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The Fantastic as an Act of Resistance in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book*

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ABSTRACT

Neil Gaiman has emerged and carved a niche in the realm of Fantasy Literature. His novels reflect the role of fantasy by demonstrating how the real and the fantastic cohere. His novels reflect the manner in which specific individuals who have already been burdened by some kind of inner confusion come into contact with mysterious landscape, objects, human as well as inhuman characters. Besides, it reflects how characters battle in attempting to discover as well as possess true understanding about their existence and self. His works bear distinctive approach by examining the subjectivity of reality through the inclusion of fantastic diversity in the narrative.

Keywords: Fantasy, Reality, Subjectivity, Self.

A majority of Gaiman's works deal with fantasy, and his writings transport and navigate his readers through imaginary landscape. Neil Gaiman's works revolve around a set of images, adventures and characters providing useful means by which readers could examine ideas about ourselves and what we are. At the same time, Gaiman has skillfully portrayed how his characters have established close connections with grotesque creatures that are present in his works. In his works, adventures would be undertaken largely without the assistance of adults and would be precipitated by contact with mysterious places, objects or persons.

The paper will attempt to purport the role of fantasy and posit it as reality in order that nothing is acknowledged as the paramount reality. It shall explore how fantasy accepts more than one aspect of reality and more than one truth and in the process highlight the subjectivity of reality. While doing so, it shall analyse how the fantastic world denotes a symbolic representation of the mind of Gaiman's characters. It will examine how characters are at times compelled to find alternate means to assert their individuality due to factors such as confinement, loss and alienation. According to Rosemary Jackson:

"Fantasy, both in literature and out of it, is an enormous and seductive subject. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define... Literary fantasies have appeared to be 'free' from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death... The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent' ". (Jackson, 1981, Introduction).

Coraline presents fantastic events that are both real and unreal that comprise a process of magical thinking on the part of not only the author but the readers as well. The magical realist narrative is discernible through the appearance of ghost in his narrative and Coraline's other mother and other father who resemble her real father and her real mother. Although their appearance and existence may be magical their presence brought Coraline to the site of chivalry, making Coraline understand everyday reality and the physical necessities that accompany it. By juxtaposing Coraline's journey behind the old door, and her own house the fabric of everyday life is stitched together in such a fashion so as to reveal the marvelous and the real within time and space. The description of the unusual weather in *Coraline* is surreal, which is difficult to comprehend:

“Coraline had to make sure she dressed up warmly before she went out, for it was a very cold summer that year” (Gaiman, 2002, p. 6).

The bizarre description of the weather on the contrary reflects the author's desire to communicate difference. By employing fantasy as part of his narrative, Gaiman attempts to show that realism is not always in the form of order, coherence and limitation. The description of the rain in the story affects the flow of the narrative. It is not the kind of rain where one could go out, it is the kind that throws itself down from the sky and splash where it landed. It is the kind of rain “that meant business, and currently its business was turning the garden into a muddy, wet soup”. Through the inclusion of fantasy in the narrative Gaiman enriches ways of perceiving reality by a variety of nonsense, dreams, visions and the creation of another world.

The Graveyard Book is blended with fantasy and reality in which everything is made possible. In the book, the world of the dead is rendered as having close relationship with the living. Chapter 5 of the book titled “Danse Macabre” which is termed by the author as “the dance of the living and the dead” portrays an unusual scene in which the living and the dead people dance together:

“They took hands, the living with the dead, and they began to dance The dance sped up and the dancers with it. Bod was breathless, but he could not imagine the dance ever stopping the Macabray, the dance of the living and the dead, the dance with Death. Bod was smiling, and everyone was smiling” (Gaiman, 2008, p.147-149).

The boundary of reality is questioned by the author in the novel. Everything is made possible by the author in the text. The making of impossible events into the possible shows how truth and lies co-exist. The creation of bizarre events and characters in the novel depicts that there is no objective reality. The kind of reality portrayed by the author is in complete contrast to

nineteenth century perception of absolute and subjective reality. Everything is constituted in relation to other things; hence nothing is simple, immediate or totally present. The author also makes it discernible that analysis cannot be complete and final. Likewise in *Coraline*, Coraline's close magical connection is portrayed when her mother takes her into the nearest large town to buy her clothes for school. She encounters aliens and is kidnapped by them. However, she fooled them by wearing a wig and laughing in a foreign accent and she escaped from them. Coraline's magical connection with the universe becomes part of her which reorients her ability to identify:

"There were all sorts of remarkable things in there she'd never seen before: wind-up angels that fluttered around the bedroom like startled sparrows; books with pictures that writhed and crawled and shimmered; little dinosaurs skulls that chattered their teeth as she passed. A whole toybox filled with wonderful toys" (Gaiman, 2002, p. 36).

