TRACING THE UNCANNY FROM GOTHIC TO ZOMBIE FICTION

SALAM TAKBIR CHOUDHURY

KOLKATA, INDIA

ABSTRACT :

My paper aims to trace the "uncanny" from gothic to "zombie fiction" through 'literary historiography' as a method in comparative literature. The objectives of this paper are identifying the uncanny as a thematic approach, tracing the gothic as a residual element and identifying the phase of transaction of uncanny from gothic to science fiction as a dominant element through some selected texts from different locations and times and the reception of these transactions in different ruptures and locations. These are *Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Cell* (2006).

KEYWORDS: uncanny, literary historiography, transaction, reception, location etc.

The Gothic and uncanny trace its origin in the field of literature and culture in the 1760s with the publication of *The Castle* of *Otranto* written by Horace Walpole. In her book *Quest of a Discipline,* Ipshita Chanda refers to Sheldon Pollock's view regarding literary historiography. To Pollock, "literature is historically situated practice"[1]. Here Ipshita Chanda mentions two things that shape a literary culture: "Practice" and "Situation" wherein the literature is produced. Wellek and Warren define these as "Intrinsic" and "Extrinsic". The outside is literalised, and the inside is universalised in literature. Ipshita Chanda includes that "it is about an outside, political, social, cultural reality literalized into the world of

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[1] Ipshita Chanda, "The Comparitist as Teacher:Teaching Indain Literatures Through a Comparative Methodology", in *Quest of Discipline: New Academic Direction for Comparative Literature* ed. Rizio Yohannan Raj (Daryaganj,New delhi : Cambridge University press , 2012) , 16.

the text through people, or more correctly characters in the text"[2]. Gothic and uncanny - a literary culture - was located in the 18th century. Indeed 18th, century thought was dominated by an intellectual movement - Enlightenment. The Enlightenment philosophers and writers privileged reason, human logic and understanding over emotions. The thinkers of the movement believe that knowledge can be achieved only through logic and calculation. According to Ipshita Chanda, literary culture is not only about "reception" but also about "rejection". Now some thinkers and writers react against the rationality of the movement, and they begin to produce literary works that include irrational, emotional responses and feelings which are presented through "uncanny". Uncanny was elaborated by Freud in his 1919 essay *The Uncanny*. To Freud, uncanny is strangely familiar. It creates an ambiguous world surrounded by the feeling of horror and suspense. The movement of uncanny is traced through Raymond William's concepts of 'residual', 'emergent' and 'dominant'. Residual, according to Williams, has been formed in the past, and it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Emergent is new values and practices. Literary period records the changing function of literary conventions and studies their relation to changes in form and theme. Literary periods are units of time in which some trends, thematic and formal are said to be dominant. In the context of Indian literature, *Rama* matter is considered "inherited" or "residual". Likewise, horror and the uncanny elements become inherited in mid18th century fiction. Later, it goes through different ruptures and renovations in different periods. The publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818 is the "transaction" from gothic fiction. This literary rupture creates many possibilities for new renovations and new literary forms and presentations. *The Routledge History of Literature in English* by Carter and McRae refers to *Frankenstein* as a shift from gothic tradition. *Frankenstein* underlines a shift in sensibility and a movement toward the uncanny, the marvellous, the rationally uncontrollable and the psychologically disjunctive. After the industrial revolution, society gradually started to live in a world of the machine. This machine throws a challenge to human capability and physical strength. This conflict between humanity and machine produces Frankenstein, which can only exist in the world of the uncanny. In the novel, the hero, the young doctor Victor Frankenstein wants to create perfect human beings. The creature turns out to be an eight-foot-tall monster: this is the "horror" element of the story. The

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[2] Chanda, " The Comparitist as a Teacher" , 16.

acceptance of a challenge from a machine produces *Frankenstein*. The creature in *Frankenstein* is reanimated in the form of a "Zombie" in post-apocalyptic fiction. The feelings of horror and uncanny now become a dominant element in Zombie fiction in the 21st century. The uncanny shares a common element of fear of the unknown world, which controls and destroys human existence. Now uncanny is also approached as a dominant theme in Stephen King's Zombie fiction, Cell published in 2006 in US. Now, this uncanny shifts into the world of machine intelligence, which has become a threat to the postmodern world. The paper thus aims to show the different transactions and movements of the uncanny in literary historiography.

