

"اريد ان اكون انسان" تطبيع الغريب (الوحش) في الادب القوطي بالإشارة الى رواية "الاجساد الدافئة" للكاتب اسحاق ماريون

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“ I want to be human”, Uncanny Collapse in Contemporary Gothic Fiction with Reference to Isaac Marion’s *Warm Bodies*

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### Abstract

In Gothic fiction, monsters/ otherness are always taken as metaphors of something alienated, abject, uncanny - something to be avoided so that the system is restored. They are excluded from any social belongingness, and hence a distance is created between “self” and “other”. However, the present paper discusses the collapse of the notion of the uncanny monster in contemporary Gothic fiction. It focuses on Isaac Marion’s, as a contemporary writer, a new representation of the monster in which more human characteristics are given. In Marion’s novel *Warm Bodies*(2010), the monster is not completely alienated in the sense that it appears to be normal and longs to be a human. The curiosity of wanting to find out what has changed with the zombie myth led to the topic of this essay. The challenge that Marion puts forward is to make literature relevant to overarching contemporary issues, particularly the widespread destruction of the huge gap between “self” and “other”. The paper concludes that zombification is culturally oriented and that the Otherness/zombie in contemporary fiction is not something bad to be avoided. Instead, the zombie appears romantic and sexy with emotions and selfhood.

**Keywords:** Zombification, Isaac Marion, uncanniness, symbolic order, Gothic fiction

### ملخص البحث

في الادب القوطي، يتم دائماً تمثيل الشخص الاخر كستعاره للمغيب او الغريب او الوحش الذي لا بد من تجنبه او ابعاده من أجل استعادة النظام والامان للمجتمع. حيث يتم استبعاده من أي انتماء اجتماعي، وبالتالي يتم إنشاء مسافة بين الذات والآخر. تناقش هذه الورقة انهيار تلك المسافة او الفرق بين الإنسان والشخص الاخر أو الذات والآخر في الادب القوطي المعاصر. تركز الدراسة على التمثيل الجديد للوحش الذي أعطيت فيه المزيد من الخصائص الإنسانية النبيله. في رواية اسحاق ماريون "الاجساد الدافئة"، يتم تدريجياً اعاده الغريب او المختلف الى المجتمع ولذلك نجد في الرواية ان الزومبي يتوق إلى أن يكون إنساناً طبيعياً. أدى فضول الرغبة في معرفة ما الذي تغير في أسطورة الزومبي إلى موضوع هذا المقال. ان الهدف الاساسي الذي طرحه ماريون هو ربط الادب بالقضايا المعاصرة الشاملة والتي تشمل اصلاح المجتمع من خلال التفاهم والاحترام وانهاء الدمار الواسع النطاق الناجم عن الكراهية. وخلص البحث إلى أن الزومبي في الادب القوطي المعاصر لم يكن شيئاً سيئاً الذي يؤدي الى تجنبه ونبذه. بدلاً من ذلك، اصبح رومانسياً ومثيراً و لديه عواطف وذاتيه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الزومبي، إسحاق ماريون، الغريب، النظام الاجتماعي، الادب القوطي

## Introduction

In Gothic literature, one of the most representative of the monster's body, as it blurs the margins between life and death, is "uncanny". The notion of uncanny is well explained by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud in his essay (1919/2012) "Uncanny". For him, the uncanny "is everything that ought to have remained secret or hidden but has come to light." (Freud, 345) It is mainly understood in terms of "terror" or "dread" that people repressed in their memory about aliens. It revolves around two notions: homely (Heimlich) and unhomely (unheimlich). The concept of unheimlich, as Freud mentioned, maybe not opposite to Heimlich, rather it is a stretch of the meaning of home, secret, unfamiliar, etc. He cited the meaning of "Heimlich" from Grimm's dictionary: "from the idea of 'homelike', 'belonging to the house', the further idea is developed of something withdrawn from the eyes of others, something concealed, secret and this idea is expanded in many ways" (Freud, 376), and what appears unhomely is preserved as frightening. This is in turn, the idea of "uncanniness" presupposes monstrous activities as it lacks a sense of security and peace. Freud supports his hypothesis by the fact that "many people experience the [uncanny] feeling in the highest degree in relation to...the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts." (Freud 364) Timothy Beal, commenting on Freud's uncanny, he writes:

