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THE GOTHIC-HER STORY: EXPLICATING THE SILENT GROTESQUE FEMALE IN THE MAGICAL SPACE OF MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD IN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the portrayal of the silent grotesque female in the magical space of the mythological world, focusing on the character of Kadambini in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Living and the Dead* (1991). The study aims to investigate the impact of the mythological world on the life of the protagonist and the ways that enable her to understand the power of mythological implications and their impact on the lives of people. Through her experiences, Kadambini realizes the pervasiveness of internalized horrific patterns due to stereotypical mythological implications and the importance of the Gothic her-story. By situating the Gothic-her story in the magical space of the mythological world, this research exposes the constraints that the protagonist in *The Living and the Dead* faces due to the inherent societal rules and the significance of highlighting the voice of the silent grotesque female as its embodiment. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship to the Gothic her-story and its relationship to the magical world genre. Kadambini's residual in dual worlds, human and ghost, brings her the understanding that mythological implications are more powerful due to the internalized horrific patterns in the lives of the people. As a result, Kadambini has to die to prove that she was misperceived as a ghost while being alive. The research proves that the abstract version of Gothic horror with a blending of magical realism brings forth the stereotypical belief system

where reality appears as blurred and fizzy. Kadambini had to follow the inclusive traditional patterns instead of a realistic stance. The study illuminates the pervasive nature of magical space in the form of societal norms with the influence of Gothic horror and the potential of literature to challenge them.

The study focuses on the imaginative life rooted in mythology and its influence on human lives based on reality. Mythological implications weave the path for developing certain beliefs and hence, decide the course of action according to the inherent socio-cultural beliefs of the society. Following the post-colonial dilemma, Gothic impact is also observed, impacting the lives of mythologically colonized subjects and transforming them into terrorized beings. Alison Rudd elaborates on the Gothic text, “It is this ambivalence and tension between the innocent victim and survivor and the guilty oppressor that enables the Gothic to be a productive mode of writing in a postcolonial context” (2019, 72). The existing tension between the powerful and the powerless brings forth the implications of the postcolonial Gothic. Another major repercussion of the Gothic is that it “has always been obsessed with the past, while actually being really concerned with issues of the present” (Rudd 2019, 72) makes it applicable to postcolonial text such as *The Living and the Dead*. The research also investigates the role of magic realism, as defined by Bill Ashcroft & others, and its influence on real life situations as used in Rabindranath Tagore’s selected short story *The Living and the Dead*.

Magic realism takes a discernible stance where magical and mythological instances represent reality as the term is more recently used “in a less specific way to refer to the inclusion of any mythical or legendary material from local written or oral cultural traditions in contemporary narrative” (Bill Ashcroft 1998, 133). All narratives that manifest the cultural patterns of society carry the essence of magic realism. Following the tradition of magic realism, all types of mythical or legendary material are considered as reality. The present study focuses on analyzing the traditional patterns in Rabindranath Tagore’s short story *The Living and the Dead*. It also scrutinizes the formation of the Gothic-her story by focusing on the silent grotesque figure of Kadambini. The magical space of the mythological world not only influences the course of action of her life however, it also determines the life and death time span for her. In the present study, the reality appears ambiguous and is interpreted for the abstract yet entrenched stereotypical norms and traditions. It represents an approach to magical realism where culture determines its hegemonic role and the reality transforms into magic or develops a mythological scenario resulting in a terrorized effect as created by Gothic implications. The existing beliefs and stereotypical societal standards transform not only the life of a woman, Kadambini, rather she has to meet death to prove her stance of being alive. The study represents the reality as forged and the entrenched traditional beliefs appear as true.

Tagore’s description of Kadambini’s life events elaborates on the intermingling of mythological beliefs in real life events to an extent that they lay bare the inherent and implicit horror in the mind of the characters. The critical phase of Kadambini’s life commences when suddenly, her heartbeat stops for no reason and she is considered dead by the people around her (Radice 1991, 47).

