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Portrayal of the Weird Domain of David Mitchell's Slade House

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Abstract: David Mitchell's Slade House (2015) transcends the tropes of Gothic fiction. The novel is structured as tales of paranormal occurrences experienced by five individual characters at the titular mansion. The events recur every nine years between 1979 and 2015. Mitchell uses gothic tropes like the haunted house, apparitions, occult rituals, hallucinations, mental degradation, and nightmarish dream sequences. Yet, on a deeper level Slade House is a narrative tackling the domain of the 'Weird' where human capacity to comprehend reality is questioned. Mark Fisher has called the Weird as something which generates a sensation of 'wrongness' in us. The wrongness or the certainty that the things we perceive should not exist in our plain of reality generates the experience of the Weird. This sense of wrongness, Fisher argues, is rooted in our inadequacy to comprehend all of reality. Weird fiction has its roots in the works of H. P. Lovecraft. His works dealt with articulating existential dread as an outcome of realizing our absolute insignificance in an indifferent cosmos. Slade House grapples with the problem of articulating this sense of the Weird. For this purpose it employs stylistic and thematic subversions of traditional Gothic and supernatural elements. This paper will examine how David Mitchell's Slade House goes beyond the Gothic and evolves into a work of weird fiction. The paper will also probe into the novel's portrayal of the inexplicable and the monstrous lurking in the realm of the Weird.

Keywords: Gothic fiction, weird fiction, the Weird, supernatural horror, the Other.

تصوير المجال الغريب لمنزل ديفيد ميتشل سليد

شاجو أوسف نالكارا

أستاذ مشارك في الأدب الإنجليزي، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية دراسات اللغة، الجامعة العربية المفتوحة، الرياض، المملكة العربية السعودية

(قدم للنشر في 1442/2/10هـ، وقبل للنشر في 7/ 1442/5هـ)

ملخص البحث: تتجاوز رواية منزل سليد - (سليد هاوس) للروائي ديفيد ميتشيل المجازات المعروفة في أدب الخيال القوطي؛ فهيكل الرواية مؤلَّف من عدد من القصص أو الحكايات، عن ظواهر خارقة للطبيعة عاشها خمسة أشخاص فرادى في قصر عتيق يحمل اسم صاحبه. استعمل ميتشيل في بناء روايته العديد من الرموز والاستعارات المجازية القوطية، مثل: التدهور العقلي، والمنزل المسكون، والطقوس الشعائرية الغامضة، والهذيان والهلوسات، والمشاهد التسلسلية لكوابيس ليلية.

فبدت الرواية سردًا يستعين بانقلابات على مستوى الأساليب والمواضيع، التي كانت عرفًا سائدًا في الأدب القوطي التقليدي، وعلى عناصره الخارقة للطبيعة، ويتطرق إلى تناول مفهوم (الغرابة)، عندما يتم التشكيك في قدرات العقل البشري على فهم الواقع، وتصبح تلك القدرات محطًا للتساؤل.

تحاول هذه الدراسة الإجابة عن سؤال كيف تمكن الروائي ميتشيل، في روايته منزل سليد - (سليد هاوس) من تخطّي حواجز القوطية؟ وتحاول - أيضًا - الوقوف على الكيفية التي جعلت صور ومفردات الرواية قادرة على ما ليس بالإمكان تفسيره، وكيفية تعامل أحداثها مع الوحشية القاطنة في عالم الغرابة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: خيال قوطي، خيال الغرابة، الغرابة، رعب الخوارق، سيلد هاوس.