Monsters are personifications of the unheimlich. They stand for what endangers one's sense of at-homeness, that is, one's sense of security, stability, well-being, health, and meaning. They make one feel not at home. They are figures of chaos and disorientation within order and orientation, revealing deep insecurities in one's faith in oneself, one's society, and one's world. (qt. In Asma Stephen T, p 45)

The uncanny is "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Stephen 124). The previous memory or the past of the known object may take, also, a form of repressed desire which under certain circumstances can float on the surface from unconsciousness to consciousness causing tremendous unrest. So physical violence, sexual aggression and other instincts acts of monsters are not completely overcome and therefore they repressed within the human psychic that is a flood to the surface from time to time and those are "unheimlich" acts. In literary criticism, in Freudianism, the uncanny is a particular form of unease, related to a particular experience in real life and to a certain motive in literature, such as an omnipresent of strange and frightening thoughts or the existence of monsters or the confusion between life and death.

Something looks unhomely, as Mladen Dolar believes, because one has 'alienated' is – repressed it – from consciousness, so that it brings anxiety. So it is clear that a zombie can produce an uncanny effect. It can be stated as "I know there are no [monster]... but I believe in them.' Or, in short: 'I know... but I believe". For Dolar, "the former is a conscious negation, while the latter is an unconscious affirmation – so that this is a truer expression of the uncanny" (Dolar, 7). In discussing Nietzsche's idea of difference, Fredric Jameson in his seminal work *The Political Unconscious* writes:

Evil thus, as Nietzsche taught us, continues to characterize whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a real and urgent threat to my own existence... whom the essential point to be made is not so much that he is feared because he is evil; rather he is evil because he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar. (Jameson, 115)

However, in contemporary Gothic fiction, the notion of uncanniness is destabilized by the appearance of some young writers who believe that there must be a serious understanding of "Otherness" away from the prevailing discourse. Charlaine Harris's *Dead Until Dark*, Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* are best examples of how monsters' representation changes in contemporary Gothic fiction.

As a young writer, Isaac Marion is well-known for his masterpiece or "zombie romance" *Warm Bodies* (2010) and later its series. The novel becomes a New York Times bestseller work and inspired many directors to adopted to movies. It is also translated to more than 20 languages including Arabic.

Marion is also a photographer and a painter. His career as a writer began when he was a young. He published three novels before *Warm Bodies*.

### Analysis

Our feelings towards the unnatural body is a deciding factor for expressing fear of the unknown. The source of that fear is the repressed feelings that the monster venturing beyond the natural limits. As symbols of psychological fear monsters thus, are judged or maybe belittled based upon what people repressed in their memory about them.

In Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies*, however, zombies are depicted differently from their past uncanny incarnations. The domestic life of the Zombie is the first arena to re-humanize the zombie in the novel. The first sea change within the new representation is the zombie's awareness of having a suitable place/home to live in. According to Steven Shaviro, zombies are "always come in between they insinuate themselves with the uncanny, interstitial space that separates inside and outside, the private and the public, life, and death." (qt in Szanter, 137) That is why the destabilizing force of the uncanny is echoed in Julie's (the protagonist) past memory concerning the zombies. For her, the zombie is often savage monster who lives in isolation without home. In Marion's *Warm Bodies* the new situation of the zombie R, however, offers a point of departure of new reality other than that of the previous memories about the monsters. The foggy image in which Julie finds herself raises many questions such as whether she trusts her memory or not? or is the zombie R alive or dead?

