

Facilitating the Grotesque Reception and Human-Nature Interrelationship in Tunku Halim's *Dark Demon Rising*

NUR FATIN SYUHADA AHMAD JAFNI
Universiti Putra Malaysia
fatinjafni@gmail.com

WAN ROSELEZAM WAN YAHYA
Universiti Putra Malaysia

HARDEV KAUR
Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Horror novels often celebrate gore, darkness, madness and emotional repression as the central themes to invoke terror and horror in readers. In the novel Dark Demon Rising (1997) the elements of grotesque and nature provide the impetus and the plot, thus invoking horror. Apart from the evident elements of grotesque, nature as a backdrop is also significant. Both elements are omnipresent and pivotal in developing the plot. Noting the relationship between the two elements, this paper explores the relationship between the grotesque and nature through the portrayal of human-nature interconnectedness in the selected novels. This paper utilises the concepts of ecocriticism and grotesque. Ecocriticism provides sufficient explanation on the relationship between humans and the natural world. The concept of grotesque by Wolfgang Kayser provides a solid framework in highlighting and exploring the texts. The application of these concepts will then demonstrate that apart from imagery, the role of nature is also evident in channelling the relationship between human and nature. The interrelationship between nature and the grotesque is portrayed under Kayser's notion of the grotesque reception. Pertaining to this notion, the interconnectedness is unveiled through the comic/horror and attractive/repulsive dualities. The finding concludes that the element of nature depicts the grotesque reception via the characters' demeanour, especially the protagonists' emotions, perceptions and attitude.

Keywords: grotesque; Wolfgang Kayser; ecocriticism; nature; grotesque reception

INTRODUCTION

The horror story is a notable example of popular and most celebrated genre in fiction writing. Horror encompasses various themes such as ghost stories, supernatural fictions, crime fictions, and many more. Dating back to the Romantic and Victorian period, the implementation of the horror in fiction is massive. From *Dracula*, 'The Cask of Amontillado', 'The Fall of the House of Usher', *Sherlock Holmes*, *Wuthering Heights*, to *A Christmas Carol*, it is worth noting that these dark tales invoke horror effects through themes of the bizarre, blood and gore propagated by the concept known as the grotesque. The grotesque is the impetus and undoubtedly a prominent feature in horror fictions.

Although nature writing initially concerned environmental issues and non-fictional prose, modern writers like Margaret Atwood, employ the concepts of nature, environment and landscape into fiction writing. However, the subject of nature is not exclusive to nature or environment-devoted texts. Since nature is omnipresent, the widespread narrations of nature and environment are available in all kinds of prose genres. Most commonly, nature writing abounds in fiction concerning environmental issues, ecological concerns, dystopian/utopian society and travel writing. Nature is narrated in ways which express, either destruction unleashed by humans or ways to preserve mother earth (science fiction such as Claire Datnow's *The Lone Tree*, 2009), to show humane values through man's relationship with animals (E.B White's *Charlotte Web*, 1952), or showcase beautiful places (J.R.R Tolkien's

The Hobbit, 1937). Although it is easier to determine the presence of nature in such novels, nature can be found in other types of fiction as well. The presence of nature is equally important in horror fiction, be it as a mere backdrop or as an impetus to instil horror/terror in the minds of readers. Noting this, the objective of this paper is to highlight the relationship between the grotesque and human-nature interconnectedness in the novel *Dark Demon Rising* (1997) by Tunku Halim.

Dark Demon Rising has been recognised globally through the growing body of gothic studies known as Global Gothic. Glennis Byron specifies that *Dark Demon Rising* embodies the process of globalisation when “demons of folklore are revived by the breakdown of traditional customs and belief and take on horrific contemporary form” (2012, p. 372). Tunku Halim is a renowned Malaysian author of horror stories that incorporate gothic into local contexts and display the social and political horrors, abuse of power, discrimination and others (Ancuta 2012, p. 430). As the gothic elements in Tunku Halim’s writings commensurate with local folklore, the elements of the supernatural and suspense are evident.

