

## The Dark Side of Society in Two Malaysian Short Stories: A Grotesque Reading

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### Abstract

This paper operates on the notion of the unintentional grotesque and aims to explore elements of the grotesque in Lee Kok Liang's "Just a Girl" (1968) and Lisa Ho King Li's "The Tiger and the Moth" (1991). A grotesque reading of the two works was done based on several reasons: the misfit characters, the grotesque elements present in the stories and ultimately, the grotesque manipulation of power towards the Other in society. This article aims to analyse elements of grotesque in the two stories via its thematisation of notions of alterity and manipulation of power. I also argue that the grotesque elements serve as a critique of the social malaise portrayed in the stories. Lisa Ho's misfit is the effeminate Endi, an illegitimate child of mixed parentage with mottophobia whose status as the other leads to a grotesque death. The misfit in Lee's work is portrayed via the nameless blind girl facing a bleak future as a result of her blindness and her father's abuse of paternal authority. While both protagonists are polar opposites, they both face grotesque consequences because of who they are. By relating to this, this paper argues that the grotesque elements expose readers to the unexpected, dark side of society.

### Keywords

Grotesque, Malaysian literature, alterity, power, the uncanny, dysfunctional family

The short stories "The Tiger and the Moth" by Lisa Ho King Li (1991) and "Just A Girl" by Lee Kok Liang (1968) were not intentionally written as pure grotesque fiction, which Edwards and Graulund described as having "clear-cut taxonomies, elements of the ludicrous and the fearful... [with the text clearly moving] between horror and terror, the ludicrous and the absurd..." (4-5). Philip Thomson however postulated the notion of the unintentional grotesque, that a work could be recognised as grotesque by readers based on their own reading and supported by evidence of the grotesque, even if it is unintended by the writer. Based on this, I perform a grotesque reading of the two works

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mentioned above for several reasons: the misfit characters, the grotesque elements present in the work and ultimately, the grotesque manipulation of power towards the Other in society, made worse by the fatal consequences that follow. This article aims to analyse elements of grotesque in the two stories via their thematisation of notions of alterity and manipulation of power. I also argue that the grotesque elements serve as a critique of the social malaise portrayed in the stories. This article will first introduce the works analysed, discuss the theory of the grotesque in general and as relevant to the study, and then analyse them using the theory; the analysis will then be linked to issues of social deterioration.

### **Works Analysed**

The two stories are chosen from the corpus that I studied for my MA thesis, a study of the representation of Malays and Malay culture in selected Malaysian short stories in English. This paper therefore is an extension of the thesis and opts to use these two works due to the presence of similar grotesque elements in both, as previously mentioned. Because only two stories are examined, this study does not claim to be representative or comprehensive of any society, or Malaysian literature itself.

Lisa Ho King Li is not a very prominent Malaysian writer but “The Tiger and the Moth” (1991) was one of the winners for the 1989-1990 NST-Shell Short Story Competition, later published in a collection edited by Kee Thuan Chye. In fact, she again won two prizes in the same competition in 1995, proving the quality of her works and her skills as a writer. She has described herself as “very interested in Malay literature” (“Winning Stories”) and this interest perhaps became her muse in writing stories featuring Malay characters, such as “The Tiger and the Moth” (1991) and “Tanjung” (1995) which won the third prize in the aforementioned 1995 contest. In “The Tiger and the Moth,” Endi, the lovechild of a Malay man and his Chinese mistress, faces ill treatment from his half-brother, Awang who has gotten used to being the only son. Awang victimises Endi for his mixed parentage, his effeminate nature and even his name. The story takes a grotesque turn as the bullying leads to Endi’s death at the end.

Lee Kok Liang (1927-92) was a well-known Malaysian lawyer, politician and writer during his lifetime (Wilson) and “Just a Girl” (1968) is one of his many fictional works published. The story portrays a poor family burdened by a blind daughter; the father’s decision to send her away leads to her fatal end. Both stories involve characters who are marginalised for their otherness; they both also focus on destructive parent-child power relationships in which, instead of capitalising their parental capability to nurture the children’s well-being, authority is used to force obedience. This is a grotesque form of power dynamics and will be explored in due course.