'SITUATIONS' PRODUCING GOTHIC AS A GENRE

As we have already known that the study of literature can be divided into parts -they are 'practice' and 'situations' where literature is located and originated. Ipshita Chanda defines the relation between "situation" and practice in this way that "practice is conceptualized in a particular way of doing informed by traditions and theories related to this doing – the crafting a text. The historical situation is the time and space that bring the act of literature to fruition -the production of a text''[3].We use the methodology of Comparative Literature to "understand components of the text and their crafting into a whole […]to enable us thus to hear and see the text while it is being produced, and while it is being read."[4] The comparative methodology shows that the structure of feeling produces a text, and the 'the horizon of expectation ' enables the text to be received or rejected, in its own time and later times. The reception of a text is characterized by representation, intertextuality and reproduction of a text. Even rejection is considered as a tool of reception. The gothic as a genre has its own unique 'historical conjecture' and 'situations' wherein the expectation of the horizon of gothic literature is rooted. Gothic as literature is situated in the mid18th century. The transaction and interaction between 'extrinsic' (historical context) and 'intrinsic'(literary communication) produce the Gothic as a genre. Gothic production is the result of interaction between different production of literature and philosophical thoughts in the 18th century. It is

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[3] Ipshita Chanda , "The Comparitist as a Teacher : Teaching Indian Literatures Through a Comparitive Methodology " , *in Quest of Discipline : New Academic Direction for Comparative Literature* ed. Rizio Yohannan Raj(Daryaganj , Delhi : Cambridge University Press , 2012) , 15.

[4] Chanda , " The Comparitist as a Teacher " , 16.

known that 18th-century literature was dominated by reason and a rational mind. Gothic was a response to this rational thought. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment philosopher believed that only the practice of science, reason and rationality could lead the human civilization to progress and development. The thinkers of this period looked for their models to the classical period of Greece and Rome, rejecting what they considered barbarism of the Medieval period. We know that literary historiography includes reception as well as rejection. Many critics and thinkers of the 18th century argued that truth could not be derived from pure thought and reason; instead, it could be approached through senses. In particular gothic art, architecture, and literature took a strong position against the Enlightenment. They returned to the medieval ages' wild beauty, sublimity, and romance for their literary production.

The second major 'extrinsic' influence on the development of Gothic was the sociopolitical situation in North America, and Europe. The late 18th century was a time of revolt and violence. In North America, many British colonies banned together and fought for freedom from colonizers. In July 1776, the delegates of the First Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia declared independence, naming their country the United State of America. This was the first colonial war in the history of the British colony. Later the French Revolution in 1789 shook the foundation of European statehood and introduced a long year of terror and cultural anxiety. Many critics consider this age's revolutionary spirit as the foundation of Gothic literary culture. It breaks all kinds of limitations of logic and reason in literature. This literary culture of Gothic looks beyond the horizon of calculation and rationality. Some Romantic thinkers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and others supported the revolution—freedom of thought and human sensibility, which are portrayed in Gothic literature.

The final extrinsic influence on the gothic is situated with literary communication and interaction at that time period. This influence comes from a philosophical and literary treatise on aesthetics called *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, written by Edmund Burke in 1757. In this treatise, he refers to the philosopher Longinus who separates beauty from sublimity. He argues that a sense of sublimity comes to form the wild, terror, and uncontrollable natural beauty, creating a world of beauty and fear . All these concepts of terror and fear, wild and beautiful, and revolutionary spirit shape the 'structure of thought' in the field of literature and these are literalized in the form of 'uncanny' in the practice of Gothic literature.

THE GOTHS AND GOTHIC

The Goths were members of a Germanic tribe who, in AD 376, crossed the Danube into the Roman Empire. After years of turbulent conflict and uneasy treatises, Alaric led the Goths to march on Rome and in the year 410 they captured the Eternal city, eventually occupying and ruling southern Europe form Italy to Spain. They needed their own cultural history. An ethnic culture of racial purity and migration was developed by the Goths. Goths were the Northern race who had their origins in Scandza, an island not unlike Britain. The geographical atmosphere was totally different from the southern part of Europe. The climate was harsh, and the landscape was rugged. Many critics claimed that Gothic architecture was monstrous and barbaric, wholly ignorant of any accepted ideas of sense and order. The taste of Gothic culture and architecture was not refined, instead, the taste was original, confused and disordered.