THE GROTESQUE, ECOCRITICISM AND LITERATURE

The concept of grotesque took root in the art and literature world over 600 years ago, the duration of which saw this concept evolving into something more interesting and intricate. On its own, the meaning of grotesque is widely agreed upon yet it remains ambivalent in art and literature. The duality (opposing qualities) of grotesque, according to Harpham, is “always a civil war of attraction/repulsion” (1976, p. 9). Looking into the application of grotesque in literature, writers like Swift, Coleridge and Dickens have utilised the grotesque in their arts; according to Steig, this is “because of the conflicts within them between regressive (religious, or “numinous”) and progressive (rationalistic) trends” (1970, p. 170). Writers like Hawthorne, Melville and Poe, in bringing to life their grotesque characters, highlighted the “supernatural and fantastic” (Schevill 1977, p. 230).

Steig also illustrated that Shakespeare, Dickens and Grass had respectively introduced influential grotesque characters into the literary world, namely: 1) Richard from William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, 2) Quilp from Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and 3) Matzerath from Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*. All three characters are depicted as “villainous and comic”, and they are deemed as provocative characters since they arouse “that ambivalence and that uneasiness” (Steig 1970, p. 170) which falls aptly under the grotesque characterisations. In the above mentioned works, Richard is a hunchback, Quilp is a dwarf, and Matzerath is both a hunchback and a dwarf. In addition to their grotesque physicality, Steig categorises them as grotesque character-wise:

[a]ll three delight in wicked mischief and seem to be possessed of magical powers. More fundamentally, all three threaten the normal, official order of things and thus are at once attractive and repellent

(1970 p. 170)

These three characters embrace the depiction of grotesque ideally. Shakespeare’s another prolific character; Ophelia from *Hamlet* is also an embodiment of a grotesque character. The grotesque is exhibited erotically, as “the eroticisation of Ophelia’s corpse is an effect of her sexuality which has transcendently resisted against the limits of the Shakespearean play” (Safaei and Hashim 2013, p. 181). Another eminent grotesque depiction lies in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667). Instead of the fantastical grotesque figures, Milton’s ‘cavernous’ grotesque refers to the “antithesis of a classical, ideal landscape” (Barasch 1971, p. 89 which

is in contrast to the usage of the word grotesque as the abnormal and unnatural distortion made popular by Dryden and Pope).

Apart from the apparent element and function of grotesque, an allegorical approach comes in handy with grotesque as well. In the case of Iranian writer Sadeq Chubak's, *The Patient Stone*, the grotesque is facilitated via: the estrangement of the body as a locus of death and renewal; the degradation of the body via the grotesque; and the horrific-comic ambivalence of the grotesque body (Hendelman-Baavur 2014). The story breaks normal convention as it presents a disordered world of discerning and foul gods and demons, and animals that can talk. According to Hendelman-Baavur, grotesque realism is used "to contest certain social practices and literary structures such as faith, polygyny, temporary marriage and intellectual and literary refinement" (2014, p. 571). The grotesque is represented through rude language, sexual puns, vulgarity, the horrific and comic, oppressive systems of faith, class and gender. Assisted by Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, grotesque corporeality is brought forth by the narration of excessive bodily grotesque and the carnivalesque from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period that worked to temporarily suspend "the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions" (Hendelman-Baavur 2014, p. 570). The interaction between the bodily grotesque and constant break of boundaries symbolise the ambivalent desire for death and destruction, as much as building hope for a rebirth and renewal of the social body, as a whole.

On the other hand, the thematic prevalence of nature in writings has given rise to a particular body of literature called ecocriticism; its role is to explore, examine and highlight the presence, functions and effects of nature and the natural world in literature. Ecocriticism, as defined by Glotfelty, is the study of literature and the physical environment (1996). Physical environment refers to the ecosystem which comprises the physical and chemical elements, inclusive of climate, winds, soil, rainfall, nutrients, etc., within the ecosystem. In other words, ecocriticism is the body of literature which encompasses its connection with nature – in the widest sense of the word. This has raised a few debates on the scope of ecocriticism in relation to the study of literature and the physical environment.

Between the Renaissance and Neoclassical period (1600 – 1700), authors such as John Milton and Samuel Johnson utilised the natural landscape as a key theme underlying their writing. For example, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) introduces an imaginary place. Similar to other poets in the seventeenth century, Milton sought to soar over the outmoded pastoral theme to "encompass ethical consideration of the natural world itself" (McColley 2001, p. 57). Like Chaucer who used the nature-culture dualism, Milton chose to depict the relationship between the natural world and political bodies. Brilliant natural language is displayed throughout the epic poem. Milton's detailed narration of nature gives life and voice to each character in the poem. McColley recapitulates Milton's portrayal of nature as the manifestation of human's relationship to the natural world, where they are attached to the divine beings; both unequalled and inherent (2001 p. 72).