### The Grotesque: A Conceptual Overview

This section will provide a brief conceptual overview of the grotesque, using mainly Philip Thomson's *The Grotesque* (1972) as a basis for discussion. Despite its publication date, it remains a relevant and frequently-cited source. Thomson described the grotesque in general as containing the combination of "the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable" with a strong association with the "physically abnormal" (3). The characteristic coexistence of "the comic and the incompatible with the comic" of the grotesque, via the portrayal of the horrific using comic techniques, serves many purposes, the most practical of which is to intensify the reader's "sense of the frightful nature of the scenes" (8). A good example of this would be Gregory Samsa's inexplicable transformation into an insect in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) which is portrayed in a matter-of-fact tone, as if it is not an abnormal occurrence. Thomson further explained that the grotesque could also be described as "a gratuitous mixing together of elements for its own sake, or for no other purpose other than to bewilder the reader" (3-4). He also highlighted another element essential in the grotesque, "the aspect, namely, of eeriness, of the spine-chillingly uncanny" (5). Another angle from which to observe the grotesque would be the quality of "a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, as an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence" (11).

The comic however is not mandatory in producing the grotesque. Michael Steig wrote that something could still be grotesque with the presence of techniques of degradation or ridicule that arouse anxiety instead of being comic or arousing laughter (259). Steig exemplifies this grotesque quality via Mrs. Clennam in Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), a frightening parental character whose aggression is mostly directed towards her son. These two techniques, degradation and ridicule, which result in the grotesque effect, are more prominent than the pure comic in the stories examined.

Thomson traced the origin of the word as a derivation from *grotte*, which is Italian for "caves," following the discovery of murals containing combinations of human, animal and vegetable elements in caves around 1500 during excavations in Rome. It was termed as *crotesque* in French and English before being replaced by *grotesque* circa 1640 (13), still referring to the painting motif mentioned above. Use of the word started to extend to literature in sixteenth century France. It was only in the eighteenth century that the semantic shift occurred, and subsequently expanded to include "'ridiculous, distorted, unnatural' (adj.); 'an absurdity, a distortion of nature' (noun)" (Clayborough 6) in England and Germany.

These meanings, still resonant of the original painting motif mentioned above, continued to be in use throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the

twentieth century. Thereafter, the word “grotesque” began to “insist” on the inclusion of

the comic inexplicably combined with the monstrous... the interweaving of totally disparate elements, producing a strange and often unpleasant and powerfully unsettling conflict of emotions. (Thomson 14)

Several scholars before Thomson had theorised on the grotesque as well. Thomson wrote that John Ruskin differentiated between “true” and “false” grotesque; Wolfgang Kayser wrote about the “explosive force of the paradoxical” (Thomson 16); Friedrich Schlegel discussed the dark nature of certain types of humour and Victor Hugo, writing on the subject and largely echoing the aforementioned points, pointed out that the grotesque, instead of being merely a mode or a classification, “exists in nature and in the world around us” (17). The social significance of the grotesque as a mode that combines the horrific and the comic in various ways is perhaps best described by G.K. Chesterton. Observing the grotesque as “a reflection of the real world,” other than as “an artistic mode” and “the product of a certain kind of temperament” (17), he posited that it

may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it, i.e. that it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic. (Thomson 17)

Thomson outlined several governing principles for the construction of the grotesque in order to achieve the end product consisting of “the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response” as well as “the ambivalently normal” and the comic (27), leading to the radical effects of the grotesque which exist in both subject-matter and means of representation. One of them is the element of disharmony, whether “conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or the conflation of dispartes” (20), which are then apparent in the reaction it produces and supposedly, in the mind of the artist. Another element is the simultaneous presence of the comic and the terrifying which however, must not be resolved to just either one of the two, as the sense of ambiguity should overwhelm throughout the work.