Presenting the Goths as non-Roman implied that their civilization was devoid of all refinements. Gothic became the representative of everything crude, ignorant and barbaric. Romans, in contrast with Goths, were civilized. The identity of Goths was established by its own values of *liberty* and *freedom,* which swept away the Roman oppression and cruelty. These attitudes of Goths were revived and regenerated in the mid8[th] century by many philosophers and literary thinkers. These spirits of the wildness of Goths are presented through gothic literature. Horace Walpole is considered the first gothic novelist who reshapes goths' spirit and life force.

THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO: INTRODUCING UNCANNY IN GOTHIC

The Castle of Otranto is considered as the first Gothic novel in literary historiography. The novel is featured terror and horror. To demonstrate how these are presented in the book, we will be relying on Freud's concept of 'uncanny':

> The subject of the uncanny […]is undoubtedly related to what is frightingness to what arouses dread and horror.[5]

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[5] Sigmund Freud , "The Uncanny " ,pdf accessed November 22 , 2019
,http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud.pdf

The novel Castle of Otranto also creates fear and horror in the reader's mind. This sense of fear comes not only from the supernatural but also from the general atmosphere. According to Freud, these atmospheres are created through the elements of 'uncanny'. Freud describes the uncanny through a different process that frightens the reader. In the essay *Uncanny,* he talks about childish fear. He says that an irrational fear appears in the mind of a child from any unexpected experience:

> An uncanny experience occurs[…]when infertile complex which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression.[6]

Freud, here refers to Hoffman's *Sandman* to elaborate the concept of uncanny. In the novel, a child fears from his father's friend because the child associates the man with the character Sandman. This kind of fears also can be founded in Isabella for Manfred. This uncanny atmosphere is also produced through unexpected happenings, death and fear of uncertainty. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred's son Conrad is killed by a helmet during his marriage ceremony:

> Shocked with this lamentable sounds and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily ,but what a sight for father's eyes! behald his child dashed to pieces and almost buried under an enormous helmet…[7]

This incident creates an uncanny atmosphere. It gives shock to the readers as well as the characters in the novel. No one can believe the death of Conrad immediately and everyone fears from uncertainty and insecurity. They even do not know what is going to take place in the palace of Manfred. In the essay, *Uncanny* Freud talks about the fear of 'castration'. This castle also stands for a barren and unproductive place which signifies that this palace does not fit for human beings, and it becomes a familiarly unfamiliar world. The Gothic structure of the castle suggests that the castle overpowers to the human world in the novel. Matilda is assassinated by her own father, Manfred. Manfred stands for the fear of castration. The novel begins with death and ends with death. Death is omnipresent in the novel. Most of the actions are taken place at night. Darkness, underground tunnel and caves dominate the setting of the

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[6] Freud , *The Uncanny*

[7] Horace Walpole , *The Castle of Otranto*(Great Clarendon Street , Oxford , UK: Oxford University Press ,2014) , 18.

novel which creates an atmosphere of uncanny in the novel. The horror and fear are transferred to the reader through the narration of the settings. When Isabella tries to escape from the castle, her panic and fear are transmitted to the reader through the portrayal of the mysterious and gothic structure of the palace:

> Yet where conceal herself? how avoid the pursuit he would infaliably make throughout the castle?

> As these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, she recollected a subterraneous passage which led from the vaults of the castle to the church of st. Nicholas. Could she reach the alter before she was overtaken, she knew even Manfred's violence would not dare to profane the sacredness of the place and she determined, if no other means of deliverance offered, to the holy virgins whose convent was contiguous to the Cathedral[8].