Through the narration of magical events in the story, it is conspicuous that magic becomes part of Coraline's identity. Besides, it is noticeable that magic cut across national boundaries, gender, class, age, the natural and the unnatural which often brings optimistic perception in the lives of people. Moreover, the fusion of magical events and Coraline's adventure in the story depicts how magic belongs to everyone cutting across national and linguistic boundaries. The employment of fantasy in the novella manifest the nature of reality because there is no objective reality and reality is shown to be something which is context bound. Reality is in complete contrast with the nineteenth century perception of the absolute and the subjective form in the novella. Gaiman has further demonstrated how everything is constituted in relation to other things.

Fantasy remains central amidst Gaiman's narrative. The employment of fantasy in the characters, events and objects in his narrative symbolises the inner turmoil and inner struggle of his characters. In Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* food symbolism

has an important implication and it can be associated with desire and repression. Food symbolism conveys and shapes concepts of anger, civilisation and cultural tradition. Natalia Andrievskikh in her essay titled "Food Symbolism, Sexuality, and Gender Identity in Fairy Tales and Modern Women's Bestsellers" states:

"Throughout cultures and epochs, metaphors of consumption act as a major symbolic vehicle to both convey and shape concepts of sexuality, agency and gender identity. In literary and popular contexts, appetite often stands for sexual desire, description of eating mask language of possession, and representations of cooking express both enslavement and empowerment" (137).

Food symbolism carries a particular importance. Bod feels imprisoned in the graveyard with the passage of time. His intense longing to have good food denotes his ardent desire to explore and extend his territory. In addition to being an important agent in helping Bod to build his inner strength, food has another function. Bod says:

"The lady who's looking after me. She makes horrible food. Hard-boiled egg soup and things" (Gaiman, 2008, p. 69).

In this regard, the author attempts to highlight that food stands as a metaphor which is inseparable from Bod's behavior. By paying close attention to food, the author evokes Bod's deepest desire and anger which is not expressed by him directly. Additionally, it evokes Bod's anxiety as well as the problem inherent in the conceptualisation of the self and others. The food image in the book stands as a variety of ways to achieve empowerment. Notably, it stresses upon how Bod is rooted in repressed anxieties that are related to his identity and sexuality. Bod frequently thinks that he will be transformed by consuming different kinds of food and transcends restrictions that are imposed on him and finally he establishes himself as a successful figure. The portrayal of food in Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* needs to be taken seriously because it has indicated how food is the cultural trait which human learn first. Besides, food in the novel acts as catalyst for change. The employment of food

symbolism raises an important question regarding culture, globalisation and multiculturalism. Moreover, it is a system of communication that further raises an interesting issue of power and reception including the power of food in culture and society.

The manner in which fantasy is portrayed in Gaiman's works reveals how his characters attempt to explore their identity. By making use of the images and symbols the writer has transported his readers to grasp the mind of his characters. By journeying into the 'fantastic' world which is in complete contrast to the real world, characters are bestowed the opportunity to assert their individuality with greater freedom. At the climax of the novel, Bod utters contradictory statements when compared with his earlier proclamation that he does not need more lessons beyond what he learns in the graveyard. He boldly confesses to Silas:

"I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands. I want to leave a footprint on a sand of the desert island. I want to play football with people. I want, he said, and then he paused and he thought. I want *everything*" (Gaiman, 2008, p. 286).

The speech uttered by Bod proves to be an important message which bears an underlying connotation with Bod's identity and his place in society. Although he has revealed how the graveyard inhabitants provide him all the requirements in life, he is incapable to remain true to his former thought. The graveyard no longer defines life, for him life means something else. He starts to exhibit a distinct idea of life which gives him a sense of challenge and broader vision. He utters his desire to immortalise himself when he says that he "wants to leave footprints on the sand of a desert island". Like his peers he wants to play football and indulge in creative activities which will make his life meaningful and consequential.

In *Coraline* the presence of inhuman characters in the story evokes changes in the attitudes and behavior of the protagonist. Coraline says:

“The air became alive with dog-bats” (Gaiman, 2002, p. 121).

Coraline’s view of the dog bats echoes her ardent desire to form a relationship with the inhuman characters. The dog bats make the life of Coraline lively, they flap and flutter about her but they do not have any intention to hurt her. By depicting the congenial relationship that flourishes between Coraline and the dog-bats, the gap that existed between human beings and inhuman characters is unraveled. The actual encounter between the two opposite characters depicts how Gaiman unravels cruelty, class and ethnic hatred and discrimination. Although the other world seems to be the shadow of the real world, it actually represents a world that is devoid of racial discrimination and prejudice. Gaiman by juxtaposing the two worlds highlights the similarities and the differences in order to bring back the absurdities and the prejudices lurking in contemporary society. Through the inclusion of fantastic diversity and the presence of inhuman characters, Gaiman has denoted the utopian possibilities for establishing a society that is devoid of racial conflict and atrocities.