The grotesque is constructed via extravagance and exaggeration, despite which the grotesque, “however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate, which makes the grotesque so powerful” (23). Thomson highlighted that the grotesque should not be set in a fantasy world because fantasy negates impossibility and therefore would not appear as grotesque to

readers. The grotesque, to reiterate, is real, however exaggerated, and hence will have an unsettling effect on readers. Abnormality, which could lead to the same unsettling effect on readers, is another constructive element for the grotesque. The grotesque abnormal is different from common abnormality where “both the comic aspect of the abnormal and the fearful or disgusting are equally felt” (27).

Constructed by these principles, the grotesque serves several purposes. Thomson highlighted that the grotesque is employed to “ridicule... to savour the ludicrous and the nauseating for their own sake” (27), “as a mere indulgence in the ludicrously ugly... [as well as] to indicate a profoundly tortured and agonized view of man and nature” (28). Portrayed via these principles, the grotesque functions as an attack on the perception of a reasonable world, giving readers a glimpse into another face of society, disturbing and yet in existence, simply because of the variety of human nature and the tendency to transgress boundaries and orders.

A more recent publication by Edwards and Graulund defined the grotesque as an element that “offers a creative force [to conceptualise] the indeterminate that is produced by distortion,” be it a literal combination of animal-human traits or “through the conceptual questions about what it means to deviate from the norm” (3). Exploring the grotesque using more recent works and issues such as the queer as well as the postcolonial, among others, Edwards and Graulund extensively discussed the various ways that “the grotesque illustrates how the normal is defined in relation to the abnormal” (8). The notion of normalcy in turn results in control and institutionalisation, where those that do not fit the bill suffer consequences such as “exclusion, demonization and even violence” (9). Notions of alterity are then constructed using “categories of inclusion (the norm) and exclusion (the abnormal) in order to preserve marked distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘self’ and ‘other’ (9). On the other hand, the grotesque in society, the abnormal against the normal, could also become a force to fight normalisation and resist constraints “in favour of conceptualizing and recognizing broader varieties of being and expression as dignified and respected” (10).

Based on the aforementioned concepts of the grotesque, it is most manifest in works that portray the horrific via comic techniques, or the combination of the horrific and the comic in its narrative, the most prominent of which include Franza Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915), Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (1955), Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989), China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000), and Toby Litt’s *Ghost Story* (2004), to name but a few. Works that thematise the grotesque face of power would include Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children’s* (1981) and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at*

*Night* (1996). Anthropomorphised/zoomorphised elements are abundant within the grotesque. Also central are figures of outcasts and issues that are intended to expose the contemptible in society as well as break conventions; this is done via the use of the comic, the ridiculous or the excessive, which allows causes and consequences to become disproportionate and bizarre. Both stories in the current study are read as grotesque due to their portrayal of the Other in a hostile society which abuses power and does not tolerate their abnormality and eventually leads them to their deaths, as will be further demonstrated.

### **Grotesque Settings, Protagonists and Predicaments**

This section argues that the grotesque qualities of the protagonists are accentuated by the stories' settings. Both stories feature a home setting turned hostile followed by an excursion into a natural setting which later ends fatally for the protagonists. The home setting turned hostile runs parallel with Freud's theory of the uncanny, which he described as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Strachey 219). Edwards and Graulund wrote that the uncanny, simultaneously yielding both the feelings of "foreign and familiar engenders the emotive responses of discomfort and alienation" (6). It is often associated with the grotesque in that a familiar element, in this case, a home no longer serves a homely purpose in terms of familial security and sense of belonging for its occupants. Worse, in the works examined here, the home becomes hostile towards only one of the occupants, the protagonists who themselves personify the grotesque (as will be elaborated), amplifying the grotesque quality of the predicament. Both stories begin with the protagonists situated in their home settings, which gradually turn un-homely towards them so that they are indirectly driven out of it into a natural setting. Endi, unable to tolerate oppression from his half-brother Awang and his father's failure to ensure his (Endi's) well-being after being brought to live with them, runs to the jungle and later drowns in a lake there; it is suggested in the story that he had fallen into the lake and drowned after having been frightened by a moth. In contrast, the girl in Lee's story makes a decision and heads to the river in the jungle before she takes her own life because she does not want to be sent away by her parents as a means to lighten their poverty. The un-homely home, the protagonists' grotesque personification and the conflicts they are caught in all combine to bring them to a grotesque, fatal end. A detailed analysis of the interrelation of the three narrative elements is as follows.