On the other hand, Samuel Johnson exhibits his wonder over exotic places. Horne proposes that Johnson's writing falls under the genre known as Arctic literature, a body of literary styles which exemplify the struggle between "the actualities of the arctic environment and human dreams, between harsh compulsions of nature and the escapist fantasies or artistic visions that the exotic, mysterious, and primitive in the Arctic evoke from visitors who wrote it" (Horne 2001, p. 78). Although Johnson's work is devoid of central nature characters, his writing, like those of his contemporaries Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, establishes him as a travel-writer. Johnson's concern for and interest in the great Arctic and the "handling of the noble savage motifs" (Horne 2001, p. 77) provoked his criticism against the materialism and 'perialistic' exploitation of the environment. Traces of environmental concern in Johnson's

work exhibits the importance of nature, thus, ecological concerns in literature can be traced back several decades.

Whereas in the Asian context, the Persian poet Nader Naderpour voices out his concern for the landscape and environment in the midst of industrialisation. Naderpour criticises such activity as it deteriorates the state of one's place and proposes that "there is a mental and spiritual gap between human beings and their environment, which stem from man's anthropocentric views about Nature" (Shamsi & Lashkarian 2014, p. 136). And as he reminisces about his childhood in his poetry, he is strongly reminded of the nature which he perceives as a dream and believes that "real happiness is only when man becomes able to understand nature deeper and as a source of guidance for his life" (Shamsi and Lashkarian 2014, p. 136). Consequently, as man gets more depressed and repressed by the modern age, the only way to heal and find relief is by embracing nature.

Poems by the Arabic poet Mahmoud Darwish express the relationship between man and the natural world. Whereas Naderpour voices out his concern for the need to heal one's self with nature, Darwish uses nature as a shield to protect himself (or the people at large) from outer threats (colonisers). His poems are a message of resistance through ecocentrism. Hamoud, Zalina and Vengadasamy (2012) stipulate that Arabic poets utilise "their environment in terms of nature and its various aspects such as the rocks, the stones, the sun, the sea, the birds, and the hills and so on to express their deep outburst of resistance" (p. 76). Eco-resistance in Arabic poems means they focus mainly on nature and the interconnectedness between human and environment. And it demonstrates that "nature and people are inseparable: a symbiotic relationship exists between them in the context of resistance to the colonizer" (Hamoud, Zalina and Vengadasamy 2012, p. 84).

The interconnectedness between human and the environment is also portrayed in Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012). The relationship between nature and culture is afforded through the symbolic use of garden. As Fincham puts it:

"The Garden of Evening Mists establishes the coexistence of 'felt experience' with 'the deliberate creation of fictive worlds', and how a garden in twentieth century Malaya, resembles gardens at different periods all over the world in the way it transects both nature and culture." (2014, p. 127-128)

On the periphery of western colonisation and ideologies, the garden "nevertheless frames a space in which the community of human and non-human protagonists can coexist meaningfully and productively" (Fincham 2014, p. 127).

Additionally, in Tunku Halim's *Juriah's Song* (2008), the narration of nature permeates the text and the element of nature functions as a catalyst in "bringing forth the animalistic value in humans, and as a source to deliver oppressing energy against the protagonist" (Nur Fatin, Wan Roselezam, and Hardev Kaur, 2016, p. 303). Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) is another novel set in postcolonial Malaya. However, the role of nature and its ecocritical value are the foregrounding concerns in Zainor Izat and Wan Roselezam's analysis of the novel. They assert that nature is highlighted in two ways. Firstly as a symbol and imagery, and secondly as a means to show the interconnectedness between human and nature. Through imagery, nature comes alive with a voice as the "[flowers], trees, jungles and animals seem not only fully alive but participatory in their own representation" (Zainor Izat and Wan Roselezam 2009, p. 306). One of the protagonists, Peter, is portrayed as having developed the strongest relationship with nature. His perception and emotions are heavily influenced by nature. Through nature, Peter's 'dimensional emotion' is reflected as his feelings and moods are mirrored by the natural world, and he is evidently "spiritually whole in the company of nature, which restores to his mind peace, calmness and quiet happiness" (Zainor Izat and Wan Roselezam 2009, p. 311). As the protagonist continues to

show his environmental sentiments, nature is constantly portrayed as having “dual roles” as both literary device and ecology lens (2009, p. 309).