Julie is really got astonished to see the zombie R has a private place to live in. R is used to live in a neglected airplane. "You live in an airplane R" (Marion 71) Julie asks the zombie. What is more, R also has a recorder and tapes in his cabinet. He plays Frank Sinatra's song to Julie "Life was so new... so real, so right... 'Safe,' I mumble. 'Keep you... safe.'... ages ago... last night..." (Marion 23). Julie has relaxed and all her fears of the zombies are changed. R also knows that "music is life! It's physical emotion – one can touch it! It's neon ecto-energy sucked out of spirits and switched into sound waves for your ears to swallow." (Marion 54)

The new characteristics of zombieism have added much to the original story. Paradoxical to Freud's observation of the uncanny as a particular form of unease, related to a particular experience in real life, R lives his private life and treats Julie in such a way that he appears more human than a monster. Maybe it is impossible to be fully indulged in human society, but at least the zombie R tries his best to change for better. The difference that R articulates at the course of the novel after Julie left R to return to her home, R is no longer able to deny the changes taking place in his consciousness and other zombies as well. Kyle Bishop describes the change in the contemporary representation of zombies saying that "the quintessential Gothic monster and iconic star-crossed lovers' have been simplified and modified, emptied of threat and tragedy, welcomed into the collective iconography of popular culture" (Bishop 166). Later in the novel, R decides to go after Julie and is reunited with her at her home. So it is a zombie journey from home, as a normal human, to a zombie, because of the virus, and then back to home, after the radical change in his personality\_ it is a journey from familiar to unfamiliar to return to familiar and hence the zombie is related to the home.

The second shift in representing the monster is related to Zombie's awareness of his past life or memories. Active remembering as Dietrich Harth argues, "represents a change in who we are. Our habits, our ideologies, our hopes, and fears are all influenced by what we remember of our past." (Harth, 233) Zombie's memory participates in unforegrounding the uncanniness of zombification. Issues such as those have a crucial role in determining between what is human and what is not or between dead and alive. R begins to feel alive when he starts to dream and recall his past memories. Memories, as a human characteristic, explore the nature of the zombie R and the way the traumatic discourse is narrated- especially when the zombie equipped with emotions and feelings. Normal humans, on the other hand, revisit or experience regularly their past memories when they witnessed an event that has a positive effect on his/her way of living. Simultaneously, emotionally exciting situations can lead us to create longer-lasting memories of the event as a kind positive reaction to the existing

events. Memories show that an emotional state at a certain stage can positively affect the encoding of information into the short or even long-term memory, showing the like between emotions and memories.

In the addressed novel, zombie R nostalgically remembers his past life trying to live the same life before being a zombie. Having a home, name, wife, and children are imitations of his prior life. He, also, mimics human social interactions and even having sex; he raises family, takes his children to school and even attends churches. R got married to female zombie and the couple adopts two undead children, but he is ultimately unable to connect with them. For other zombies, R seems to have an inner life: he continually considers his current life and his feelings of remorse about the zombies' cannibal way of preying on humans. Those nostalgic mimics show zombie's dissatisfaction with his current situation and nostalgically longs for his past human status. Blaming his current situation the zombie R narrates his past life saying that "before I became a zombie I must have been a businessman, a banker or broker or some young temp learning the ropes because I'm wearing fairly nice clothes." (Marion 2) Julie, on the other hand, believes that a typical stereotype of the zombie has nothing to do with such things as memories and emotions. She compares between the dead and human saying that "[w]e have to remember everything. If we don't, by the time we grow up it'll be gone forever." (Marion 46) For her humanness is judged according to human- monster relation, by the presence of emotions and memories.

In the same domain, the zombie R echoes his past life's ability to perform things related to humans. He, for example, is used to performing past habits such as going to a mall or kitchen or even play music. R can recall some things about his time in the airport: riding the escalators, power occasionally flickering on, and also having friends, such as the zombie M. He also has the memory of the spatial structure of the airport and has a place, an abandoned aircraft, which he calls home. Another positive evaluation of the past is reflected in R's preference for the music, fashion models, and automobiles that were popular during his past human life. Music seems for him is life and hope for the nihilist life of apocalypse:

People used to say music was the great communicator; I wonder if this is still true in this post-human, posthumous age. I put the record on and begin to move the needle as it plays, skipping measures, skipping songs, dancing through the spirals to find the words I want to fill the air. (Marion 57)