Introduction

David Mitchell (1969-) is a British author who is widely acknowledged as a master craftsman of fiction. He has authored eight novels: Ghostwritten (1999), number9dream (2001), Cloud Atlas (2004), Black Swan Green (2006), The Thousand Autumn's of Jacob de Zoet (2010), The Bone Clocks (2014), Slade House (2015), and Utopia Avenue (2020). His works display a vast range in theme and scope and largely deal with the interconnected lives of humans. Even while being celebrated as a writer of literary fiction, with two of his works being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, he experimented with narrative techniques. He treaded into the realm of genre fiction through his work The Bone Clocks where he used the tropes of fantasy fiction. The work won him the World Fantasy Award in 2015. In his 2015 work Slade House Mitchell turned again to the conventions of genre fiction; this time his focus was on horror fiction. Mitchell's Slade House (2015) developed as a companion work to his 2014 novel The Bone Clocks (Thomas, 2015). While The Bone Clocks was an expansive novel following a large set of characters through jumps in time and space, Slade House is grounded in a single setting, the titular mansion. It shares thematic content with Mitchell's 2014 novel, yet functions as a novel exploring the realms of horror fiction. But the brand of horror pervading the pages of Slade House evades easy definition. The novel boasts of a Gothic temperament with the portrayal of a 'haunted' house, ghostly revenants, abductions, occult rituals, gristly deaths, and nightmarish dream sequences. Yet Mitchell's novel goes beyond the mere categorization of Gothic or horror fiction by grappling with the portrayal of the unknowable and the incomprehensible. The dread radiating out of Slade House is not predominantly of the supernatural but that of a sense of wrongness which can only be clearly defined by placing it in the domain of the Weird. According to Mark Fisher, "the weird is a particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here" (2016, p. 15). The foremost practitioner of the Weird was H.P. Lovecraft, whose stories explored existential questions pertaining to a cosmos which proved indifferent to the plight of mankind (Moreland, 2018, p. 19). Weird fiction writers including Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, Robert E. Howard, China Mieville, Jeff VanderMeer, and Thomas Ligotti transcended Gothic conventions by exploring further the idea of reality hiding incomprehensible truths which when confronted generated the experience of the Weird (Carroll, 2015). This sense of the incomprehensible encroaching into normal reality is given emphasis in Slade House even while it masquerades as a haunted house Gothic tale.

The novel follows the lives of characters whose perspective of reality is altered by their experiences at Slade House, a sprawling mansion. The events span five episodes between 1979 and 2015, at the recurring interval of nine years. The first four episodes follow the fate of guests who are lured to the titular mansion in order to be consumed or annihilated by the immortal occupants, the twins, Jonah and Norah Grayer. The victims include a thirteen year old boy Nathan Bishop, in 1979; police inspector Gordon Edmonds, in 1988; teenager Sally Timms, in 1997; and Sally's sister Freya, a journalist, in 2006. These victims are special for their psychic abilities and are categorized as 'Engifted' people who have a stock of 'psychovoltage' which the twins need to consume for their immortal existence (Mitchell, 2015, pp. 173-174). A ritual of luring a compliant guest to an aperture in the form of a black iron door to Slade House is initiated every nine years. Once the guests cross the aperture they enter a suitably scripted dream sequence, called the 'orison', involving them experiencing horrifying events at the House. This dream sequence is constructed using the subconscious memories of the victims. Nathan Bishop's orison consists of his mother, Rita, a debt ridden, aspiring musician being invited for a musical soiree at Slade House. Gordon Edmonds is lured by an orison of sexual fantasies he harbors as a divorced man. Sally Timms' orison showcases her insecurities as an obese teenager craving a romantic relationship. While Freya's orison finds her investigating the disappearance of her sister Sally. This ritual also requires the victims to consume food inside the orison, food which has been laced by a drug called 'banjax'. This is the penultimate trap which when secured seals the fate of the guest whose soul will be extracted and consumed by the twins. The final episode, set in 2015, involves a showdown between the twins and a powerful immortal arriving in the guise of an Engifted guest Dr. Iris Marinus-Fenby (Garner, 2015).

It could be argued that Slade House is detailing classic tropes of vampirism associated with Gothic fiction. On numerous occasions the novel categorizes the twins as "soul vampires" who feed on their unsuspecting guests (Mitchell, 2015, p. 176). The final episode of the novel can also be read as a kind of exorcism where the evil entities are vanquished. But Mitchell's novel turns such Gothic tropes on their head by radically subverting them. In Slade House, the supernatural or the ghostly are minimal. Jonah and Norah Grayer have a modus operandi which transcends the vampirism of a Gothic tale. The 'haunted' mansion in question turns out to be an elaborate vision, a kind of simulation of Gothic tropes. Nightmarish sequences involving monstrous entities have ontological roots beyond the realm of the supernatural. Above all, Slade House foregrounds the utter helplessness in comprehending a reality which is not what it seems to be. The novel asks existential questions regarding good and evil, rationality, and the afterlife. It answers those questions by refuting clichéd Gothic conventions

and bringing into the limelight the limits of human capacity to comprehend all of life's experiences. This paper will argue that Mitchell's Slade House utilizes several tropes of Gothic fiction yet they are used largely to be subverted in the light of ideas derived from Weird fiction. The paper will rigorously examine the novel in light of studies being conducted on Weird fiction by theorists including Mark Fisher. Current practitioners of the Weird including China Mieville and Jeff VanderMeer have also attempted to conceptualize the Weird through their critical writing; these would also be utilized to clarify the scope and philosophical ideals of Weird fiction. To strengthen this hypothesis being proposed by this reading of Slade House, an examination of the facets of Gothic fiction utilized in the novel proves necessary. Such an examination will generate facts concerning Gothic fiction which will facilitate a contrast with Weird fiction, and will ultimately help situate the novel in the domain of the Weird. Gothic fiction and weird fiction are sub-genres of horror fiction which engage with the myriad forms of the supernatural. But the core focus of the Gothic and the Weird is different. As Jonathan Newell would argue:

Where the gothic primarily generates what Ann Radcliffe calls 'the gloomy and sublime kind of terror', accomplished through 'a union of grandeur and obscurity' – a giddy Kantian thrill in which the human subject's power is glorified - the weird revels in less rarefied forms of horror, derived not from the subject-affirming power of sublime fear but from the subject-dissolving power of disgust. While there are certainly gothic works that turn the stomach... the disgust precipitated by weird fiction emanates from a specific source – the non-human world, what philosophers have called the world-in-itself (2020, p. 5).

Gothic Fiction

Gothic fiction can be defined as, "A mode of narrative fiction dealing with supernatural or horrifying events and generally possessed of a claustrophobic air of oppression or evil" (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 290). It is a peculiar offshoot of horror fiction emerging in the late 18th century which has come to represent a certain kind of atmosphere typically associated with a Gothic temperament. This temperament has outlived the restrictions of time and space and can be seen in works which explore conflict between old, decadent values and modern sensibilities (290). The Gothic in this sense works effectively in narratives which portray the intersection of the past with the present (Snodgrass, 2005, p. 159). Gothic signified the medieval or the barbaric. The term Gothic represented, "the centuries proceeding the enlightened Protestant era that began with the Glorious Revolution of 1689" (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 291). Gothic literature consists of familiar tropes which generate an immediate, desired response of dread. Tropes utilized include, but are not limited to, "terror-ridden atmosphere, ominous tone and mood, and vague geographic settings among Gothic structures and ruins, particularly caves, abbeys, towers, castles, crypts, and oratories" (Snodgrass, 2005, p. 159). The mystery surrounding such settings is vital to produce a sense of suspense or horror. Gothic fiction also explores the topics of sensationalism like abduction, incarceration, torture, sexual repression, and discrimination (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 291). Early works which became quintessentially associated with Gothic fiction include The Castle of Otranto (1764) by Horace Walpole, Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) by Charles Maturin, The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794) by Ann Radcliffe, and The Monk (1796) by Matthew Lewis (Lynch, 2008, pp. 47-51). Radcliffe's work introduced the common figure of Gothic fiction in the form of the 'damsel in distress' who has been abducted, or imprisoned, in a decadent setting by an aristocratic villainous male character. While Lewis's work added occult elements of diabolic rituals, sexual deviancy, and supernatural excess into the Gothic (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 291). These works divided the Gothic tradition into two separate strands, one which relied heavily on the supernatural and the other which eschewed supernatural agencies with rational explanations (Hogle, 2002, p. 2). Nevertheless, both the strands preserved the atmosphere associated with the Gothic.

Gothic fiction evolved with the times by incorporating modern settings into the narrative. This produced works like William Godwin's Caleb Williams (1794), Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), James Hogg's The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824), and Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1818). The common strand which united these works was the theme of, "the stranglehold of the past upon the present, or the encroachment of the 'dark' ages of oppression upon the 'enlightened' modern era" (Birch & Hooper, 2012, pp. 290-91). To the Gothic conventions were added later on the vampire sub-genre with John Polidori's story "The Vampyre" (1819); the tropes of gloomy houses, and cursed families and individuals who are paralysed by their pasts by the works of Charles Dickens; the thriller sensibilities of the novel of sensation in the 1860s by the works of Wilkie Collins; and body horror with the works of R.L. Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 291). Gothic fiction has also utilized set-pieces to evoke an atmosphere of dread and suspense. These set-pieces include, but are not limited to, "pale moons, blue mists, gliding figures, hollow sighs, shaking tapestry, reverberating voices, nodding pictures, long corridors, deserted west towers, north towers, and south towers, ruined chapels, suspicious vaults, damp charnel-houses, great clocks striking twelve, wood embers expiring, dying lamps, and total darkness" (Snodgrass, 2005, p. 159). The Gothic became a melting pot of all these tropes and set-pieces, and is still evolving with contemporary writers who engage with it to discuss

sexuality, domestic confinement, gender issues, and racism (Birch & Hooper, 2012, p. 292). A careful study of Slade House also reveals the use of Gothic tropes and set-pieces, but the novel subverts and transcends Gothic conventions by giving them timely updates.