A critic of grotesque, John Ruskin asserts that ‘true’ grotesque is a misrepresentation of nature caused by emotion, “the spirit of play or fear, but not a rejection of it” (Clayborough 1965, p. 14). Ruskin also insists that the grotesque sometimes gave “evidence of deep insight into nature” (Harpham 1982, p. xix). The grotesque of the natural world can be seen through the natural phenomenon of birth, death, and rebirth and in the association of human and animals. For instance, in observing the drolleries in the margins of Gothic texts; seeing tiny humans frolicking with animals, Schapiro argues that human beings “in these strange re-embodiments as a being among the others in nature, and sharing in his movement and passions the instinctive mobility of animal world... It is a process of desublimation through which the distance between the natural and the civilised is abolished” (Harpham 1982, p. 51).

Further, the interconnectedness between nature and the grotesque is facilitated through natural happenstance and metamorphosis. In Signorelli’s grotesque, the metamorphosis of the creatures demonstrate an easy transference of human, animal and vegetable forms, “a willingness to shuffle the pieces to produce an image of nature as mysteriously mingled and blended, a world in which the individual form is engulfed in a commonality that unites all order of being” (Dacos, qtd. in Harpham, 1982, p. 51). Moreover, Harpham also emphasises that in the case of traversing categories, [myth] intertwine humans infused with the natural as “animals marry, stars form families, and water speaks. At the margin of figurative metaphor and literal myth lies the grotesque [my emphasis], both and neither, a mingling and unity” (*On the Grotesque* 1982, p. 53).

Apart from breaking from the norm (fusion of human with the natural) as a purported grotesque projection, the grotesque in nature can also be observed through the monstrosity of nature. Looking into how the two elements – nature and grotesque – could come together, Alaimo highlighted that often, the monstrous nature is neglected and invisible within the scope of ecocriticism, as the priority is to direct “its attention toward texts that portray nature more favourably” (2001, p. 279). She further asserted that in fact, monster movies “could be the single most significant genre for ecocriticism and green cultural studies (Alaimo 2001, p. 279). Also, nature can be portrayed as rebellious in stories. The breaking of hierarchies as previously mentioned is one of the fundamental properties of grotesque. Raglon and Scholtmeijer observe that there are plenty of movies displaying “revolt-of-nature” in Western culture, “[W]orms, reptiles, birds, sharks, bears, tornados, earthquakes, comets and even vegetation rise up to attack us,...” (2001, p. 253).

THE GROTESQUE RECEPTION AND NATURE

Grotesque or grottoes refers to strangely shaped ornaments found within Roman dwellings hundreds of years ago. The grotesque prominently featured in the medieval arts such as printings, paintings and sculptures. This form of art is viewed as pure aesthetic due to its neither conceivable motifs nor understandable symbols (Fingesten 1984, p. 419). In grotesque paintings and sculptures, exaggerated and distorted forms are a necessity. The purpose of asserting the grotesque in their works meant that “exaggerated forms with exaggerated emotions are more symbolic and conducive to evoking the numinous, the uncanny or the horrible” (Fingesten 1984, p. 419). Fingesten further claimed that in the sternest form (or classically even), imaginary hybrid creatures were known as grotesque, some of which were dangerous and fearful, some destructive, others benign creations of the fantasy (p. 420).

Apart from the medieval arts, history reveals that the grotesque was closely allied to other major concepts such as magical realism and the gothic (Baker 2009, p. 4). In fact, the terms ‘grotesque’ and ‘gothic’ were used interchangeably and were treated as similar during the Romantic period (Clayborough 1965). According to Kayser, grotesque is pertinent in three categories: “the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception” (1963, p. 180). The first and third functions have been incorporated into this research. Due to the property of the grotesque as displaying unnatural fusion and ugly characters, its ambivalence evokes feelings of disgust, fear or even, revulsion. Grotesque demonstrates that the notion of “the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence” (Kayser 1963, p. 37). Grotesque is easily detected due to its apparent narrative of the unnatural. For instance, the habitual appearance of “caricaturally distorted figure”, “eccentric style of movement” and “animal qualities” of human bodies among others (Kayser 1963, p. 39).

