argues that:

A fine grotesque is the expression, in a moment, by a series of symbols thrown together in bold and fearless connection, of truths which it would have taken a long time to express in any verbal way, and of which the connection is left for the beholder to work out for himself; the gaps, left or over-leaped by the haste of the imagination, forming the grotesque character. (97-98)

The symbolical *grotesque*, thus, in Ruskin’s view helps set forth an “otherwise less expressible truth” (98). Ruskin considers the artists to be prophets whose revelations often appear to man in the nature of symbolic *grotesque*. The symbolic *grotesque* helps them to convey the truths that are not normally grasped by humans and Ruskin contends that most truths appear to man in some form of *grotesque*.

If Ruskin treats his notion of *grotesque* from a symbolic domain, Julia Kristeva locates hers in the realm of the abject. Her notion of the ‘abject *grotesque*’ is for the most part, consolidated in her work *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The abject for Kristeva is something which is “radically excluded” and jettisoned outside of the subject, something that “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). It does not respect the borders, positions and rules. It constantly challenges the superego. The abject she notes; is “something that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me” (11). The abject is a place where all meaning collapses.

Abjection marks the phase in an individual when he separates himself from his mother. In order to create an identity for himself, the child rejects or expels the maternal, and creates an imaginary border between the self and the mother. He enters the social order by tearing himself away from things connected to his mother like the placenta, blood and so on and the mother thereby in the act is abjected. Abjection therefore, Kristeva says, creates a fear of the maternal, for maternal posits a hazard of re-inclusion into the body from which the subject has separated itself.

In her view the disgrace, a compromise, a re-inclusion may elicit is the primal reason for rejecting things that are not part of one's self. She then in her essay delineates the aversion for food as the most rudimentary form of abjection and explains this through absurd images.

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck . . . I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. (12)

Abjection thus detaches anything inseparably bound to the subject. She notes: "I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it" (12). She reiterates that; "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (12). In her view the corpse represents another sickening abject for it represents the most sickening wastes. It is abject, because it reminds one of those wastes which he firmly detaches himself from in order to survive.

The abject, then again, for Kristeva is perverse as it denies rules, laws, "turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them" (24). Corruption, she says, is therefore the most common and most socialised appearance of the abject. Speaking of the abject in relation to literature, she alleges that the writer of the contemporary age is fascinated by the abject in that he perverts the language, style and content to cast himself into it. The literature produced in such a manner crosses over the classifications between the pure and the impure, and sin, morality and immorality. Writing, then, for Kristeva, "implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacements of verbal play. It is only after his death, eventually, that the writer of abjection will escape his condition of waste, reject, abject" (25).

While Kristeva's exploration of the power of abject offers significant insights in analysing the *grotesque*, Michel Foucault's writings on the 'abnormal' and 'monstrous' grants the scholars of *grotesque* yet another cache on the term. In the *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France (1974-1975)*. Foucault, tracing the genealogy of the abnormal individual speculates that the abnormal individual had evolved from three ancestors, that is, the human monster, the incorrigible man and the masturbating child. For Foucault, the abnormal individual is created when a regular network of knowledge and power brings in these three ancestors together. The monster, says Foucault falls under the framework, and was transformed in accordance with the "politico judicial powers"; the incorrigible man was developed under the "functions of family and the development of disciplinary techniques" and the masturbator emerged with the "redistribution of powers that

surround the individual's body" (61). The abnormal individual according to Foucault is thus constituted by the linking of these three powers and knowledge structures. The dominant figure among the three is the monster that challenged both the medical and judicial systems of the time. The monster was the central figure, for it was around the figure of the monster that the knowledge and power structures were appropriated and reconstructed. He argues that the monster violated the rules and the laws of classification. Foucault, who was always focussed on institutions that wield power to maintain normalisation, further contends that a monster is created when the rules of normalisation are defied. In his view the monstrosity comes into force when there is a chaotic topsy-turvy and disruption of the religious and civil canons projected by the society. Alternatively, he also argues that the monstrosity often "calls law into question and disables it" (64).