Kadambini is perceived as dead and her relatives arrange for her last rituals where she comes back to life. The internalized horror due to mythological beliefs becomes prominent when Kadambini comes back to life and sighs (Radice 1991, 48). The boys arranging for her incarnation flee away, considering her a ghost (Radice 1991, 48). At this phase of her life, Kadambini's life changes from living to a dead person while being alive. Her identity altogether gets changed as she is perceived as a ghost by others while, for herself, she lives in the dual worlds, of the living and the dead. The consideration, of a human as a ghost, represents Gothic horror specifying the blending of imagination and improbability with supernatural elements (Hogge 2019, 1). The stereotypical mythological assignment of ghostly traits to a living being, transforms the situation and Kadambini has to start an abandoned life just like a ghost. Later, Kadambini's escape makes the situation more complicated and she has to stay for the rest of her life with a ghost-identity. Kadambini had not died rather her life functions had been suspended (Radice 1991, 49) for some time and later they revived. After her return to life, she could not return home for being rejected and excluded by society due to her ghost-identity. Her selection of a friend's home, as her abode, in a far-off village leads the rest of her life towards seclusion. Her native village residents perceived her as dead and according to the witnesses, her cremation rituals were performed. On the other hand, her friend was not aware of the situation and Kadambini had to live there in fear of being disclosed as dead. At this phase, she starts living her life in the dual worlds. She was alive, however; she was carrying a ghost identity for the rest of the world.

Kadambini's new phase of life, at her friend's home, was without any wish or desire; hence, she felt dead. She never found an urge to return to her home or to be part of the relations again that she has left behind. Her new ghost-identity also introduces evil as an integral part of her personality. She realizes the fact that she will not be acceptable to the living ones and she affirms the situation to herself, "I am not alive - they won't take me back. It would be a curse on them. I am exiled from the land of the living - I am my own ghost" (Radice 1991, 50). Kadambini is very well aware of the curse attached to her personality and of the rejection from society. Her transformation to a grotesque character in Gothic-her story begins and culminates when she has to embrace death to prove her alive. Kadambini portrays all the three inherent features of the Gothic postcolonial literature: "resistance, struggle and anxiety" (Rudd 2019, 71) against the societal "structures of power" (Rudd 2019, 71) where traditional patterns appear more important than the life of a person. Kadambini's emotions and feelings that are an integral part of the living world become dead and she does not find in herself any signs of life. She also realizes the curse attached to her personality for being a ghost. Her fear of societal rejection transforms her into a grotesque character that may do anything to regain her previous position in society. Her realization of the existing difference in her life style also imparts her awareness of no more being a part of the world of living beings and was also perceived as a carrier of evil, a ghost. For Kadambini her dual worlds of life and death, purity and evil, are mingled and as Faris elaborates, "Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (1995, 5-6). Magic realism empowers the texts to portray the role of dual worlds and systems

that is otherwise difficult to follow. In *The Living and the Dead*, the dual worlds of life and death combine and Kadambini resides in both and shows her inability to comprehend both simultaneously. The role of magic realism with the amalgamation of Gothic horror develops the character of Kadambini as a grotesque female fighting for her identity of being alive. For Kadambini, her worlds of life and after-death are intermingled and she is unable to surpass the boundaries of the physical (of living beings) and metaphysical (world of ghosts) worlds. Gothic postcolonial element makes the situations “uncanny and abject” (Rudd 2019, 72) where Kadambini is unable to determine her actual identity, of the living or the dead.

The horrific impact of Gothic tradition makes fear appear as an essential element of Kadambini’s character. When she wakes up after her death-sleep and she feels her ghost-identity, her very first feelings are of liberty and freedom. She feels that “all ties and conventions seemed to snap. It was if she had weird power, boundless liberty – to go where she liked, do what she liked; and with the onset of this feeling she dashed out of the hut like a madwoman, like a gust of wind” (Radice 1991, 50). Kadambini starts feeling the freedom that is a part of the world of ghosts where she did not have to follow the traditional patterns. The ecstatic feeling of liberty overpowers her rational self and she rushes out like a mad woman, like the wind that gives her the power of being a part of the transcendental world of ghosts. However, her feelings, later on, get changed and Gothic horror, with the awareness of mythological beliefs, scares her. It is not only Kadambini who feels fear rather her appearance, as described, could scare anyone: “Wandering around at night like a madwoman, with her mud-smeared clothes and weird demeanour, Kadambini would have terrified anyone, and boys would probably have run away and thrown pebbles at her from a distance” (Radice 1991, 50). Not only does her image gets transformed rather her weird appearance brings in Gothic horror that is also mythologically determined. The traditional impact of Kadambini’s personality presents her as a grotesque female figure that is no more a part of the rational world. She, being part of a transcendental world, loses her right of being a part of the world of living beings. The realization of being a part of Gothic-her story makes Kadambini suspicious of her future life and destination. Her first interaction with a stranger opens up a new world for her. Previously, she has been a part of the world of living beings however, now a passerby questions her about her abode. Kadambini feels herself “totally at a loss. That she was out in the world, that she looked well-born, that a passer-by was asking her questions – all this was beyond her grasp” (Radice 1991, 51). She appears unable to cope with the new situation and she feels like a stranger in a well-versed world. It was like stepping into an unknown world and “the unknown can be frightening because it often represents change” (Howarth 2014, 6). The change appeared frightening for Kadambini as it was stepping into an unknown transcendental world. Kadambini’s transformation or shift from world of the living to the dead ones makes her feel a misfit in the world of living beings. She cannot disconnect herself from this world to be a part of the transcendental world. She feels herself nowhere and that introduces Kadambini with strange feelings as also described by Homi K. Bhabha, “The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself [. . .] taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’ ” (9). The moment, a person feels himself homeless

