

Gothic Manifestations in the Postmodern Culture

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Abstract: *Postmodern culture, which roughly started in the second half of the twentieth century describes a range of events, activities and perspectives related to art, humanities and social sciences. The modern culture, emphasising on universality, coherence and social progress in contrast to the postmodern in which modernist narratives of social holism and progress are viewed as contradictory, elastic and incomplete. The dominance of coherence is subverted by difference and universality gives way to diversity within a postmodern condition. The Postmodern Gothic on the other hand, can be seen as an artistic response which helps us to interrogate our anxieties, fears, terror that haunts our collective unconscious and certain creative ways to portraying them. The primary task of these postmodernists is to construct a route to the unrepresentable and unknown aspects of self and reality. This paper analyses how the postmodern Gothic literature, brings out the expression of anxieties, fears, terrors and their psychological implications.*

Keywords: Postmodern culture, Postmodern Gothic, anxieties, fears, terrors

I. INTRODUCTION

The postmodern condition is a disruption in the claim of totality as it emphasize the fragment over the whole or the particular over the global. The grand narratives or grand theories as described by Lyotard fail in a postmodern era insofar as the plurality of human existence emerges within a wider cultural space. Postmodern Gothic studies focuses on anxiety, death and terror as sources of fear in society and many of the contemporary artists express their ideas of fear symbolically either in relation to ourselves or society. In the Postmodern culture, the concept of "the self" is changing and as a result of sociocultural developments, the human nature is being transformed by such developments like digitalization, globalization, and a semiotic turn. With these changes, both in the minds of the people and the society, the advent of an entirely different kind of literary movement was inevitable.

Gothic literature that centres on chaos, dread, decay, fear and terror privileges passion and irrationality and over reason and rationality. The purpose of such literature is to evoke chilling terror by exploiting a variety of horrors and mystery, fictionalizing the realm of irrational and preserving nightmarish terrors and impulses that lie beneath the surface of the civilized mind (Abrams 137). The Gothic literary genre originated in Britain in the 18th-century with Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which is considered as the first Gothic tale with its ghostly supernatural machinations and an architectural setting (Botting, 14) and the genre reached crescendo in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).

Beville argues while exploring the concept of fear on a more broad cultural level, that in today's time the society generally has a pool of fears that may be culturally specific, woven together by the subdued undercurrents of terrorism and it is through the medium of terror novel that we can potentially realize and expunge this pervasive and stifling fear (87). This way literature can be seen as a medium through which we can address or resolve the fear, anxieties and terror caused by the exposure to the daily-based stream of news. Because of the ongoing threat of terrorism and the overall instability in global politics today, modern Gothic fiction has often been seen to reflect the collective fears and traumas of the modern world. Therefore, a genre like Postmodern-Gothic would be a perfect medium to represent the issues, in a world where international politics are in a constant state of flux.



Many human fears are inherent, and thus remain same through the times. It is to be noted that some basic human fears have morphed into new kinds of anxieties due to the massive changes that have taken place all around. These new fears have to do more with the minds of people and on a more psychological level than with physical terror. According to Beville, it is through Postmodernist Gothic texts that we can question our own unconscious beliefs, prejudices and fears "not only in terms of the desire that instigates them, but also in terms of the repercussions for society in general" (16). It can be said that Postmodern Gothic literature functions more on the level of unconscious fears and traumas of the modern age.

The Postmodern Gothic genre can be seen as a combination of two different literary genres, Gothic and Postmodern fiction, one emerging in the 18th century and the other in the later part of 20th century. On combining, these two apparently very dissimilar literary genres can be found to be strikingly similar. The genre is the clearest mode of expression of terrors in post-modernity and presents an expression of the philosophical and psychological implications of terror in postmodernist literature. In her book, *Gothic-Postmodernism, Voicing Terrors of Postmodernity* (2009), Belville defines Postmodern Gothic "as an amplification of the Gothic language of terror to encompass the more recent terrors of our postmodern age and also the theories of terror that have been put forward as part of the enterprise of postmodern cultural theory" (9). She finds this hybrid and distinct genre of Postmodern Gothic at convergence of the terrors of the gothic and the terrors of postmodernism. There is much more about this hybrid genre that is same because some of the issues that are explored separately in gothic and postmodernist fiction, are one and the same like the darkness of the human psyche, fragmentation of the self and the crises of identity (53). Keeping this in view, it is not easy to completely separate the attributes one genre from the other.

While presenting Postmodern fears, Gothic fiction needs to dispense itself in a form other than the conventional ghost story. The horror, fear or the terror in Postmodern Gothic come from something other than the most traditional Gothic scares of evil villains or haunting spirits. For example, in novel, *The Keep* (2006) it is not the castle (the physical place) that is haunted, but instead the hauntings arise from the characters' past. The anxieties and fears presented in the novel are more psychological than the tangible real-life threats. The characters in the novel suffer from childhood traumas, addictions and existential crises. One can refer to the significance of Postmodern-Gothic which paves the way for theoreticians to step in this realm while focussing on the issue of fear, terror or anxiety reflected in the various modern mediums and discourses like media, literature and so on.