Speaking of the forms of monster that existed at various periods of time he says that the earlier forms of monsters were either a mixture of species or of sexes. The middle ages privileged the bestial man, the Renaissance the Siamese twins and the Classical age the hermaphrodites. Foucault then finds the mixing of the sexes to be absent with the dawn of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the notion of monstrosity, he argues was based on eccentricities, on different kinds of imperfections, and errors of nature. This was evident in incest and cannibalism and the monstrosity was increasingly suspected of being behind all criminality. He remarks, "Every criminal could well be a monster, just as previously it was possible that the monster was a criminal" (81-2). He also finds a shift in the nature of monstrosity whereby monstrosity was not recognised by its nature, but by its conduct. Thus there is the "attribution of a monstrosity that is not juridico-natural but juridico moral" (73). He also recognises two forms of monsters. The political monster who "prefers his own interest to the laws governing the society" and the juridical monster who misuses power (92).

Through Foucault one learns that monstrosity is no longer bound to the bodily irregularities alone. It may appear in any non normative account, in any form of deviation, of the mind, body or nature. His analysis of the monster in relation to the abnormal individual is significant. He argues that "the abnormal individual is essentially an everyday monster, a monster that has become commonplace" (57). The abnormal individual contends the normative and in short is *grotesque*.

Thus the various manifestations the *grotesque* conceives in diverse criticism and theory grants it a significant place as an aesthetic form in vogue in contemporary literature. It assumes a compelling position in literature because the writers, with the strategic use of *grotesque* can easily gain the reader's attention and can emphatically convey their thoughts without being overtly sententious. Commenting on why the writer of the *grotesque* used the *grotesque* in their fiction, Joseph R. Millichap in "Distorted Matter and Disjunctive Forms: The Grotesque as Modernist Genre" notes that the "Modernist writer discerned disjunctive forms capable of reflecting the fragmentation and alienation of the modern world" (339). Authors like Franz Kafka, William

Faulkner, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Martin Amis, Stephen King and other writers of *grotesque* often resorted to the use of stream of consciousness, disjointed narration, isolated chapters, multiple narrators, and the creation of abnormal individuals, freaks, misfits, terrifying and comic characters, queer characters, supernatural events, horrific and ludicrous situations, and other such *grotesque* devices to create "alienation and fragmentation" (Millichap 339). Thomson rightly notes that the writer of the *grotesque* by employing *grotesque* devices brings "the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface" (59). The use of *grotesque* shocks the readers, arouses them out of their stupor, and urges them to view things from a fresh perspective. Flannery O'Connor aptly consolidates the function and purpose of using the *grotesque* in her fiction:

In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected. It is this kind of realism that I want to consider. (40)

Like O'Connor, J. K. Rowling is a writer who has deftly made use of the *grotesque* in her works to make alive experiences that have been largely ignored or have been systematically desensitised due to its constant representation in art, literature and other social mediums. She is one of the most successful and compelling writers of the contemporary era who has received many honorary degrees and numerous awards for her writings. She is best known for her *Harry Potter* series published between 1997 and 2007. The work gained wide recognition and international acclaim and its abounding popularity resulted in the work to be translated into seventy three different languages. Her other works that followed also gained immense popularity like the previous one. *The Casual Vacancy* published in 2012, *The Cuckoos Calling* in 2013, *The Silkworm* in 2014, *The Career of Evil* in 2015, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* in 2016 remain to date among the most widely read pieces of literature. Other than these works she has written a prequel and several supplementary works to the *Harry Potter* series. Apart from the print medium, she also publishes digitally in her website *Pottermore*. Her writings in the website primarily explore the wizarding world, offering explanations on various situations and characters in her fictional world.

Rowling being a writer sensitive to the social, political and cultural issues of the time often voices her concern through her writings in *Twitter*. Her 'tweets' supporting LGBT community and those against misogyny and racism are few instances that validate that she is a writer deeply concerned with the issues of her time. An advocate of humanity, a defender of equal justice for all, Rowling educates and inspires her reader to stand up against atrocities and cling on to and

rehabilitate one's lost humaneness. In a world of confusion and disorientation, she teaches one to have faith in oneself. As a poor, jobless and a single mother who rose from her struggles and depression to abysmal popularity and riches, her life administers that failures are imminent for a successful life and Rowling exhorts this precept to her readers through her works.