introduces him with the terror that may appear in consequence. Fear of being homeless keeps Kadambini in a perpetual state of terror till the climax of the story.

The magical space of the mythological world combined with the Gothic horror induces another type of fear in Kadambini. Her decision to live with her childhood friend, Yogmaya, results in constant fear of her identity revelation. At this phase, Kadambini resides in the dual world of the living and the dead. For the external world, she maintains a ghost-identity while Yogmaya and her family take her as a living being. Furthermore, she also maintains a ghost-identity for herself. Kadambini is unable to maintain an intimate level with her childhood friend due to the reason “death stood between them” (Radice 1991, 52). She felt herself away from the world of living beings as a part of a transcendental world. Tagore elaborates on the feelings of Kadambini, “if one doubts or is conscious of oneself, one cannot unite with another” (Radice 1991, 52). Kadambini suspects herself due to the strong traditional beliefs that she herself could not deny despite being aware of the reality. Her state of mind reflects “a mental ‘intending’ of a ‘deep space’ of ‘sublime terror’ whereby archaic spaces or looming shadows drew forth the most primordial and feared drives in what were increasingly thought of as the depths in Western psyches” (Hogge 2019, 5). All that was related to Gothic horror appear like shadows and it terrorized the situation and in Kadambini’s case, fear became a constant part of her personality. The magical world of mythology appears as stronger than reality due to its deep cultural roots. She keeps reminding herself of the reality that Yogmaya and her husband are a part of the world of living beings “with their loves and feelings and duties, and I am an empty shadow. They are in the land of the living, whereas I belong to Eternity” (Radice 1991, 52). Kadambini felt devoid of emotions, and she had no obligations of this world being a ghostly figure, part of the eternal world.

The fear of Kadambini’s inner self, being revealed as a ghost instead of human, remains a constant part of her being. In the story, Kadambini’s fear is compared with the fear of ghosts just like people are “frightened of what they cannot see” (Radice 1991, 52). She was afraid of her internal hidden being that could be a ghost identity and also of the reaction of people related to that identity. During her stay with her friend, Kadambini perceives others, around her, as humans and she was reduced to a shadow (Radice 1991, 53). Ironically, she was pushed to the margins of the dual worlds of the living and the dead. In a similar scenario of magic realism, the boundaries of “mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female” (Faris 1995, 6), are “erased, transgressed and blurred, brought together” (Faris 1995, 6) and refashioned in the story. The boundaries of dual worlds, of life and death, are blurred for Kadambini and she appears indecisive in determining her true identity.

Kadambini’s struggle to hide her actual story, from her close friend, carries the fear of stereotypical prevailing Gothic-horror that could present her as a threat to others’ happiness (Radice 1991, 53). The horror explicates the Gothic-her of the grotesque figure of Kadambini who is scared of herself. Furthermore, Tagore describes the fear of Kadambini, “she could not run away from herself.

Those who are frightened of ghosts look backward in terror – they are frightened of what they cannot see. But Kadambini was terrified of her inner self – nothing outside frightened her” (Radice 1991, 52). She has internalized the fear of being a ghost and she is unable to come out of it. Her state describes the psychological functioning “of primal impulses and fears, repressed into the unconscious, that are called up by seemingly strange, unfamiliar, ‘other’ beings (such as ghosts or what appear to be monsters); these actually resurrect” and influence the character’s state of mind (Hogge 2019, 5). For Kadambini, the mythological stance in her society was suppressed in her unconscious however; her present situation appears as a cause of the revival of her suppressed fears. Kadambini lives with her friend until the news of her death reaches her, too. However, the internalization of gothic horror and mythological implications stop Kadambini from disclosing the fact of being alive.