Through the genre of Postmodern Gothic, we can interrogate our own unconscious fears, anxieties, terrors and new ways to represent them. It constructs a route to the unrepresentable, unknown aspects of self and reality. The postmodern Gothic tries to search reality, which can also be perceived in the presence of some supernatural or unreal phenomena among other things. Fredric Jameson in his book, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) states that Gothic is a boring and exhausted paradigm because postmodern is terrifying in itself and both of them inspire anxiety and fear. The purpose of the terror as a 'negative pleasure' is to make the reader understand reality through the realization of fantasy and this spirit of terror is the manifestation of our subjective desire for its return to open unto the darker side of our known realities (Beville 24).

Botting is of the view that the role of Gothic too has changed in the contemporary scenario so that these Gothic anxieties and fears could be applied to fit the modern world. He further adds, that once outcast and exiled as figures of decadence, deviancy, ghosts, horror and the monsters of the Gothic tradition find themselves absorbed and recycled as common images of a contemporary condition that is itself uncertain and shifting (17). Postmodern Gothic is all about this fear or terror and it alludes to the unrepresentable and the unimaginable through terror and some of the examples of postmodern terrors are evanescence, alienation and death.

Sometimes Postmodern Gothic works use traditional gothic tropes to amplify the postmodern tendencies of hyperreality, indeterminacy and liminality among others. This overriding concept of terror is among the key factors that unifies the gothic and the postmodern, accounting for the excessive amount of anxiety and fear that are present in both genres. For Example, Donna Tartt's postmodern Gothic tale *The Secret History* (1992) terrifies us about the possible ways that a late capitalist, contemporary society may shape and affect the individuals within it. Tartt's use of traditional gothic tropes along with the postmodern traits work on a superficial level to create fear and anxiety,



The Keep (2006) by Jenifer Egan borrows many of its horror stuff from early Gothic fiction, although the characters or fears in the novel are typical of the contemporary era like the main protagonists have their own psychological issues and traumas. In a way, the novel is a combination of the the Gothic and the postmodern or traditional and the modern. As a novel, it combines Gothic and postmodern thematic elements and uses them to present the anxieties and fears, which to an extent are universal, not dependent either on place or time. It is this feeling of volatility and uncertainty that creates the mood of Postmodern Gothic fiction rather than the traditional hauntings. The virtual self-created world of the internet that is represented in the novel as well as the problematic concept of the self as portrayed in postmodern fiction, are both unstable as such.

Continuing with the idea, it could be argued that the Postmodern Gothic uses literary elements from traditional Gothic fiction and combines them with postmodern elements to create an atmosphere that continues the tradition of Gothic fiction. It also in a way updates the genre to address the modern anxieties and fears, as is found in Egan's The Keep. The feeling of fear or uncertainty is always lurking somewhere in the background and can be felt throughout the novel. It seems that the different characters in Egan's novel are fearing something that prevents them from doing what they want to do. In this novel, the feeling of fear is shared in the way that everyone feels it and makes it fundamentally a personal experience.

In Gothic fiction, the dark side of the human psyche is often shown via an "evil twin" type of character and in Postmodern Gothic fiction, this dark side of the self exists inside the characters themselves. The idea of someone observing us or watching us is common and familiar in postmodern literature. The postmodern terrors presented in the above novel are of mind than the actual physical threats. It could be safely argued that different kinds of anxieties or fear are behind many of the actions performed by the characters in the novel. The issues brought up by the novel are quite relevant to the present times, and the issues such as fragmentation of the self, crises of identity or the darkness of the human psyche.

Similarly, some of the recent movies like Francis Ford Coppola's 'The Godfather' employ elements of Gothic postmodernism. This movie keeps its overall atmosphere close to Gothic while combining elements from different genres. Botting is of the view that Gothic shadows flicker among representations of familial, cultural, and individual fragmentation, in uncanny disruptions of the boundaries between social values, inner being and concrete reality, and in modern forms of monstrosity and barbarity (156).

In order to stay relevant, the literary genre of Gothic fiction has had to evolve, and this means that the elements of fear have also had to evolve alongside with the changing anxieties and fears of the reading public. While noting this 'historical change' in Gothic fiction, Clive Bloom states that the elements that scared our ancestors may or may not scare us. However, he argues that despite of this change, horror fiction seems to retain archaic elements one would imagine should have been long since abandoned (211). Therefore, we can surely say that some horror elements are universal and not dependent on time or place.

We can also safely state that the sources of terror in postmodern societies, are much more alarming and the metaphysical terrors now have a more profound resonance than the physical terrors of previous eras. The terrors in Postmodern Gothic fiction are an issue of supply and demand. Further, as it always has been that literature usually reflects the ideas or feelings of its own time and thus meet a demand and desires of their particular times. Gothic terrors or anxieties related to a rapidly changing world defined by disorientation, violence and the loss of meaning or faith re-emerges with the changing times. To present the more Postmodern fears while using Gothic elements, a specific kind of atmosphere is created - and such atmosphere gives a platform for a genre like Postmodern Gothic.

For voicing the terrors of postmodernity, Postmodern Gothic is usually considered as an apt medium of expression in literature and the two genres (Gothic fiction and Postmodernism) fit together seamlessly, as both of them present similar thematic elements and ideas. Beville refers to the combination of the two genres as a literary monster. She adds that the fascination of Postmodern Gothic with terror, the irrational and the negative places it in the realm of revolution (16). The rapidly changing world defined by loss of meaning, violence, social anarchy, disorientation and godlessness led to the Gothic terror and anxiety and the issues re-emerged at the dawn of postmodernity. The complexity and combination of Gothic themes and the postmodern features do make this genre special, and worthy of academic attention.



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