It suggests the mysterious setting of the novel which creates a tense atmosphere in the novel. *The Castle of Otranto* became popular and was accepted as a new and original work in the field of literature. The subtitle of the novel is "A Gothic Story" which opens a new horizon to the readers in 18th-century literature. The Gothic was received as a genre in literature. We can see that the main themes of Gothic architecture are sexual ambiguity and supernatural events. All these techniques and features are accepted by contemporary writers in the 18th century. It has a vast impact on the writers of upcoming periods. It leads the treatment of the uncanny in Gothic fiction to the post-apocalyptic fiction in the postmodern age. Later, *The Castle of Otranto* influences William Beckford, Ann Radcliff, S. T. Coleridge, Mary Shelly, and others.
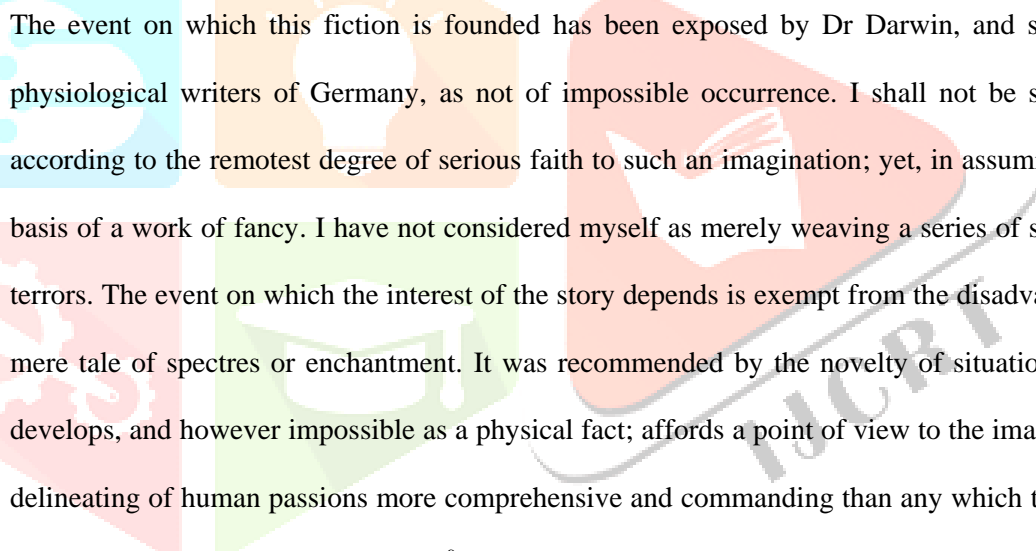
FRANKENSTEIN: A TRANSFORMATION OF UNCANNY FROM GOTHIC TO Sci-Fi

We have marked the 18th century as the age of liberty, freedom and the wild spirit of a human being. But 19th-century society shows an economic and socio-political shift in the society. Society experiences rapid growth of industrialization and economy. For this purpose, the people engage themselves in the competition of inventing different types of machines to increase the production in the industry. There is

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[8] Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* , 26

increasing attention to the scientific approaches, thoughts, ideas, and experiments in society. People become alienated in the society of machines. They start to find an alternative society that is totally dependent on the machine and the production of machines. Gradually society faces a conflict between mechanization and humanity. Benjamin Franklin, Luigi Galvin experimented on electricity. The theory of magnetism by Erasmus Darwin dominates the thought of the people. Darwin in his book *The Laws of Organic Life* talks about the experiments of '*reanimation'*. These mechanical developments shape and impact 'the horizon of expectation' in the field of 19th-century literary practice and culture. This interest of society to scientific innovations and progress as well as the conflict between humanity and machine frames 'the structure of thought 'in the productions of literature which is traced in Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. In the 1818 preface of the novel, we can find the impact of this structure of thought in the society:

> The event on which this fiction is founded has been exposed by Dr Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according to the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy. I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of situations which it develops, and however impossible as a physical fact; affords a point of view to the imagination for delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.[9]

Here, she locates the socio-historical context wherein the novel is situated. Though at that time period, *Frankenstein* was received as a Gothic novel, it does not only deal with gothic elements, rather it goes beyond that. There is no such shocking death as a helmet falls from the ceiling on the head of the protagonist. In this work, we can find that Gothic transforms into science fiction which does not only deal with 'uncanny' through external settings but also deals with 'uncanny' which inhabits in the psyche of the protagonist. This transformation and generic shift are also accepted by modern literary critics and the novel is received and recorded as a precursor of Sci-Fi. *Glossary of Literary Terms* written by M.H

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[9] Mary Shelley , "Preface 1818 " ,*Frankenstein* (Kolkata: Booksway , 2015) 45.