Transcending the Gothic in Slade House

The haunted house is the first major Gothic trope which is subverted by Slade House. The title of Mitchell's novel foregrounds the relevance of the manor as a locus of supernatural occurrences. The initial episodes seem to be affirming this aspect. The occurrences which exhibit supernatural traits happen at a secluded mansion which Nathan Bishop calls, "this big house like in To the Manor Born" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 31). Nathan is referring to a 1979 BBC television series which is set on an English manor house (Garner, 2016, p. 580). Nathan Bishop spies a presence at the window of Slade House while he is engaged in a game with Jonah Grayer. He sees a woman with a dated hairstyle staring intently at him from inside the house. The woman is repeatedly opening and closing her mouth miming a single word. Nathan is startled when, "I take a step forwards, but she vanishes and there's only reflected sky. So I take a step back, and she's there again" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 21). Inside the house, Nathan climbs a flight of stairs which have paintings of an odd set of people, including the lady who appeared as a ghostly presence near the window. Nathan hears disembodied whispers which are associated with the supernatural in Gothic fiction. He hears a soft murmur, "Run now, as fast as you can, the way you came in..." (27). Adding to the dread is the final portrait which is of Nathan himself in his present attire, but with his eyes missing: "I take two or three steps and draw level with the last portrait. Which is me. Me, Nathan Bishop.... Wearing exactly what I'm wearing now. This tweed jacket. This bow tie. Only in the picture I've got no eyes (27).

The second episode with Gordon Edmonds also exploits the trope of the haunted house. Like Nathan Bishop, Gordon is also enthralled by Slade House, "the house... A real mansion, it was. Grander than all the other houses around, half covered with red ivy. Big tall windows, steps going up to the front door, the lot" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 46). While having dinner at Slade House, he hears disembodied voices of children playing inside the house (60-63). The haunted house trope of disembodied spirits is used effectively to generate a feeling of dread common in gothic fiction: "Then I hear the girl again: 'Jonah?' I didn't imagine that. Again: 'Jooo-naaah!' I'm standing in a fight-or-flight crouch.... My legs are trembling.... My voice is a bit manic" (60). Gordon also experiences the shock of finding his portrait among those on the walls of the stairs with his eyes missing (70). He is given a warning by the disembodied presence of Nathan Bishop on his impending doom, "I'm not a lot, says the boy. I'm my own leftovers" (69). The mystery surrounding Slade House as a haunted mansion is further discussed in the third episode by Sally Timms and her companions who are part of an amateur paranormal society. They proclaim the need to investigate the "mystery house that only blinks into existence one night every nine years" (95). Sally and her companions enter the walls of Slade House to witness, "a big old stone house. A Virginia creeper, dark crimson in the twilight, grows up one side" (101). Sally finds her eyeless painting while climbing the stairs (Mitchell, 2015, p. 124). She is also visited by an apparition of Gordon Edmonds who gives her a fox headed hair pin which had belonged to Rita Bishop, Nathan's mother, as a weapon to protect her.

All these events of the supernatural seem to underscore the fact that Slade House is haunted. But the novel deconstructs the trope of the haunted house by proposing that there is no haunted house, or any 'house' in the physical sense. What the guests experience as haunted events at a house are all dream sequences carefully constructed to appear real. As Jonah Grayer would explain, "Between the iron door and waking up here, however, was an orison: a live, 3D stage set... A scripted vision... the people you met, the rooms you passed through, the tastes you tasted – was a local reality brought into being by my sister" (135). The house which masquerades as a Gothic setting is nothing more than a dream image projected to neutralize the guests and to make them compliant enough to consume banjax, the drug which would enable the twins to easily extract the souls of their victims. Slade House as a physical entity "was bombed to a rubble in 1940. Direct hit by a German bomb. Cranbury Avenue and Westwood Road were built over it after the war" (177). Mitchell's novel thus cleverly deconstructs the Gothic trope of the haunted house. The apparitions are also not proper 'ghosts' in the sense of the restless revenants in Gothic fiction. They are termed as 'afterimages' by the twins (34).

