



Consumerism as the Representation of Terror in Postmodern Gothic: A Study of Katherine Dunn's 'Geek Love'

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Abstract:

The Gothic has become a pervasive genre in contemporary culture precisely because it is relevant to the representation of contemporary concerns and anxieties. The liminal aspects and the ambiguity that are commonly foregrounded in Gothic fiction echo the postmodern thought and imagination. The postmodern gothic, therefore, becomes a significant genre through which the terrors of postmodern culture can be explored. Katherine Dunn's 'Geek Love' (1989) tells the story of an American family circus where the parents mutilated the children into 'freaks' so as to boost the family business. The text deals with issues ranging from bodily normalization, to genetic modification and sexual difference. Dunn engages herself in a unique portrayal of normal and abnormal along with complex ethical issues which, therefore, breaks down established binaries. A reading of the text as postmodern gothic will throw light on the idea of consumerism as the horror of postmodern culture where the postmodern concepts of capitalism, consumerism, alienation and the notion of identity serve as means for invoking the terrors and horror of postmodernity and how these aspects are represented in works of fiction. I would also like to examine the social concerns, the perception of normality and insanity, morality, individuality, and alienation in the text within the postmodern paradigm.

Keywords: *postmodernism, postmodern gothic, consumerism.*

Beginning with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), the Gothic tradition has penetrated different genres and its tropes have been thoroughly utilized thereby creating multiple sub- genres.

Hogle thus argues that "Gothic representations are a product of cultural anxieties about the nature of human

identity, the stability of cultural formations, and processes of change. As a result the representations are influenced by the cultures that produce them” (Hogle 308). This could be the reason for the Gothic’s ability to diffuse into other genres and means of representation. Following the expansive and comprehensive nature of the Gothic, the tropes and setting of the genre have permeated into different genres. The postmodern Gothic is one among the different genres into which postmodernism and Gothic have amalgamated to form a new kind of sub-genre where both the ideas of the two genres fused together. In a way, the Gothic has made itself an integral part of the postmodern.

Within the postmodern paradigm, the Gothic tradition has undergone several changes with respect to tropes, setting, thematic content as well as form. The traditional Gothic setting with castles and dungeons, spooky basements and haunted houses are often replaced by an urban setting with cities, busy streets, apartments and so on. According to Fred Botting, postmodernism and the Gothic share a close literary alliance because both have thrived amid “industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic organization, and scientific discovery” (Botting 3). Moreover, the Gothic’s subversion of stable norms, collapsing of binaries caters to the postmodern sensibility. Theorists and critics have commented on the “striking parallels between the features identified in discourses concerning postmodernism and those which are focused on in the Gothic tradition” particularly their qualities of incoherence and indeterminacy (Allan Lloyd Smith 6).

The central focus of this paper is to situate the concept of capitalism and fetishized consumerism as the forms of horror within postmodern Gothic in Katherine Dunn’s *Geek Love* (1989). *Geek Love* was published during a time when free market and family values were touted as if they were mutually constitutive (Duane 106). According to Kenneth Miller,

In the twentieth century America has been in the vanguard of technological and business innovation associated especially with mass production and investment capital. In American capitalism the forces of the marketplace are paramount and concepts of private ownership, property, and the drive towards profit are integral to social organization (Miller 111).

Using the idea of family as a means of cultural analysis, the novel provides a sharp social commentary on the horrors of capitalism and consumer culture. It examines how individual family members are informed by economic conditions and the eventual disintegration of the family unit. Within the Gothic narrative, Dunn expresses anxiety over the advent of an information age that will precipitate ceaseless probing into the human genome accompanied by a capitalist driven economy. The novel exhibit a characteristically postmodern trope by breaking down established binaries in order to throw light on the horrors of capitalist consumerism.

Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* tells the story of the Binewski family circus inhabited by freaks and mutilated children. The story is narrated by Olympia, the Binewski's youngest daughter who is an albino hunchback, as she recalls the early days of traveling in a circus with her family. Following the tradition of Frankensteinian tradition, Al Binewski decides to breed his own freak show by mutilating his four children. Al and his wife Lil involved themselves in genetic mutilation using drugs, insecticides and radiation in order to give birth to freaks. Arturo, the eldest child, was born with flippers instead of arms and legs and functions as the major highlight of the family circus. The Siamese twins, Electra and Iphigenia share a pair of legs while Chick, the youngest child, was born with telekinetic powers. The Gothic horror in the novel functions in two levels- the narrative tale about the freaks and the underlying horror of capitalism and fetishized consumerism.