Looking at the relationship between human and nature, ecocriticism recognises (in nature and culture) “the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognise that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity” (Howarth 1996, p. 163). Although in different readings, nature can be interpreted symbolically, the value of nature in this context is extensive. It does not exist as a metaphor in an aesthetical way. The symbol functions as a voice and this approach is heavily associated with notions of culture. Since this paper employs the sub-concept of the relationship between human and nature, it is pertinent to ask: How nature is depicted in the selected texts particularly its relationship with human?

Alaimo highlights that often and commonly, the monstrous nature is neglected and invisible within the scope of ecocriticism as the priority is to direct “its attention toward texts that portray nature more favourably” (2001, p. 279). She further asserts that in fact, monster movies “could be the single most significant genre for ecocriticism and green cultural studies (Alaimo 2001, p. 279). Although Alaimo’s study is directed towards monstrous nature and creatures in films, and its relationship with politics and culture, she notes, interestingly, that instead of focusing on the beauty of nature, we should not forget and forgo the ‘ugly’ nature. In a visual context, horror and monstrous movies are seen as the epitome medium highlighting the relationship between nature and ugliness. However, since this paper is about nature and grotesque, it will focus on the relationship between nature and ugliness in a literary context.

Kayser also draws a connection between grotesque and nature, especially animals and plants: “hidden organic realms reveal grotesque sceneries as well” (1963, p. 183). Animals and plants enhance and enrich the organic realms associated with grotesque. Nature posits “unnatural fusion of organic realms concretised in this ghostly creature” (1963, p. 183). With the aid of animals and plants as tools, Nature discloses a dangerous life of its own. Walker argues that in nature narratives, the audience is “uncomfortable with both the silence and the sounds of nature” (2001, p. 145). Centring on this, I would like to ascertain that at most of the time, the protagonists are left with close proximity to the nature. Therefore, their emotions and perception towards nature are evident and even more sensitive. As the senses enhance the interconnectedness between human and nature, the elements of nature (flora or fauna) evoke the manifestation of grotesquery.

FACILITATING THE GROTESQUE RECEPTION AND HUMAN-NATURE INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Perception initiates the grotesque effects. This process of grotesque effects is what Kayser labelled as the grotesque reception. Kayser emphasises that “[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 effects a secret liberation” (1963, p. 188). Under grotesque reception, this research which highlight the relationship between the grotesque and nature, pertaining to the portrayal of the human-nature interconnectedness. The analysis discloses the relationship by two defining features of the grotesque namely attractive/repulsive reception, and the grotesque laughter.

In *Dark Demon Rising* (henceforth *Demon*) the relationship between the grotesque and nature is portrayed to reflect the way in which the grotesque body and action are landscaped on the elements of nature, or simply put, as ‘nature elements as the grotesque-inflicting agent’. This is where the notions of grotesque from several scholars become relevant.

“The insects fell strangely silent like some dreadful orchestra waiting for my arrival.....Darkness had almost completely descended and the trees clinging around the graveyard had become immersed by blackness, only the gravestones remained a dirty pale, like cold bones. I froze, I suddenly become aware of myself, as if I’d awoken from a long, vivid dream, as if I’d been lulled by the consuming odours of the jungle, by the hypnotic, swaying movements of the branches....All around, insects suddenly burst into life in a cacophony of strange noises and the jungle seemed to shudder itself to life.”

(Halim 1997, p.128 – 129)

A few grotesque actions are evident in the above passage. Firstly, the strangeness of the insects’ behaviour and secondly the chills emitted by the jungle. The two actions are portrayed as being strange and disturbing. There is no apparent physical distortion here but distortion is conveyed through the unusual action of the insects and jungle. As if on cue, the insects fall silent upon Shazral’s arrival. Furthermore, even the trees in the jungle seem “hypnotic” to him.

This exhibits the strange charm of nature. The sudden vibrant and eager demeanour of nature’s entities represent the grotesque as being “disturbingly odd” (Baldick 1990, p.93). Under this circumstance, action by itself, does not deliver enough grotesque elements. However, the effects of a particular action help to enhance the grotesque actions. The whole narration evokes the similar effects of grotesque. As Thomson illustrates, “.. effect of grotesque is at least as strongly emotional as it is intellectual.” (1972, p. 5). The insects, on cue become silent, then suddenly hit a crescendo; this describes a distorted action – unconsciously and emotionally, the scenario evokes a chill in readers, thus contributing towards developing and projecting fear. This connection between nature and grotesque is expressed by Hoffman as one that “possess uncanny mechanical skills of a kind that enables them to establish contact with the most secret mysteries of the nature and thus to produce effects which remain inexplicable,” (qtd. in Kayser 1963, p. 106). When such a connection is established, it proves the deep interrelations between humans and their surroundings, which in this case is between Shazral and the jungle and insects.