The vampire trope which is associated with the Gothic is also subverted by Slade House. The twins, Norah and Jonah Grayer are referred to as 'soul-vampires'. Their craving for souls to maintain their immortality is similar to the bloodlust of the Gothic vampire (Hughes, 2012, p. 199). Jonah talks about his hunger to a naïve Nathan Bishop, "I have nightmares... about running out of food" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 18). He adds, "Food that makes you hungrier, the more of it you eat" (19). But unlike the vampires of Gothic fiction, Norah and Jonah are unique in their selection of victims. They need only people with psychic powers. Their modus operandi consists of occult rituals which have helped them to fashion for themselves a kind of 'crypt' frozen in time. This 'lacuna' in time is forever frozen "a few minutes after 11 p.m. on Saturday, 27 October, 1934" (Mitchell, 2015, p.177). It is shielded from the ravages of real time and holds the birth bodies of

Jonah and Norah Grayer aged 35 years. The soul-vampires have constructed their immortal existence by anchoring their birth bodies to the timeless lacuna and by using occult arts which help them to exist as spirits which can inhabit the bodies of any human being. This operandi work provided the twins recharge the lacuna every nine years by consuming the soul of an Engifted (78). Slade House portrays the twins as monstrous entities who are hard to categorize as completely human or inhuman. They exhibit traits of the vampire yet are more updated versions of the Gothic bloodsucker.

The Gothic fiction tropes of abduction, imprisonment, and the damsel in distress are subverted in Slade House. Gordon Edmonds is lured into the lacuna of the twins by the voice of Norah Grayer, who is in the guise of Chloe Chetwynd, a seductive widow. She cries, "I'm a damsel in distress, Gordon. Up the stairs" (68). Gordon's investigation leads him into finding Rita Bishop, Nathan's mother, imprisoned in the attic of Slade House (71-73). Gordon had been investigating the disappearance of the Bishops nine years ago at Slade Alley. His chivalric spirit is kindled and he attempts to rescue her from her prison only to find later that it was also a dream vision programmed to produce a similar reaction in him (76). The whole episode might have been a common trope in Gothic fiction, but in Mitchell's novel it is all a simulation. The episode involving Sally Timms and her boyfriend Todd Cosgrove trying to escape from the nightmarish Slade House is also another sequence with the desperate heroine. Todd's comment echoes the malignity surrounding Slade House, "Something bad is happening in this house, Sal. We need to get out" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 126). Sally follows Todd's instructions to ward off the diabolical entities surrounding her at the house. She is provided with inside knowledge on the twins and their modus operandi by Todd. He says, "On our way out, speak to nobody; respond to nobody; meet nobody's eye. Accept nothing, eat nothing, drink nothing. This version of Slade House is a shadow play, evoked into being. If you engage with it, the twins will sense you; they'll wake; they'll extract your soul" (127). Sally's desperate attempt at escape ends up as yet another orison by the twins. While it mimics Gothic conventions, it is in reality a cruel ploy at playing mind games with the victim's romantic temperament. Sally has been sufficiently brainwashed to believe in the possibilities of a narrow escape from danger with her lover Todd. Jonah says, "my soul was there, moving Todd's body, saying Todd's lines" (135). He rebukes her gullible nature by saying, "Your and Todd's thrilling bid for freedom was another part of the rat's maze we had you run through, an orison inside an orison." (135).

By using Gothic tropes to portray horrifying events, Slade House appears to be adhering to traditional horror conventions. But the explanations offered after the seemingly supernatural occurrences completely undermine Gothic conventions. The haunted house becomes a dream vision, ghostly voices are afterimages or residues of the consumed victims who lack a 'soul' to actually haunt a place, and nightmarish visions are part of the orisons constructed by the twins. Victims who respond in a generic way to such baits find themselves facing a different reality where Gothic conventions lose their meaning. They experience the wrongness of it all, the inexplicability of the reality they are living in. Gothic conventions operating on twin poles of the supernatural and the rational crumble in the novel. Characters understand the limits of human comprehension. They have to come to terms with a cosmos which is indifferent to their plight. All the victims from Nathan Bishop to Freya Timms get annihilated not because they are evil. They find themselves facing a reality where definitions of good and evil become pointless. This can be seen in the episode where Gordon asks Norah before his impending death at the hands of the twins: "What did I do to deserve this?" (79). Norah's reply highlights the insignificance of the delineations of good and evil: "'What does "deserve" have to do with anything?'.... 'Did the pig whose smoked flesh you ate at breakfast "deserve" her fate? The question's irrelevant. You desired bacon and she couldn't escape the abattoir. We desire your soul... and you can't escape.... That's it' (Mitchell, 2015, p. 79). The experience of confronting such unknowable events which are beyond the realms of the Gothic projects the characters into the domain of the Weird.