The ghost-identity also gives Kadambini a sublime effect, disconnecting her from the world of the living and connecting her with the transcendental world. The absence of Kadambini’s actual being and the fact that she was perceived as a ghost terrified her. Furthermore, absence also appears significant due to the reason that the concept of “sublime is associated with absence” (Smith 2007, 11). Absent figures appear a part of the transcendental world hence, they appear sublime and beyond the reach of this concrete world. The physical absence of the character, leads sublimity to “a negative experience because it reinforces feelings of transience (our passing) and insignificance” (Smith 2007, 11-12). Kadambini’s supposed death transforms her into a grotesque female character and she has to follow the mythological assigned roles of a transcendental world. She herself appears as convinced with her death and she does not try to convince her friend’s family of her being alive.

The revelation of Kadambini’s death opens the way to return to her home and the reunion with her nephew revives the desire in her heart to be alive. All her efforts to convince the family members appear futile. In *The Living and the Dead*, magical realism functions as ideologically “less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity” (Faris 1995, 3). The imposed death of Kadambini reflects the eccentric world of mythology where her ghost identity is determined as a curse for others and she appears as a grotesque figure in the story. Faris perceives that “in magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation” (1995, 3). The cultural disruption introduces havoc in Kadambini’s life and she understands the implications associated with her ghost identity. She reiterates the fact to herself, “ ‘I no longer belong to the world of living people. I am fearsome, a bringer of evil; I am my own ghost’. As this realization struck, all ties and conventions seemed to snap” (Radice 1991, 50). Kadambini’s connection with the conventional world seemed to get dissolved with her being the embodiment of Gothic horror. The formation of Gothic-her story brings forth the grotesque female character that appears to be a part of the magical realistic conventional beliefs.

The Gothic-her story represents the grotesque figure of a woman who is bound to follow the magical and mythological stereotypical patterns of her society. The reaction of her family members follows the existing trends of the society and confirms her ghost-identity. Fairs rightly comments that “the widespread appeal of magical realist fiction today responds not only to its innovative energy but also its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth and twentieth-century realism” (Faris 1995, 2). Kadambini’s character revives the traditional beliefs of the era where ghost identity appears as a harbinger of a curse and she cannot be accepted in the world of the living ones at any cost. Her ghostly existence presents a subversive approach to life and like all magical realist texts, the selected text also presents its in-betweenness and all-at-oneness that “encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures” (Faris 1995, 18). The prevailing cultural structures appear too strong in the development of Gothic-her story that they negate the existing reality and, at a phase, during her stay at her friend’s home, Kadambini also gets convinced that she is a ghost, a dead person. She feels others as “people of the world, with their loves and feelings and duties” (Radice 1991, 52), while on the other hand, Kadambini convinces herself to be “an empty shadow. They are in the land of the living, whereas I belong to Eternity” (Radice 1991, 52). Kadambini feels like an empty shadow and disconnected from this world. She is convinced of her eternal and transcendental presence hence, she cannot convince others of her being alive. She, unconsciously, internalizes the horror of being dead and follows the societal norms that may be applied in situations like the one she is facing.

Kadambini also reflects the submissive attitude of a woman in a patriarchal society where women are terrorized to such an extent that they make it a part of their life. Tagore portrays two women as representatives of the prevailing social system where Kadambini appears as impenetrable and her friend becomes resentful to know the reality behind her false representation. Tagore also highlights the nature of women that they cannot “bear mystery, for this reason: that poetry, heroism or learning can thrive on uncertainty but household arts cannot. Therefore women thrust aside what they don’t understand, maintaining no connection with it, or else they replace it with something they themselves have made – something more useful” (Radice 1991, 52). The household arts are formed by the prevailing social system and members of society willingly follow them. Furthermore, mythological implications also appear as a part of the social system and are bound to be followed. When Kadambini’s friend, Yogmaya, is unable to sort out the real Gothic-her character of Kadambini she shows her resentment. She appears unconvinced of Kadambini’s true identity and she waits for the truth to come out. Kadambini’s declaration, “I am your Kadambini, but I am no longer alive. I am dead” (Radice 1991, 55) introduces Yogmaya with the terror associated with the world of the dead. Kadambini also internalizes the world of the dead to such an extent that she does not find out a way to come out of the other world. Kadambini still knows that she needs a place to live although she is a part of the transcendental world. The boundaries of dual worlds, the living and the dead, get blurred for her and she seems unable to find out her way through the fizzy confines. Faris rightly comments on the nature of magical realist texts “to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds –

in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism” (Faris 1995, 6). The commonality of transformation and dissolution influences Kadambini’s life and reflects her inability to find out a way to live the life of living people. Kadambini’s residual in the dual worlds is mentioned as “binaristic, symbiotic, and fragmented depictions” (Hanger 2001, 11) where female figures are sometimes in a “toxic relationship to death” (Hanger 2001, 11).