Apart from the bizarre grotesque actions, the depiction of grotesque as the horrifying and comic is also evident in these novels. Descriptions such as “he slid down the river like a log” (Halim 1997, p. 77), “diseased banana tree,.... green leaves lay limp and black” (Halim 1997, p. 191), and “millions of leaves like faces looking right at me, some smiling, some shrieking as if in great torment” (Halim 1997, p. 208) mirror the notions of grotesque proposed by Kayser. Note the coexistence of distortion and the comic conveyed through the mentioned examples. Kayser’s concept, as summed up by Thomson, defines the moods

elicited when there is “co-presence of the ludicrous with the monstrous, the disgusting or the horrifying” (1963, p. 9). The ‘diseased banana tree’ and ‘leaves with faces’ are what Kayser denotes as the intertwining between different entities, thus contributing to the grotesqueness of the subject matter. The ‘diseased banana tree’ presages Minah as an aberration (the human version of the demon). The banana tree was first seen as healthy and vibrant-looking, akin to how Shazral viewed Minah in their first encounter. However, once Minah is revealed to be the man-eating demon, the condition of the banana tree is commensurate with Minah’s true nature, that of a rotten-looking monster. Why a banana tree in particular? Back in the village, it was established that the jungle and river were allies of Minah the-demon, and in Minah’s house in Kuala Lumpur, the banana tree is the only thing close to nature that could actually convey Minah’s demonic form to Shazral.

The following sentence, “Millions of leaves like faces looking right at me, some smiling, some shrieking, as if in great torment” also connotes grotesque imagery, akin to the “diseased banana tree”. While the ‘diseased banana tree’ mirrored Minah’s real form, the jungles in the village and the mystical island (where Shazral became aware of Minah the demon) were demonic Minah’s allies. I mentioned earlier that nature too conspired against Shazral; the ‘leaves with faces’ denote a fusion of nature (leaves) and negative spirits (the faces). This facet of nature partakes of the mystic. Through nature imagery, nature is given a voice as the “flowers, trees, jungles and animals seem not only fully alive but participatory in their own representation” (Zainor and Wan 2009, p. 306). This grotesque reception can be further refined and observed through another two defining features of the grotesque, namely the attractive or repulsive, and the comic or horror.

THE ATTRACTIVE/REPULSIVE

In the fierce stillness of one particular night, Shazral loses the sense of time and place due to the ultimate pressure of accomplishing a task at hand (to accept a family inheritance that was bequeathed by his father). In his reverie, nature seems to be the only living entity, pulsing with life excitedly as “insect voices pierced the humidity and blackness grew from the roots, embracing the trees, spilling from the branch” (Halim 1997, p. 128). When Shazral finally reaches his father’s grave, the buzzing sound suddenly dies as they “fell strangely silent like some dreadful orchestra waiting for my arrival.” (Halim 1997, p. 128). The living agent (the insects) acts as the entity that breaks his reverie, jerking him back to reality and his purpose of coming to the grave in the first place. Here, the paradoxical reception of the grotesque as the attractive/repulsive is achieved. In this particular instance, Shazral witnesses the liveliness of nature. In his lone quest, the fluidity of the insects’ buzzing presence is strangely attractive, as if the whole business is nothing, but a merry one. However, the abrupt halt of the buzzing can be interpreted as a repulsive sentiment, even to Shazral because the liveliness that seemed so welcoming just a moment before has now reminded him of the foreboding task at hand.