Weird Fiction

According to China Mieville, "Weird Fiction is... conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic ("horror" plus "fantasy") often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus "science fiction")" (2009, p. 510). The high point of Weird fiction was popular American pulp magazine Weird Tales which began publication in 1923 (VanderMeer, 2012). The magazine was the first publisher of several writers of Weird fiction including pioneers like H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and Robert Bloch (Everett & Shanks, 2015, p. x). Weird fiction focused upon the sublime which breaks into the mundane and how it inspires a sense of awe in the beholder (Mieville, 2009, p. 510). It highlights the fact that the reality surrounding mankind has always been hard to accurately represent using human faculties. Observing the fiction of Lovecraft, Mieville examines that the disjointed narratives of Weird fiction were a form of statement affirming the deficiency in humanity to comprehend all of reality (2009). Mieville connects Weird fiction with Gothic fiction. According to him, "The awe that Weird Fiction attempts to invoke is a function of lack of recognition, rather than any uncanny resurgence, guilt-function, the return of a repressed. It is thus as much a break from as an heir to traditional Gothic" (2009, p. 512). Weird fiction upholds its own set of

norms which subvert Gothic tropes. Mieville argues that while Gothic fiction attempts to secure normalcy through exorcising of the supernatural or the uncanny from the horrific reality it is narrating, Weird fiction asserts that there was never a stable reality (2009). Weird fiction can be differentiated from Gothic fiction by examining its priorities in comparison to the Gothic. Firstly, Weird fiction does not concern itself with the moral didacticism of the Gothic tale. Secondly, it eschews debates on the afterlife (Machin, 2018, p. 17). Weird fiction attempts to point out that the semblance of normalcy maintained by mankind is a feeble attempt to ward off total breakdown of rationality once we truly attempt to comprehend reality. Lovecraft himself acknowledged in his iconic tale "The Call of Cthulhu" the incapacity of humans to grasp all of reality. Lovecraft says in the first line of the tale that the, "most merciful thing in the world... is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents... but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light" (Lovecraft, 2016, p. 139).

The Weird is disquieting in the sense that it forces mankind to confront the sense of wrongness around us which breaks through the thin veneer of reality we are holding on to. Mark Fisher regards this sensation of wrongness taking over normal reality as something which is insufficiently understood as 'wrong' (2016). According to Fisher, "The weird... is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (2016, p. 15). We need to adopt new methodologies which would help redefine existence. Fisher points out Lovecraft's writing as attempting to capture a 'real externality' which functions as the core argument of the Weird. According to Lovecraft, "To capture the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all" (Lovecraft & Turner, 1968, p. 150). The Weird has an alluring power which seduces us to confront it; it fascinates and simultaneously repels us (Fisher, 2016). Weird fiction portrays the 'outside' or the 'Other' which breaks into the familiar and alters our understanding of the mundane (Weinstock, 2016, p. 181). Fisher argues: "It is the irruption into this world of something from the outside which is the marker of the weird" (2016, p. 20).

Weird fiction operates on the border between the terrestrial-empirical and the outside (Fisher, 2016). This kind of radical engagement necessitates the use of first person narratives in Weird fiction. The philosophy being that, "if the outside gradually encroaches upon a human subject, its alien contours can be appreciated" (Fisher, 2016, p. 20). Cultural events like imperialism, fascism, communism, professional journalism, and literary criticism have played their part in shaping the contours of Weird fiction (Noys & Murphy, 2016, p. 119). Weird fiction can be categorized under two broad factions. One deals with the 'inflationary' as bringing the entire cosmos under its purvey; while the other deals with 'impoverishment' as highlighting the horrors lurking in the mundane and the local (Machin, 2018, p. 4). According to Jeff VanderMeer, "'Weird' refers to the sometimes supernatural or fantastical element of unease in stories – an element that could take a blunt, literal form or more subtle and symbolic form and which was, as in the best of Lovecraft's work, combined with a visionary sensibility" (2008, p. ix). Weird fiction's unique engagement with reality is powerful enough to revamp our understanding of the world (Joshi, 2003, p. 118). A reading of David Mitchell's novel Slade House also reveals an upholding of the Weird sensibility over the comfort of the resolutions offered by Gothic fiction.