Kadambini’s return to her home is based on the desire to see the little boy again, whatever are the results. The words of the boy, “*Kākimā*, give me some water” (Radice 1991, 56) make Kadambini alive again and she feels herself part of the world of the living ones. She admits that she had died however; later, the revelation of her being alive implores her to convince others, too, of her living identity. The comparison of her dual lives makes her understand the reality: “when she had been in her friend’s house she had felt dead, felt that the person whom her friend had known had died. But now that she was in her nephew’s room, she realized that his *Kākimā* had never died at all” (Radice 1991, 57). The sentimental attachment to the little boy, his love and the sense of belongingness make Kadambini realize her living identity that previously she has subsided. The sentiments of a mother-child relationship manifest the psychological domain however; later, the overpowering concerns represent “the shift in emphasis in magical realism from psychological to social and political concerns” (Faris 1995, 1-2). In the case of Kadambini, socio-political concerns overwhelm the emotional and realistic state of affairs that introduce the drastic culmination of the Gothic her-story by highlighting the grotesque female figure. The psychological and emotional state of Kadambini and her relatives is overpowered by the belief that her ghostly appearance might be the result of improper carnation rituals. The man of Kadambini’s house tries to settle down the matter by promising, “please go away – we’ll perform your proper funerary rites” (Radice 1991, 57). The forced expulsion from society seems unbearable to Kadambini and her internal fear, of being rejected by her near ones, results in her hysteric reaction. She is forcefully expelled from her own world of living ones and “to be thus “outcast” is to suffer an anxiety often nauseating in its intensity” (Hurley 1996, 4). The intensity level of anxiety appears uncontrollable in Kadambini and her desire to be considered alive brings her to the state of hurting herself. Her strife to be considered alive results in her hysteric screams and act, “‘I did not die! Can’t you see: I am *alive*’. She seized the bell-metal bowl that had been dropped on the ground and dashed it against her brow: blood gushed out from the impact. ‘See here, I am alive!’ ” (Radice 1991, 57). Her endeavors to convince society of her being alive results in an injury, just to show herself bleeding like a human. Kadambini’s position of as an outcast from the society and “obsessive staging and restaging of the spectacle of abhumanness as a paralysis, a species of trauma, but one must also note the variety and sheer exuberance of the spectacle, as the human body collapses and is reshaped across an astonishing range of morphic possibilities” (Hurley 1996, 4). The concept of abhumanness carries the implications of being away from the world of humans and devoid of all those features that may be a part of their world. Consideration of the state of abhumanness disconnects the one not only from one’s society however; it may also result in reshaping the body into Gothic

body structure with several possibilities. The traumatic state of Kadambini does not result in any supernatural shaping of her body however; she tortures her body to show herself bleeding as a proof of being alive. Her hysteric condition appears as a quest for life and to show her belongingness to the world of living. Her residual in the dual worlds reflects the fragmentation of her personality and her efforts focus on the fusion of her Self where she would be able to reside in one world. However, her final effort to prove that she is alive results in her actual death. Kadambini had to jump into the water tank to prove that she was alive. The rules of society and the mythological implications appear as true to life and the reality looks unreal. The real Gothic horror brings the climax of the story when the wish for living-identity brings Kadambini close to an end where she dies to be admitted as a living being. Her last act to show her actual death and to falsify the beliefs of the people around her testifies to the Gothic-her story of the grotesque female figure in a space of magic realism. The transformation of Kadambini's character from world of the living to the dead portrays Gothic as it has been "theorized as an instrumental genre, reemerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises" (Hurley 1996, 5). Tagore highlights the cultural stress in the form of inherent mythological trends of the society that surface the anxieties in Kadambini's character that reduces to a shadow losing her living identity. Her transformation and crises present the formation of Gothic-her story to highlight the gender based grotesque treatment of society.

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