"The Tiger and the Moth" personifies the grotesque via the character of Endi, a boy of Sino-Malay parentage i.e. his Malay father and his Chinese mistress. While mixed parentage is increasingly common nowadays in Malaysia, the fact that Endi is the lovechild of an extramarital affair negates any easy path for the boy to be accepted in Malay society without stigma and marginalisation

for a social “crime” for which he is not responsible. Even the title hints at an unfair power struggle. “The tiger” refers to Awang, an alter ego that he uses when he goes around the house bullying his siblings and making mischief. “The moth” refers to Endi and the grotesque quality of their relationship is already hinted at here; while Awang is referred to using a name suggesting power, Endi is symbolised by the creature of which he is most inexplicably scared, the moth. His mottephobia is also used by his father to describe him as effeminate: “small, frail, and princess-like. [Endi] did not know what being effeminate meant” (124). His fear of moths and being called by degrading names occurs throughout the story, accentuating the grotesque power relationship between Endi and his oppressors.

Being brought into his father’s official family seems to go well initially despite being Endi bullied by Awang, because at least he gets along well with his father’s wife, Cik Munah and Mimi, his half-sister. Cik Munah sympathises with him although she could not bring herself to fully love Endi like her own because he is her husband’s lovechild with his mistress. This initial positivity is later outweighed by the neighbours’ radical, incriminating reactions towards Endi as an illegitimate child and ultimately, Awang’s unbridled incessant bullying, a predicament exacerbated by Captain Mamat’s constant absence due to work. It escalates into Awang taking his half-brother to the forest to scare him. In a fateful meeting with a tiger, Endi manages to scare the beast away but Awang fabricates a story that it had been Endi’s idea to go to the forest. No longer able to tolerate Awang, Endi runs away, back to the forest and later drowns in a lake there. His father assumes the tiger must have scared Endi, so much so that he falls into the lake but readers are earlier informed that Endi had “noticed a small flutter of paper-white wings upon a smooth stone just beside his foot in the sand” (132), suggesting that Endi’s fall into the lake is instigated by the presence of a moth, of which he is extremely frightened. This is later strengthened by Awang’s reaction:

When they pulled the body out of the lake, Cik Munah gasped and pressed Awang’s head against her belly. But he struggled and turned to look at his father carrying the lifeless form of Endi. “It must have been the tiger,” Captain Mamat said softly as he looked at the bluish, slightly foaming lips. “Look at all its prints in the sand...”

But Awang knew it was not the tiger. He saw the moth upon the stone, and smiled. (132)

Even more heart-breaking is that in the story there is a brief moment where Endi gains courage to defend himself, an act of restoring his subjectivity. Running away into the forest upon being slandered by Awang after their meeting with the tiger, he is described as being calmed by the forest:

He kept running and running into the forest. The trees were a blur now – gnarled, brown, woody columns that seemed dead this time.... There was a slight wind and when he arrived at the lake, he felt it tickle his hot ears and calm the craziness within. (131)

This initial calming down is then coupled with the realisation that his father is going to hunt the tiger down. I opine that for Endi, since Awang identifies himself as the Tigerman, the hunting down of the real tiger would be a symbolic defeat of Awang; thus it is when Endi thinks about his father's intention to hunt the tiger down that he gains a bit of courage:

... his mind reeled in a spiral, always coming back to the same thought – they're going to hunt the tiger, the Tigerman, and he felt an urgency and a welling up of some strange kind of courage that affirmed that he was not effeminate, only different. (132)

The grotesque is once again apparent in how Endi meets his fatal end right after he has found the courage and confidence to be who he is: this newly found strength is easily vanquished by the mere presence of a moth. It is grotesque because now it can be seen that it is Endi's phobia, and therefore he himself, that has caused his death, which then explains Awang's delight at having noticed the moth at the lake. Since Endi is "the moth" in the title, the metaphor now gives the impression that he has killed himself, again in relation to his phobia. As tragic as it is, there is a grotesque realisation that Endi's death actually solves a lot of problems. He no longer has to deal with Awang's victimisation of him and his social marginalisation as a half-breed, illegitimate child, while Cik Munah and Captain Mamat would not have to worry about people talking about Endi. There also seems to be a dark, grotesque pleasure for Awang that his original intention to only scare Endi in the forest has instead led to Endi's death. His hands are clean and with Endi's death, he is back to being his father's only son, all thanks to the moth.