In Gaiman’s works his fictional characters do not have a real self until they exercise their imagination and create their own fantasy world. His novels are not merely coming of age stories with ghosts, giants, witches and animals with spooky effects (Klapesik “Neil Gaiman’s Irony, Liminal Fantasies, and Fairy Tale Adaptations”, 320). Their psychological growth is assisted by the presence of supernatural elements in order to understand the uncomfortable truth. The novella places heavy emphasis on the gothic with the atmosphere settings and diction to build suspense and a sense of unease in the readers. Gaiman has included strange human characters in his work. The appearance of the three children in the mirror room who have been trapped in the other world under the domain of Coraline’s other mother for a long time is grotesque. Their hearts and souls are stolen by Coraline’s other mother and she takes their lives away and leaves

them in the dark for a long time that is “time beyond reckoning”. These ghost children in spite of their grotesque appearance and form assist and comfort Coraline and help her save her parents by giving her hints and significant instructions. Coraline established an intimate relationship, thereby breaking the boundary between the two worlds. As a result, the mystery and variety of horrors are diminished and exploited. One of the children assigned Coraline to find her soul and the soul of her two friends from the other mother.

In *The Graveyard Book*, Bod mingles with the dead and the living. He lives in the graveyard and is raised and educated by ghosts. He possesses freedom of the graveyard, which means he has the power to communicate with the dead, move through the walls and remain invisible to most humans. He has to remain hidden from most of the living and most of his companions are ghosts and supernatural creatures. Throughout his adventures, Bod learns bizarre skills such as ‘dream walking’, ‘fading’ and ‘haunting’. These skills are the armaments to resolve the injustice inflicted upon him. Additionally, these supernatural skills are complex and unusual but indeed matters a lot because it opens up new worlds of the imagination to illuminate reality.

At times, Gaiman’s characters can be labeled as the marginalised. Being portrayed as the marginalised, their identity is shown to be a troublesome phenomenon which at times requires the assistance of memory. Lois Tyson says:

“We do not have an identity because the word *identity* implies that we consist of one, singular self, but in fact we are multiple and fragmented, consisting at any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties and intentions” (Tyson, 1998, p. 257).

Gaiman’s characters are burdened with the question of who they actually are. Furthermore, they are often troubled with the saddening notion that their own fantasy and dream might not be their own. The unstable sense of the self, and the kind of

insecurities and detachment they have experienced is coherently portrayed by the writer. They remain separated and find themselves arrested in the periphery. Besides, characters are trapped and their struggle for identity makes them symbolic of the so called 'everyman', searching for a sense of place and self, particularly through their embodiment of loss. Gaiman's characters exhibit an ardent desire to explore an alternative way to confront their individual identity as a result of being hindered from cultivating it independently.

The protagonists in *The Graveyard Book* and *Coraline* are the alienated figures who attempt to find solace and recognition. In *Coraline*, the principal character's loneliness and detachment is discernible from the question which she has often raised before her parents, "What should I do?" Coraline's life inside her own household becomes dry and monotonous. Besides, the main source of alienation in the story occurs because of the failure of communication due to the busy schedule cultivated by Coraline's parents. Being an adventurous girl she has a desire to explore. When Coraline expresses to her father her ardent desire to explore, he suggested that she count all the doors and windows and list everything that is blue and simply warns her to leave him alone at work. Likewise, Coraline's mother is engaged with her work typing things on the computer screen most of the time. For Coraline, none of the activities offered by her parents suits her sentiments. In addition to the insecurity she develops towards her parents, her insecurity is heightened when she mingles with Miss Spink and Miss Forcible. At times, she wonders if they have forgotten that she is with them. They act passively and go about accepting life in a nonchalant manner. Her presence is not felt by the

adult characters and exclaims her strained relationship and family dilemmas when she says:

“I m on my own. I think I’ve probably become a single child family” (Gaiman, 2002, p.60).

Likewise in *The Graveyard Book*, Bod develops a feeling of isolation and detachment. As he grew up, his feeling of estrangement increases enormously. He confesses as to how no one likes him or wants to play with him. He feels unappreciated and claims that no one cares about him. He has demonstrated how his own guardian abandons him and this hinders his ability to adhere to the ‘graveyard folks’ as well as the ‘living folks’. The narrator says:

“The boy was a model pupil, forgettable and easily forgotten, and he spent much of his spare time in the back of the English class where there were shelves of old paperbacks, and in the school library, a large room filled with books and old armchairs, where he read stories as enthusiastically as some children ate” (Gaiman, 2008, p. 169).

Bod is an alienated figure in the school. He is forgotten and remains unrecognised. He is remembered only when he is sitting in front of the other children. The other children do not think about him nor do not show any signs that they needed him. The narrator goes on stating that if someone ask the children in Eight B to close their eyes and list the twenty five boys and girls in the class, his name would not be included in the list and his “presence was almost ghostly”. Hence, due to the characters’ entrapment in confined spaces both mentally and physically, they are compelled to seek unconventional means in order to confront their notion of self. In this manner, Gaiman employs pastiches consciously in different forms including science fiction, gothic, fantasy, myth and magic realism and cut across boundaries that have existed between the real and the unreal as well as the natural and the unnatural.

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