Abrams and G.G Harpham records such reception for this novel: "Mary Shelley's remarkable Frankenstein is often considered a precursor of Science Fiction…"[10] J.A Cuddon in his book *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* remarks:

> A key work -perhaps the key work – in the evolution of science Fiction was Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818). The long-term effect of this novel has been extraordinary. Frankenstein is a completely original work, and innovation.[11]

So, it can be said that Frankenstein can be put in the rupture between gothic and Sci-Fi. J. A Cuddon defines Sci-Fi:

> Science Fictions have a contemporary setting which is somehow influenced by the arrival or invasion of alien beings (alienation in various way is a common theme) or by some invention which profoundly alters normality. They are also concerned with technological change and development, with scientific experiments with social climatic geological and ecological change. Some are concerned with supernatural forces and agencies. They are often fantastic, though they may be rooted in reality. They stretch the imagination.[12]

In the novel, scientist Victor's creature monster is also a result of a scientific experiment. In this novel alienation is one of the main themes. The monster in the modern age stands for the inventions of the machine which gradually goes beyond the control of human beings and becomes a threat to human society. From Freud, we came to know that 'uncanny' always overpowers both the inner and outer existence of human beings. Mary Shelly does not name the creature because the 'uncanny' is always ambiguous and knowingly unknown. The monster here is representing the 'uncanny'—not purely human, not purely the product of a machine. J.A Cuddon also adds:

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[10]M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham *, A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Delhi , India: Ceange Learning , 2013) 356.

[11] J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London , England: Penguin , 1998) , 793.

[12] Cuddon , *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* , 791

The anonymous identikit monster created by Dr. Frankenstein is the product of scientific research, knowledge and skills. The doctor imparts life to a composite being constructed from bits of corpses. The scientific experiment goes disastrously wrong and Frankenstein rejects his creation.[13]

So, Frankenstein's monster is a product of uncanny and sublime which criticizes the status of human nature, society, and the scientific progress of human civilization. The monster represents everything that opposes our conscious understanding of our life and what is in order and what is familiar to society. The monster can be identified with Victor's unconscious possession of pride, ambition and scientific success from his repressed desire. Here 'uncanny' is presented through 'alter ego'. The monster belongs to the state of uncanny and belongs to all that is terrible. Victor takes all the responsibilities of the destruction and death attempted by the monster:

… my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me.[14]

Victor here identifies himself with his creation. Now the question is whether it is a creation or production. It becomes a production and it exists in the world of uncanny and doubt and conflict. Now, how does Shelley show this conflict? At the end of the novel, we can find that though Victor degrades into an inhuman, egocentric and alienated being whose purpose is always self-centered, the monster changes into a more human creature who longs for love, comfort and companionship. This approach raises the question of whether the scientific production is itself a destructive force or the repressed desire itself a threat to the human society. In this novel, we can find that the destructive force or the world of 'uncanny' exists in the human psyche—Victor's desire. It is remarkable in the field of literary historiography because it traces a shift of uncanny from the outer world to the inner world which is the inner psyche of human beings. It establishes a new fact that 'uncanny' does not only exist in gothic palaces and architecture but it also finds its space in the human psyche. This remarkable shift of uncanny opens a new horizon for Sci-Fi for contemporary writers. The monster of a victor which is the uncontrollable and irresponsible desire of the human mind reanimates in the shape of 'Zombie' or 'internet virus' etc. in post-apocalyptic fiction. During the world war, people experience the massive

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[13] Cuddon , 793

[14] Mary Shelley , Frankenstein (Kolkata :Booksway , 2015) 95.

destruction of human civilizations. People were psychologically devastated because it breaks all the faith and communications which shapes humanity. People became alienated and they are waiting for their doomsday—the last day of human civilization. They become unknown to each other in society. There is no vibration or pulse of humanity. They become zombies to each other because of uncertainty and doubt which are internalized in their psyche.

RESHAPING UNCANNY IN SCI FI

After the 2nd world war, human society lacks the value of humanity. The whole world starts to chase power and this power is redefined by the inventions of science technology and the machine. In this context, the battlefield is reshaped into the cyberworld. Most of the powerful countries begin to possess nuclear weapons which becomes a threat to the world. America gradually becomes the superpower in the world through scientific invention and economic growth. America starts to control the world economy. Gradually the location of culture (movies, literature etc.) shifted to America. In the contemporary age, we can find a development of a new culture that is called internet culture. Though the internet culture gives the concept of a global village where communication becomes very easy from different corners of the world, this communication is not taken between two human beings rather it is between different artificial mediums and electronic machines. Gradually people lose the urge and intensity of communication with each other. And to the lack of communication people become totally dependent to the machine and internet culture. As a result, it pushes uncertainty and doubt regarding the expression of human feelings and consciousness which build human value and civilization. As a result, human civilization is going towards its destruction. In this rupture, we can find that America is presented as a savior to the human world through different cultural productions. Most of the science fiction and movies in Hollywood show that a superman who is representative of American power and scientific knowledge appears and takes the responsibility to save the world. This is a remarkable shift of cultural location and this shift of location is accepted worldwide. Even it is found in the field of literature.