The grotesque-nature is also projected in the scene where Shazral is about to share his story with his guest, Professor Cummins. This relatively exciting moment for Professor Cummins, turns to be a dreadful moment for Shazral when he recounts the tale. Yet again, the surrounding nature exhibits the attractive/repulsive grotesque reception:

“It had not rained for weeks and the sun had baked the ground dry so that lines had appeared on its crust. The trees appeared limp as if they too were suffocating in this heat, the roots that were visible appeared useless as if they had sucked every bit of moisture from the earth. Even the Mynah birds and sparrows sheltered in the shade were not flying unless to search for worms and insects” (Halim 1997, p. 11)

Nature as a living entity that partakes actively in the background is vividly described in narrative. The narration of nature is orchestrated in an intense and exaggerated manner, and Shazral, is both, attracted and repulsed by it. The attractive manifests in the participatory and lively jungle life such as the trees, birds, worms and insects, while being oblivious to his dilemma, reflects the repulsive.

Secondly, the presence of nature serves as a means to mock and deliver warning messages to the protagonist. This can be inferred in *Demon*, where the effects of nature are both positive and negative. This is evident in the relationship between Shazral and his surroundings. The young Shazral, once, while waiting for his classmates by the river before the start of the boat match, idly begins to observe the jungle around him. To his astonishment, the once familiar jungle suddenly comes alive, “mysterious and full of unknown noises and animals” and the whole picture gave him the impression of imminent danger, of a “patient beast” (Halim 1997, p. 52). Little did he know then, that nature was forewarning him about an impending tragedy; his friend Affendi was later swallowed by the treacherous river. The role of nature here is similar to the one described in Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). In Hardy’s book, he orchestrates nature in a manner that mocks at Tess’s rape. There are no witnesses other than the “primeval yews and oaks,” “gentle roosting birds,” and “hopping rabbits and hares” (101). These animals function as “ironic, useless mock witnesses” (Kerridge 2001, p. 128).

On another occasion, Shazral sets out to hunt the demon - *hantu jahat* in order to kill it. In his quest, he enters a surreal world on a mystical island. He finds himself in a boat heading towards the island. He catches sight of the beach, “[The] waves pushed the boat strongly forward as if urging me on towards a waiting secret” and heads ashore, “the cool water lapping at my ankles, and made my way forward...” (Halim 1997, p. 134). As perceived by Shazral, nature, most comfortingly, urges him to venture into the unknown. However, its intention is ambiguous. Nature could have been an instrument of the evil as the place was later revealed to be inhabited by the demon itself. Nature’s seemingly comforting and inviting trait can be interpreted as deceiving.

Shazral also finds nature particularly aggravating. When Shazral fails to kill the demon during his first confrontation with it, he feels dejected, alongside mounting pressure and expectations from the people around him. In the midst of self-loathing and seeking comfort, he finds that nature has allied itself with the demon, “[Above] and all around trees leaped in the air, branches poking the dirty sky in mocking gesture” (Halim 1997, p. 148). Later, when the demon strikes and kills his uncle, nature shows its indifference towards a melancholic Shazral. When he laments his incompetence in destroying the demon that killed his family, an indifferent nature functions as normal: the “cock crowed, sparrow landed...as if nothing had happened.” (Halim 1997, p. 164).

THE COMIC/HORROR

Kayser asserts that “grotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying.” (qtd. in Thomson 1972, p. 16). This description defies intellectual comprehension. However, the effect is dual in nature, capable of eliciting a shudder with a hint of amusement. As Thomson puts it, “... deep within us, some area of our unconscious, some hidden but very much alive sadistic impulse makes us react to such things with unholy glee and barbaric delight.” (1972, p. 9).

Looking into the explanation suggested by Kayser, it is significant to note that the grotesque incites both horror and comic at the same time. In constructing the body of definition of the grotesque, Thomson asserts that the assortment of the two elements are not

necessarily proportionate, as in some texts, the comic is punctuated with a touch of horror, or vice versa, but can still be labelled as grotesque (Thomson 1972, p. 21).

What does it mean to invoke both terror and comic simultaneously? Hopkins proposed that in a written discourse, some elements are written with gruesome and ghastly details purportedly to bring forth the “funny” side of the story (1969, p. 163). Simply put, apart from elements of horror and terror, grotesque also renders the comic and ridiculous. Thomson explains the purpose and impact of the grotesque as follow:

“...the possibility that our laughter at some kinds of the grotesque and the opposite response – disgust, horror, etc. – mixed with it, are both reactions to the physically cruel, abnormal or obscene: the possibility, in other words, that alongside our civilised response something deep within us, some area of our unconscious, some hidden but very much alive *sadistic impulse makes us react to such things with unholy glee and barbaric delight* [my emphasis]. Just how far one can legitimately pursue this aspect of the grotesque is doubtful, but we may note that, at the very least, the grotesque has a strong affinity with the *physically abnormal*. [author’s emphasis] (p. 8-9)

The grotesque as comic/horror in *Demon* is portrayed through brutal illustrations. In the said novel, there are scenes where two characters are killed in the vicinity of nature. The first incident takes place when a very young Shazral and his group of friends venture deep into the jungle, towards the river, for a boat match.