The Weird Domain of Slade House

In Slade House the unknowable and the inexplicable erupts into the mundane undermining human comprehension. The Weird in Slade House is awe inducing and sublime while simultaneously revolting and horrifying. The ritual sequence culminating each episode in the novel exhibits this tendency beautifully. Characters are drawn into the lacuna of the twins where they remain utterly paralyzed while their souls get sucked out of their bodies. A single candle with runes on it burns while the twins chant incantations with the paralyzed victim facing a mirror reflecting their person. The vision portrayed in the ritual sequence is hellish as well as sublime because it is narrated in first person by the characters as they observe their own deaths. In Gordon's vision: "something appears above the candle flame... a bruise in the air, a glowing lump, lit reddish from inside, beating like a heart, big as a brain. Worms or roots or veins snake out from it. Some grow towards the twins, and several come my way... they enter my mouth, my ear, my nostrils, like sharp tiny fingers" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 81). All of the victims are unable to clearly define this object, the 'wrongness' which they are forced to confront while being utterly paralyzed. Nathan describes it as a heart the size of a football with veins growing out like tentacles of a jellyfish; the tentacle being an obsession of Weird fiction, a symbol of the anomalous (Mieville, 2009, p. 512). Sally describes the Weird object as a fleshy jellyfish with tendrils; while Freya describes it as a misshapen faceless head with roots emerging out of it (Mitchell, 2015).

The Weird object's purpose is to open an aperture in the heads of the victims from which their souls come out. The victims themselves narrate their experience of beholding their souls while their bodies disintegrate which adds to the subliminal terror of the sequence. Freya describes her penultimate experience: "I feel a spear-tip of pain where my Cyclopean eye would be. Something is

being extracted through the same spot; it comes into focus a few inches from my eyes, a translucent shimmering globe, smaller than a billiard ball, but cloudy with countless stars. It's my true me. It's my soul" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 189). Each character confronts their soul with a sense of awe, a seemingly uncharacteristic reaction to the horrifying. All the victims find their disembodied souls 'beautiful'; as Sally would say, "My soul's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 138). The ritual sequence effectively portrays the novel's rootedness in the Weird by evoking both pleasure and terror. Slade House upholds its credentials as a Weird tale as it transforms something "causing displeasure into a Thing which is both terrible and alluring, which can no longer be libidinally classified as either positive or negative" (Fisher, 2016, p. 17).

The monstrous in Slade House also eludes easy classification and thus conforms to the norms of the Weird. Mark Fisher argues that traditional monsters are not 'weird' since the factors dealing with their narration are already set (2016, p. 15). China Mieville affirms this by saying that the monstrous in Weird fiction are, "agglomerations of bubbles, barrels, cones, and corpses, patchworked from cephalopods, insects, crustaceans, and other fauna notable precisely for their absence from the traditional Western monstrous" (2009, p. 512). While it is evident that the real monsters in Slade House are the twins, the novel projects monstrous entities which in themselves are far beyond the classification of traditional monsters. Nathan Bishop confronts a monstrous entity which is a collage of his worst nightmares. His trauma surrounding the event of being mauled by a dog is projected onto the monstrous entity. Nathan observes, "a growling darkness with darker eyes, eyes that know me, and fangs that'll finish what they started... big as a cantering horse... it's wolves it's winter it's bones it's cartilage skin liver lungs it's Hungrier" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 24). Sally is presented with a monstrous entity which comprises of horrifically jumbled up parts of her friends: "a grotesque frame of naked limbs, chests, breasts, groins, shoulders, toes... an undrawable bone cage, a flesh loom, a game of Twister with several Siamese bodies pulled apart and smooshed together; up here's Angelica's head with her matted indigo hair and a tongue-stud showing; down there's Axel's head" (124).