"Just a Girl" (1968) features a nameless blind girl stuck in a cycle of poverty, whose ultimate means of escape is death. The grotesque in this story emerges first in the gloomy setting and second, in the way in which her disability leads to an unexpected fatal consequence. The story takes place in a setting full of foreboding: it is an unnamed rural place with characters trapped by the collapse of a family institution as well as dysfunctional interpersonal relationships. The characters' poverty is portrayed via their home: a hut without rooms, where they sleep in the corners and they still cook over a charcoal fire. The blind girl's parents are old and her father is always angry about their continuing poverty. The atmosphere in the hut is one of dissatisfaction, helplessness and hopelessness. Her blindness makes it worse; it has denied her

marital eligibility in a society that does not deal very well with physical disability. She is also unable to assist in making ends meet, a situation aggravated by her brother's abandoning the family and leaving their old parents to support themselves. Because they have to work, she is left alone every day until they return in the evening. The only parties who give positive responses and provide her with company are Che Hasnah, a neighbour believed to be a witch by the girl's father and then the baby monkey that Che Hasnah gives her as a pet. The girl feels welcome and finds company with these two, in contrast to the harsh and cold treatment from her father.

The girl's family is portrayed as Muslims who still practice animism which at times overshadows the religion itself. Nightmares that the girl regularly has are attributed to ghosts, and Allah is invoked with the hope to allay it. The parents pray to both tree spirits and Allah to lighten their burden, namely poverty, the collapse of their family due to being neglected by their adult son, and the girl's blindness. They also seek advice from a local shaman regarding their daughter, and they plan to follow the shaman's advice by sending the daughter away to "the big house in town" (102), the details of which are not included. The girl's father, Mat also blames his hard life on Che Hasnah, whom he calls "The black witch! The black witch!" (103) and claims that she has put a curse on him because he did not return her love when they were younger.

Interestingly, Mat prefers to blame others for his misfortunes, rather than admitting his own weaknesses or making more efforts to overcome hardship. For example, he is upset at the policeman and the customer who discover that he is using false weights, instead of admitting that it is his own fault. If he is hostile towards acts like these, he is not any better with acts of kindness either. Refusing to see Che Hasnah's kindness in giving his lonely daughter a baby monkey as a pet and for company, he adamantly insists that Che Hasnah has ulterior motives, that she is only adding a burden to his family despite the fact that Che Hasnah has assured the girl that she will provide food for the animal so as not to trouble her parents. Mat's attitude hints at the dysfunctional relationship that he has with other people, family or not, exacerbating the hostile atmosphere within which the story takes place.

When the parents plan to send the girl away to the big house in town, the family as well as the home shift into the unhomey strangeness untypical of a home, as it has now become a threat towards her well-being and her sense of somewhere to belong to. The girl understandably no longer feels comfortable or safe after hearing about her parents' plan. She has difficulty sleeping, as she has a sinister nightmare that night; she dreams that while she is sleeping, she can still feel pain when "she felt her other body getting up again and drifting out of the hut" (103). In her dream state, where her vision is restored, she meets her brother, Che Hasnah and a local shaman in a gathering but when she joins them

upon their invitation, “a long rope was dropped over her neck, and she began to grow smaller and smaller” (104).

Waking up from this, the girl has an epiphany: “suddenly she knew what she had wanted to do all these nights” (104) and so she walks to the river, after saying goodbye to her mother and returning the baby monkey to Che Hasnah’s hut. She has decided to find the moon because “[e]veryone said the moon was lovely. The moon was kind” (98); given the unkind treatment she receives at home, and being in a state of hopelessness and sorrow at the prospect of being discarded, she would like to find the “kind” moon. Her reasoning might not make sense to readers, but the girl is grappling with a situation where even her parents’ decision is not conventionally right. On another level, much as Endi’s death liberates him from many problems, the girl’s death via suicide also grotesquely liberates her from her predicament; and that, perhaps, explains her sudden certainty about what to do, and her determination to do it.