Rowling's works have psychologically, socially and culturally affected and have brought about changes in the lives of a whole generation of the reading community. A study published in 2015 in *The Journal of Applied Social Psychology* titled "The Greatest Magic of Harry Potter: Reducing Prejudice" says that reading *Harry Potter* considerably reduced the prejudiced attitudes of people towards the stigmatised groups. This study led by Loris Vezzali proved that *Harry Potter* created a positive attitude towards the homosexuals and the refugees by not associating with the evil characters such as Voldemort (1). In a similar study, Antony Gierzynski and Kathryn Eddy found that:

Harry Potter fans tend to be more accepting of those who are different, to be more politically tolerant, to be more supportive of equality, to be less authoritarian, to be more opposed to the use of violence and torture, to be less cynical, and to evince a higher level of political efficacy.(6)

Rowling through her works, without doubt, moulds people into better human beings by tutoring them on ethics and other humane values. She finds a dire need to project such values because she is dreadfully aware of the alarming way in which the essence of humanity is fast deteriorating and vanishing from the world. She accentuates the need for values that devise one as humans by projecting the crisis one is caught in, his existence in a world of strife, anxiety, confusion and unknown horrors. The disquieting concerns of the time are thus keenly articulated and are acutely felt in her works of fiction. And Rowling does this through an ingenious use of the *grotesque* which in turn deeply probes and arouses one to the concerns of the time.

The *grotesque* in Rowling's works, one finds, works not merely as a stylistic device. It assumes a force and power, a credibility and rigour, by which it works as an aggressive weapon to foreground experiences and convey her thoughts emphatically. By mirroring man's existence, the *grotesque* in her hands becomes an expression of life. At the same time by imperatively exploiting it to powerfully grasp and grip one's emotion she transmutes the *grotesque* into an experience, as a panacea to bring about a propitious change in the society and the self. The immediate effect of the *grotesque* then in Rowling's works may be that of awe and horror but the ultimate effect will be a discovery of a truth, a truth that has been concealed or has been evaded by the normative structure of the society. The *grotesque* is thus for Rowling a part of her social aesthetic that forces her readers to re-evaluate and open up discussions on the problems that surround one's self and society and thereby bring about a difference for a more peaceful, psychologically healthy and harmonious living.

In Rowling's fiction, the *grotesque* is seen manifested at disparate levels. It appears at the physical level in the form of physically *grotesque* characters. These *grotesque* characters have a deformed body that is at odds with the conceived normalcy of the body the society gleans. They terrify, amuse and often haunt the readers to a large extent in her novels. Such physically aberrant characters are explored in detail in most of her works. Other than the physically *grotesque* characters, she has focussed her attention on the characters that are psychologically aberrant in her works. They are *grotesque* because they often manifest an anomaly that is daunting and repelling. By exploring the *grotesque* at the psychological level, Rowling grazes the yet unexplored meadows of the psychological *grotesque* in fiction and exhibits the various forms of distortions like perversion, obsession, abject and behavioural abnormality as *grotesque* forms that are created with a purpose. Rowling has also used the *grotesque* to her advantage at the language level in her fiction whereby the grotesqueness in conversations, dialogues, repetition of words, verbal structuring and the like enables her to convey her thoughts forcefully. Apart from these, Rowling researches into yet another area of the *grotesque* whereby it evolves as a potent theme in her fiction to depict the world as a Gothic abode. Using the *grotesque* she lays bare before her readers a world that is a dwelling place of inconceivable violence, trauma and unknown horrors. By creating a *grotesque* portrait of the world she makes her readers confront, explore, express and resolve the crises of the age.

Such surveillance from a *grotesque* vantage point, channels a fresh perspective, as Rowling's works, which due to its immense popularity; especially the *Harry Potter* series have mostly exhausted itself as a critical source by being subject to varied critical scrutiny. While helping one to discern the unresolved contradictions felt in the world around, the *grotesque* in her works evolves as a representational mode to depict the paradoxical nature of man's life. It has evolved as the most relevant and dominant literary mode of the contemporary era and Rowling is now one of the central practitioners of *grotesque* who uses it as a social aesthetic and as an ethical and virtuous tool to chronicle the discordant post-postmodern era. The general milieu of the action is concerned with Rowling's *grotesque* characters, situations, incidents, themes and so on, which is actually a microcosm of the world around.

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