At the present time, human society itself becomes a state of uncanny because in this society people are surviving physically without humanity. They are addicted to machines and internet culture and the cyberworld. They are attacked with viruses (hatred in the name of nation, race, region, language, cultural

practice etc.)from this world. They are trying to create an alternative world of this real physical human society. As a result, they become an alien in their own society and to their own people. They become objects of doubt and threats to each other. There are feelings of uncertainty in the present world and this world also itself becomes a world of uncanny where people are roaming like an alien. They are human beings without any sense of human value and humanity. They are familiarly unfamiliar creatures who are presented as zombies in literary productions and cultures whether it is in movies or fiction. The Zombies are a type of creatures who are shaped in human form without any sense of humanity.

Stephen King, a well-known writer for his science fiction, in his novel *Cell* presents a world of uncertainty and uncanny where Victor's monster is reanimated in a cell phone in a form of a virus. The protagonist of the novel struggles for his own existence and to save his son Johnny and wife Sharon. The novel is located in America, Boston where the protagonist Clay has just signed a project. Boston has already been attacked by a virus—The Pulse—which comes from a cell phone:

> The event that came to be known as The Pulse began at 3.30 p.m., eastern standard time, on the afternoon of October 1. The term was a misnomer, of course, but within ten hours of the event, most of the scientists capable of pointing this out were either dead or insane.[15]

The city of Boston is attacked by a virus which spreads from the cell phone. The protagonist Clayton Riddle and his friends McCourt and Maxwell try to escape the city. They cannot totally understand what is happening in the city. The people who are attacked by the virus are called phoners and the people who are not attacked by the virus are called normies. The phoners are transformed into Zombie-like creatures:

> Salem Street was full of crazy people. Clay's first assessment was that there might be a thousand or more. Then the observer part of him took over—the coldhearted artist's eye—and he realized that was a wild overestimate, prompted by surprise at seeing anyone at all on what he had expected would be an empty street, and shock at realizing they were all them. There was no mistaking at the vacant faces, the eyes that seemed to look beyond everything, the dirty, bloody, dishevelled clothing (in several cases no clothing at all), the occasional cawing cry or jerky gesture. There was the man dressed only in tightly-whity undershorts and a polo shirt who seemed to be saluting

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[15] Stephen King, *Cell* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2007) 03.

repeatedly; the heavyset woman whose lower lip was split and hung in two beefy flaps, revealing all of her lower teeth […] a boy—dear God, a boy Johnny's age—who walked with absolutely no sign of pain although one arm was flap […]a pretty young woman in a short skirt and a shell top who appeared to be eating the red stomach of a crow. Some moaned, some made vocal noises that might once have been words, and all were moving east […]Christ, it's Zombie heaven.[16]

This description shows a picture of Boston city where people are automated and have no feelings of pain. It seems that they have already been programmed and their functions are mechanized. According to Freud, the world of uncanny is created by leaving the reader in uncertain about whether the creatures described in fiction are automated or human beings. In the portrayal of Boston, we can also find that the zombie-like creatures are moving towards the east and they look like automation. They are physically damaged but they have no suffering. They are transformed into zombies with cell phone virus attacks and the world itself transforms into the world of uncanny. In the novel, Clay's fear of losing his own son stands for the fear of losing a new generation and of the destruction of human civilization. The fear is whether the human civilization is going to be destroyed or not. The novel puts the readers in the world of uncanny with a lot of doubts regarding humanity, human civilization, the purpose of living, communications and human relations with each other etc.

Thus, this paper tries to trace the development and shifting of the uncanny through ages and locations. This mood of change creates various possibilities for the comparatists. It shows the mood of society and literary reception in different time periods. It also traces the changes and portrayal of human value in society in literary productions. In the present time, the uncanny becomes a dominant element in Sci-Fi like 'rama' matter in the historiography in Indian Literature. This paper shows a possibility of further changing and shifting in this field of Sci-Fi and the element of uncanny. Uncanny becomes a discursive element in this Literary historiography of Sci-Fi.

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[16] King, *Cell* , 130

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