She might only be blind but this disability coupled with the kind of family and society she is in means that the future is very bleak for the girl. Economically and physically not eligible for marriage, she is a blind girl in a traditionally patriarchal Malay society where a female’s position is often marginalised and secondary to her male counterparts, where the husband/father is usually the bread winner and is to be obeyed. The girl therefore faces double marginalisation, for her gender and her disability. She becomes the misfit even in her family and then in society, except for Che Hasnah who seems to be genuinely kind to her.

Her status as a misfit is grotesque due to the disproportionate consequences brought about by natural causes beyond her control, i.e. her being female and blind. These two aspects land her in unfavourable situations where, objectified as a useless “thing,” her fate is decided for her; she is to be given away to the big house in town and her ineligibility for marriage is burdensome for her parents who if at all possible, do not wish to be working so as to support an adolescent/young adult child. The grotesqueness of her predicament is brought out ultimately by her act of suicide. She knows exactly what to do, because the potentially fatal danger posed by the river has been communicated to her by Che Hasnah. In the story, after discovering her parents’ plan for her, she goes to sleep, has a sinister nightmare and when she wakes up from it, “[s]uddenly she knew what she had wanted to do all these nights” (104). She is fully conscious of this decision, seeing it as her only means of escape as “[s]he did not want to go to that big house in the town” (105). The ending is perhaps ambiguous but I read it as a suicide, especially because she is well aware of the danger of the river and that she is not supposed to be there on her own. The grotesque act at the end of the story, namely her act of suicide because she does not wish to be given away, is thus fully formed and clearly manifested by her conscious decisiveness, coupled with her reasons which are all valid even if

only to her. This matches the definition of the grotesque as the ambiguous portrayal of the act, which largely hints at a suicide but is not definite either, arouses anxiety in readers as the story ends simply with her lowering her body into the water:

She pushed the branches and leaves from her and walked slowly to the bathing stage. On the stage she squatted down. She bent her head down. She did not want to go to that big house in the town. She wanted to stay here and find the moon. In the river.

The water was cold when she lowered herself down from the bathing stage. (105)

The characters' grotesque settings, predicaments and traits all combine in making them an object of ridicule which puts them in a grotesque power relationship as will be discussed next.

### **Power as a Grotesque Force**

Edwards and Graulund wrote about the ab/normal grotesque in relation to Michel Foucault's theory of power and how it regulates the normal and simultaneously condemns the abnormal, which is most prominently portrayed by the fathers in both stories. Although Foucault's theory was based on his observation of the regulation of the abnormal in society via the asylum, the hospital and the prison, it is relevant to this study based on the four principles of power that Foucault had outlined: that it is a relation involving multiple parties instead of an object of possession in the hand of a person; productive instead of repressive; could only be understood in relation to forms of knowledge and discourse in practice; and is susceptible to resistance "if only because it necessarily constitutes and reproduces oppositional categories, dispositions and forces" (Schirato et al. 45). These principles do not illustrate power as grotesque but this paper argues that it becomes grotesque in the hands of the fathers in both works studied.

Both fathers use their paternal authority as something they "possess," which allows them to regulate and dictate the lives of their children who do not conform to the portrayed social conventions. Because their power as a father is perceived as a possession, with them as the sole holder, it is manipulated instead of being utilised as a way to nurture the children's well-being. In the two stories, the fathers' practice of their socio-familial power leads to grotesque consequences, namely the children's deaths, even though the grotesque deaths, accidental for Endi and self-inflicted for the girl, are not actually intended by the fathers. This fate is disproportionate to the predicament that the children are in. For all the grotesque qualities that make their children misfits, an illegitimate "half-breed" and a blind, ineligible girl, the chain of events that lead

to their deaths are nevertheless caused by the fathers' grotesque moral deformity.