The infusion of home and marketplace looms large throughout the narrative. The novel opens with the scene of an ideal nuclear family, an archetypal representation of familial bliss, where the Binewski family gathers around as the children listens to their father's tale. However, as the narrative progresses, the stability and unity of the family gradually disintegrates as the line between home and marketplace dissolves. The Binewski family and the carnival society becomes more and more dependent upon the ideology of a religious cult founded by Arty, a cult that requires its initiates to dismember themselves piece by piece until they are left only with head and torso, the social order within the Fabulon becomes increasingly capitalistic.

Many critics have agreed that the evolution of the novel has been coterminous with the evolution of both capitalism itself and a particular domestic space reflecting an affective economy that undoes the division between home and work, and between love and money. The novel chronicles the destruction of the individual subject created by the supposed tension between the home and the market. The setting of the novel is the

travelling carnival owned by the Binewski family. Here, the family lives in a large family van which serves both domestic and work purpose. Thereby, the cultural division between working and non- working space, work place and home are dismantled which has a significant impact on the relationship between family members. The domestic space functions as the workplace in the form of the travelling circus which further creates alienation. A sense of home is absent which renders the family home as ‘unhomely’ and strange. The family unit functions as a large business firm where Al Binewski and then later his son, Arturo represents the capitalist. The children are constructs who function as objects that generate capital. The Binewski family van represents the domestic space and workplace simultaneously; within this enclosed space domestic issues and business matters are taken care of. The idea of home and marketplace are fused together.

The Gothic excess significantly plays out through the characters in the novel, especially the Binewski children. If one is to accept Cohen’s thesis that monsters are “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment- of a time, a feeling and a place” (Cohen 4), the Binewski children must be seen as embodiments of the consequences of American capitalism taken to the extreme, where anything can be turned into products and any way of starting a business venture is acceptable as long as it is financially successful. The children are referred to as objects and commodities. While narrating his father’s early years, Oly says, “He realized that children could be designed” (Dunn 10) and refers to herself as “an industrial accident” (Dunn 103). The heads of the family involve themselves in “experimenting with illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes” (Dunn 7) in order to produce children that would generate maximum capital. For Crystal Lil, the mother, bodily reproduction parallels accumulation of capital. Children are perceived as products that will generate financial income in the future.

Dehumanization also functions through Arturiannism, a cult that followed the family circus and worshipped Arty. Recognizing and embracing his own conception as a commodity, Arty not only loses all inhibitions against treating his twin sisters as marketable objects but also expresses the alienation caused by the separation of workers from the fruits of their labor through the shocking metaphor of incremental bodily dismemberment. The limbless condition to which Arty’s adherents voluntarily commit themselves through incremental surgical amputations metaphorically reflects the Binewski’s relentless accumulation of money. Arty

is dehumanizing his followers by turning them into products of his own narcissistic fantasies and exploiting them financially in order to prove his worth as the highest earner of the family. He, therefore, is a product of his father's grotesque form of entrepreneurship himself. Chick, the youngest child, is taught to pick pockets at an early age and later trained to become a surgeon. After discovering his telekinetic powers, Al exclaimed, "He's the finest thing we've done. He's fantastic" (Dunn 71). Chick is referred to in terms of a commodity that could generate capital for the family business.

The dynamics of consumption occurs in two ways within the narrative. Arty always thinks in terms of power structures and the identification with mythological monsters clearly appeals to him since it places him and his siblings in the role of predators in relation to the 'norms', their prey. Arty brings out the Gothic trope of monstrosity because his monstrosity is connected to violence and not on a psychological level like his siblings. Excessive consumption leads to the disintegration of individual identity and this is represented by the cutting off of limbs by the cult members.

The Binewskis are not only dehumanizing their children by deliberately deforming them, but also by turning them into commodities that they mean to profit from, reduced to objects. Al Binewski represents an explicitly American version of Doctor Frankenstein who does not create monsters for the sake of scientific discovery, but in order to succeed in the tradition of American capitalism and individualism. Oly narrated that "papa thought we should be the mysteries that the townies couldn't see without paying" (Dunn 47). Within the postmodern paradigm, Lil's procreation takes to wild extremes the metaphorical valances of human reproduction as a cyclical yielding of capital. This excess foreshadows the fetishization of consumerism that will become the texture of the Fabulon society.

Geek Love is populated by homebred monsters, not only in the narrow literal sense of Al's homemade freak show, but also in the broader sense that every monstrous act, and every monstrous body that functions as a product or signifier of such acts, has been bred on American soil by cultural values and systems such as entrepreneurship, capitalism and patriarchy. Market forces rule the family. The aim of the family was creating capital. Oly's portrait of the freakish family at the heart of *Geek Love* casts a glaring neon light on the reciprocal relations between market and home in the late twentieth century.

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