“By the time we had rushed up through the jungle track, slipping and sliding on slick mud, pulling bloody, squirming leeches off our calves and thighs, the sun had come out and shone harshly on the browning puddles, that were still disturbed by the drizzle, and almost immediately, thick, all-consuming humidity rose from the muddy ground” (Halim 1997, p. 79).

As they slip and slide on mud and struggle with the leeches, the elements of nature harmonise to depict excitement, fun and jovial mood of the children. Even the ‘squirming leeches’ do not detract from the joy of the outdoors. But as they progress deeper into the jungle, its natural, vibrant mood gradually changes to grim.

During the boat match, one of Shazral’s best friends, Affendi falls into the river and drowns. Although Shazral tries to save Affendi, “the hungry brown river...its incessant, angry roar” is way too treacherous (Halim 1997, p. 84). A guilt-ridden Shazral is unable to erase the drowning scene from his thoughts, “like a malevolent shadow across the foaming river, screaming it was all my [Shazral’s] fault” (Halim 1997, p. 83). Following Affendi’s death, Shazral begins to notice and experience more grotesque representations of nature. He once describes the full moon as “hanging big and low on the horizon just above the jungle canopy. Its dirty yellow light opened up the darkness surrounding the dirt-filled compound like wound” (Halim 1997, p. 84). The moonlight reveals a wound - which is a metaphor for an evil infestation

“...my attention was drawn to a particular tree not more than forty feet from the house. Not the tree itself, for my heart would not have trembled so, but a stunted shadow by its side, almost merging with the darkness like a fat deformed bulge clinging to its bark” (Halim 1997, p. 84).

This descriptive passage is pregnant with the comic/horror ambivalence. The trio of elements, namely demon, moon and tree connotes horror although Shazral’s observations are childlike and innocent, perhaps comical even. Hence the very essence of grotesque reception is conveyed through the dual manifestation of the comic/horror.

Besides Affendi, Shazral’s mother also dies in the novel. On that momentous evening, “dusk arrived the way it usually does, like an odourless, thick smoke emanating from the tree trunks and the last remnants of light stripped from the air. Mosquitoes were out

for the feast, teeming from the bushes and the shrill of insects loud and hungry” (Halim 1997, p. 90). In this illustration, as evening fell, the mosquitoes and insects eagerly take charge of the territory. A dark and sombre mood settled like a pall into the night. “Something wretched, something evil, waited above the trees which my mother couldn’t have seen. A black loathsome shadow hanging in the air like a foul sickness, hovering just beyond the branches...” (Halim 1997, p. 91). The comparison between two entities, akin to the hunter and the hunted: the mosquitoes to feast and the evil, to kill its prey – demonstrates the simultaneous grotesque reception of the comic/horror. The mosquitoes provide the comic, while the evil, shadowing its prey, is hair-raising and horrifying.

CONCLUSION

Having discussed how the grotesque and nature are incorporated via the grotesque representations of human-nature interconnectedness in *Demon*, we would like to reiterate that based on Kayser’s notion of the grotesque, the grotesque reception is a dynamic component in the body of grotesque. Thompson’s ‘tension and unresolvability’ and Steig’s ‘the grotesque double-edged’ provide credible explanation of the psychological role of the grotesque.

“In particular, it [the grotesque] accounts in psychological terms for the essential paradox of the grotesque: that it is both liberating and tension-producing at the same time. Moreover, the comic element in the grotesque is itself seen as having dual function, exciting both ‘free’ and inhibited or defensive laughter” (Thompson 1972, p. 61).

This dual functionality is especially apparent when Shazral advances into the mystical island to accept his inheritance. The relationship between the grotesque and nature is depicted through the existence of human-nature interconnectedness. Under the grotesque reception, this relationship is revealed. The grotesque reception is observed through its duality; firstly, the grotesque repulsion/attraction pairings and secondly, through the grotesque laughter.

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