Endi's father's power is grotesque in that his use of his paternal authority results in the victimisation of Endi based on his effeminacy and mottephobia, making things even harder for Endi. It results in a double marginalisation, first as an illegitimate child, and second as one of mixed, Sino-Malay parentage. Giving him the benefit of the doubt, Captain Mamat might have meant well initially; since Endi's mother is dead, bringing him into his official family is the best measure that he could take to perform his paternal duties. Prior to Endi's mother's death, he is initially portrayed as kind and loving towards Endi but afterwards, he becomes less so.

Captain Mamat's practice of power as a father performing his duties could have been productive but instead it becomes repressive as he fails to regulate Endi's well-being there, given that his eldest, Awang is a notorious bully. Faced with the possibility of sibling rivalry, Awang sees it fit to mistreat Endi in order to assert his power and/or position as the eldest and on another level, the legitimate son. The failure of regulation by Captain Mamat then allows Awang to abuse Endi, using his power to condemn the latter's abnormality, which is why he keeps calling Endi names suggesting otherness and qualities opposite to the norm. Endi therefore becomes the object of mistreatment from two forces of grotesque power, Awang and their father.

Despite Endi's protests and attempts to defend himself, his subjectivity is disregarded and ridiculed as Awang keeps calling him unfavourable names: "half-breed" (126), "effeminate... stupid" (127), and "a big cissy" (128). Endi's name itself is an object of ridicule for Awang as it enhances the sense of the Other and the misfit, the one that "mis-fits." It does not readily hint at his identity, nor does it give a clue as to what language it really belongs to. Like Endi, a half-breed, the name is a hodgepodge of an English sounding name, Andy, but spelled with a system consistent with the Malay language. Consider the following remarks by Awang:

"What a stupid name you have. It is so English – Endi. But then, you're not purely Malay. You're only a half-breed. Yaaah!" (126)

Awang's name on the other hand, is a typical boy's name within Malay society, whether as an official name or a nickname. Even the father's name, Mamat is typically Malay and both names therefore imply them as the superior polar opposites to Endi's hybridity and "half-bridity." Endi's name therefore compromises his subjectivity and this runs parallel with how he is treated by Awang and his father; as an object of ridicule and victim of the predicament. Awang's behaviour is however not surprising, considering how their father himself treats Endi, "curs[ing] him for being silly" (125) and calling him "you

miserable wretch” (125). The fatal end might be accidental but the chain of events leading to it does involve Captain Mamat’s dysfunctional parenting coupled with Awang’s hostility towards Endi.

In a similar vein, the girl’s father’s parental power is grotesque in how his authority is used to decide that she is to be given away to lighten his burden of poverty. This decision objectifies and degrades his daughter as something easily disposable, instead of a daughter who deserves parental care and love. He is portrayed as a grumpy man, always angry at other people for his hard life; he speaks harshly to his daughter as if everything is her fault. His action degrades her into the innocent recipient of his anger about his misfortunes, an object made vulnerable to verbal abuse and anger, and then to be discarded because of flaws not her fault, without anyone asking her what she wants. He is also named Mat. Although he has taken care of his blind daughter for many years, it is only in the hope that someone will eventually marry her and take her off his hands. It is almost as if the girl’s blindness is turned into an excuse not to treat her well, let alone as a person. Her sense of powerlessness is manifest in her recurrent nightmare where she floats in boiling water with her hair spread out, crying until her mother wakes her up (97).

The girl is portrayed as having a perfect doppelganger in her dreams, who can see and walk around freely as she, the real, but blind one, sleeps. She is however still connected to “the other body” to the extent that she could feel it get up, leaving her in the corner where she sleeps:

Someone was talking. She felt sleepy now. The voice was low, and while she lay, she knew her other body had got up. It separated from her, night after night, she felt it slowly forming into a shape, laughing softly into her ears.... There were sharp quick pains in the back of her head and the vein throbbed.... And then her other body came back and became mixed with herself again. The pain ceased. (102)