The narrative of Slade House also upholds the principle of Weird fiction to blur the boundaries between the real and the fantastic. In Weird fiction, "there are unresolved oppositions of authenticity/affect, belief/skepticism, truth/falsehood operating throughout the narrative, constantly undermining the reader's grasp of what exactly is being told and why" (Machin, 2018, p. 25). This argument adds to Mark Fisher's reading of the Weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft where he finds that by setting his stories in realistic settings, with academic and mythical lore narrated as if they are grounded in the real, Lovecraft blurs the boundary between fiction and reality (2016, p. 24). Two episodes in Slade House exhibit this trait perfectly. First is the episode involving Sally Timms and her friends in the guise of amateur paranormal investigators exploring the mystery surrounding Slade House. Sally's companions try to pin a rational explanation to the events of disappearances at Slade Alley every nine years. Newspaper reports are cited to ground the mystery in reality: "The caption reads, Nathan and Rita Bishop: last seen in Slade Alley, Saturday, 27 October, 1979. The bottom picture shows a man of thirty or so.... His caption reads, Detective Inspector Gordon Edmonds: last seen entering Slade Alley, Saturday, 29 October, 1988" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 88). The whole myth surrounding the Slade Alley disappearances is given further credibility by making one of Sally's companions – Axel – a relative of an eye witness to the Nathan Bishop episode. Axel's debriefing before he embarks on the investigation of Slade House with Sally and co has detailed reports on Nathan, Rita, and Gordon. Their history as real life individuals is discussed along with speculations on the mysterious occurrences at Slade House (Mitchell, 2015). The episode functions as an attempt at rationalizing the Weird. It maintains a semblance of the possibility of human cognitive capacities being sufficient enough to comprehend the unknowable. But this is an effective narrative ploy employed by Weird fiction to confuse the reader. The reader has to decide whether to trust this grounding in rational explanations of the Weird or to embrace the possibilities of the unknowable, thus creating a narrative tension vital to maintain the Weird sensibilities of Slade House.

The penultimate episode with Freya Timms, as a journalist investigating her sister Sally's disappearance is also in a similar vein. Freya interviews Fred Pink, the relative of Axel, who had witnessed Nathan and Rita entering Slade Alley. He was immediately struck down by a taxi and fell into a deep coma for nine years waking up in 1988. Fred Pink is utilized as the chronicler who has documented all of the history surrounding the twins and their occult powers. He explains in detail the history of the twins from their birth to the disappearance of Sally. When Freya demands facts, he explains to her that the mythos surrounding the twins have been documented in two memoirs, he also names them. His narrative is authenticated by references to historical events including the First World War. The way he begins the narration of the fantastic history evokes an attempt at meticulous chronicling of real events: "We'll kick off over a century ago then, near Ely in Norfolk, at a stately home called Swaffham Manor... back then it was the ancestral seat of a family called the Chetwynd-Pitts, who you'll find in the Domesday Book, if you please. In 1899, twins were born at Swaffham, a girl and a boy" (Mitchell, 2015, p. 146). On being asked to authenticate his fantastic narrative, Fred Pink cites, "Albertina Chetwynd-Pitt – Her Ladyship – published a memoir in 1925 called Rivers Old And

Lost. It's all about what I'm telling you now: the twins, their upbringing, and everything" (147). He also adds another memoir by Dr Leon Cantillon 'The Great Unveiling' in 1927 which narrates the occult history of the twins (Mitchell, 2015). The purpose of this episode is also to obscure the reader's conceptions regarding Slade House's take on the fantastic. It blurs the boundaries of reality and fiction precisely because it is grounded in real life history yet engaging with the unknowable. Slade House becomes "a site of temporal distortions and simulations: an irrealist space in which the world's historical and cultural realities dematerialize and rematerialize" (Knepper, 2019, p. 176). The reader is left perplexed on what to make of the whole narrative and whether to consume it as reality engaging with the Weird. A narrative dysmorphia is achieved through this ploy in Slade House, perfectly adhering to the conventions of Weird fiction. Through the use of its narrative techniques Slade House is able to achieve what all Weird fiction aspires to achieve; the promulgation of a "sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality" (Mieville, 2009, p. 513).

Conclusion

Slade House is an ingenious ploy in mimicking the conventions of Gothic fiction. In the novel David Mitchell makes use of Gothic conventions including the haunted house, disembodied spirits, nightmarish dream sequences, and occult rites to lull the reader into a comfort zone where the stock answers of either a rational explanation or a supernatural resolution is expected. The reader is instead provided a perplexing experience where the Gothic tropes laid down eventually transform into mere simulations hiding a Weird essence. Slade House engages the Weird by narrating the wrongness hidden in the mundane; a wrongness which in a sense appears so only because of human incapacity to comprehend all of reality. The novel's heart is in the Weird domain where human cognitive powers and rational security crumble in the wake of a confrontation with the Weird. Slade House grapples with the problem of articulating this sense of the Weird. By doing so it succeeds in conveying that reality is, "richer, larger, stranger, more complex, more surprising – and, indeed, "weirder" – than common sense would suppose" (Freedman, 2013, p. 15). It is for this purpose alone that the novel employs stylistic and thematic subversions of traditional gothic and supernatural elements. David Mitchell's Slade House, thus, goes beyond the gothic and evolves into a work of weird fiction.

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