The notion of an alternate, perfect self suggests the girls’ struggle to gain empowerment against her parents’ decision for her. At the end of the story, taking control of her life (and death) via her decision to commit suicide restores her subjectivity and grants her empowerment and freedom from oppression, albeit with the price of death. This is the force of resistance that is customary in all power relationships as theorised by Foucault. Endi too, keeps trying to assert his subjectivity although to no avail, and he runs to the forest, an act that soon turns out to be his ultimate act of resistance. The grotesque face of power in the two stories lies in how both fathers use their power only in the sense of authority, where they dictate, manipulate and objectify their children’s life. They however neglect the other side of power in terms of their capability to love and protect their offspring, the failure of which has facilitated their miserable lives and sadly, their fatal ends.

## Conclusion

To reiterate, the works can be read as grotesque for several reasons: the misfits reside in uncanny, insecure home settings; they are “abnormal” in that they clash with the implied norm and are consequently objectified as targets of ridicule. This in turn renders them powerless in power relationships with dysfunctional parents, eventually leading them to their fatal ends. The works are grotesque in how the fatal consequences are disproportionate to the predicament they are in; that what initially seems merely like a case of poverty or familial conflicts leads to the protagonists’ deaths. Tragic as it is, their deaths ironically grant them freedom from the grotesque predicaments they are in and the seemingly bleak future in a society that is quick to resort to name calling, ridicule and indecent treatment of the abnormal.

The use of grotesque elements enables the authors to expose to readers the dark side of society, one that is wrought with infidelity, judgemental individuals, dysfunctional parenting, immoral decisions, and children’s deaths as a result of circumstances that are in no way their fault. In portraying the home setting as uncanny and insecure for the abnormal protagonists, the authors subvert the conventional value of the home as a nurturing place for the family and children to grow, into one that hosts power abuse and suffering. Following Steig’s observation of techniques of degradation and ridicule, the grotesque effect is produced via the parents in the two stories, as they degrade the “other” child into an object of ridicule that is freely tossed about in abusive power relationships, so much so that the protagonists could only be emancipated from their predicaments via death. The grotesque abnormality of the protagonists draws attention to the Other in society and forces readers to be aware of notions of alterity and the ramifications that such positions entail, as well as the treatment that they receive from those that constitute the normal in society, turning society into a hostile site for the misfits. At the end of the day, the worst grotesque is not the illegitimate, half-breed Endi, nor is it the blind girl whose only other company is a little monkey and a neighbour despised by her father. It is the cruel parents and the dysfunctional society, whose moral malaise and rejection towards the social Other turns the home and the social atmosphere into unkind, threatening spaces which, in their glorification of the normal and the familiar, outcast the Other by turning them into objects of ridicule, just so that the normal could assert their subjectivity and power.

The grotesque reading therefore exposes to readers a slice of life possibly unexpected and otherwise inaccessible to the reader but which happens nonetheless, due to specific causative circumstances/elements. Starting as what seems to be just a story of a poor family, “Just a Girl” descends into the dark side, where financial inadequacy upsets the ties that bind the family together, taking its heaviest toll on the most helpless member. “The Tiger and the Moth” begins with a deceptively normal nuclear family before readers are brought face

to face with the bizarre consequences of marital infidelity and (step)sibling rivalry, with the weakest member also receiving the worst consequence. Seen from the grotesque angle, the effects of many elements of social deterioration such as poverty, fragmentation of the family institution, marital infidelity, and the mistreatment of the Other by individuals constituting the notion of normalcy are heightened to a shocking degree. It invokes doubt towards society as we know it, and the ability of parents and society to ensure the well-being of their younger members and/or members who do not easily fit in.

Michael Gillum wrote that the grotesque challenges our notions of the ideal and the “proper order with dissonant elements – disgusting, embarrassing, incongruous, or frightening intrusions” (Blooms 13). Both stories analysed here embody this challenge, resonating with Chesterton’s idea of the grotesque, as mentioned earlier, that it is to “make us see the (real) world anew, from a fresh perspective which, though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic” (Thomson 17). There would always be the dark in society, in the people we meet and situations we observe everyday but unless we are made aware of the grotesque consequences, society might well be heading to a fatal end itself.

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