Memories give R a unique human-like identity among other zombies. R's identity is constructed by his memories. As Klein and Nichols argue that "[m]emory for past episodes provides a sense of personal identity – the Memory is an important component of creating and maintaining individual and communal identity" (Klein and Nichols 680). Memories of the past can be also unwanted, especially those events one wants to forget, but it seems that "memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions. People remember or forget the past according to the needs of the present, and social memory is an active and ongoing process" (Van and Alcock 3). Memory, on the other hand, is seen as a mediator between past, present, and future, and as a process of personhood. Paul Ricoeur in his theory of *Narrative Identity* (1984) points out that the story which is narrated by a person is part of his identity formation and selfhood. The narrator in a story tends to construct and reconstruct his/her identity based on personal and other's narratives. (Ricoeur 118) So, R's question for identity begins by asking "who I am". It, then, moves to R's justification that although "[w]e [the zombies] may appear mindless, but we aren't. The rusty cogs of cogency still spin" (Marion 4), to fully achievement of an identity human society. Marion's *Warm Bodies* invites the reader to regard the zombie as a person rather than a monster with identity and selfhood. R puts in his/her observer a comfortable, instead of uncomfortable, feelings. Now defining uncanniness- the essential factor responsible for the production of uncanny feelings is intellectual uncertainty - in terms of horror seems inapplicable, since the zombie's trait of fear is changed to comfortable feelings. Julie feels at home in familiar surroundings when the zombie R takes her to his

chamber. In this way, Julie's stereotype of a monster as an uncanny Other is disturbed in the way the zombie treats her.

The rise of the zombie's consciousness is the third issue that supports the departure of the monster or zombie from its stereotype. In the novel, R's consciousness is first revealed concerning language which the monster uses. Traditionally, monsters are explained generally as leftovers. They are objects to be seen as third persons and since they are objects, a language of oppression they usually receive. Language, besides memories, is also a norm to judge the normality of dead and alive. However, contemporary monster language and dialogue, such as those figures discussed in this study, reposition the monster to the status of normality. Marion's zombie R begins to speak about himself and his problem. He explains that something wrong happened to him changed him to a monster, but for him, zombieism is not a crime. He wants to pass being a criminal to step forward to be treated like a human again. R starts with the description of the situation explaining his current situation: "I am dead, but it's not so bad. I've learned to live with it. I'm sorry I can't properly introduce myself, but I don't have a name anymore." (Marion 1) Here the zombie R is no longer an object or something to be spoken or written about, but he is a subject who speaks and writes, though he is not eloquent. In *Deformed Discourse*, David Williams argues that the:

The language of the monstrous is parasitic, depending on the existence of conventional languages; it feeds, so as to speak, at their margins, upon their limits, so as to gain the power to transcend these analytical discourses and, true to its etymology, it points to utterances that lie beyond logic. (Williams 81)

According to Williams the language of the monster is limited, savage, and an inchoate. It shows the monstrous platform for horror and fear. Aesthetically, this limitation is usually represented by using metaphor to stand for any void or "inchoate either a blank or an elusive and tantalizing confusion". (qt. In Williams 180) Nonetheless, a prominent place of pride and normalization is the contemporary aesthetic texts. In those contemporary texts, the deformed discourse of monsters fails to cover the new reality. The Lacanian "Void" or "Lack" now is filled with meaning and the Derridaian "sign play" is no longer applicable because the monster is now connected with meaning. This is evident in Marion's narrative style. In his novel *Warm Bodies*, the zombie R is created with an awareness that he and other zombies still have something with a human. Throughout the text and in R's words there is always a sense of normality. R used to decrease the difference between the past and present, saying that:

We may appear mindless, but we aren't. The rusty cogs of cogency still spin, just geared down and down till the outer motion is barely visible. We grunt and groan, we shrug and nod, and sometimes a few words slip out. It's not that different from before. (Marion 3)

Julie explains her new inner feelings towards monsters, arguing that "[w]e don't understand their thoughts so we assume they don't have any" (Marion 174) who considers it as a long-term agent of global reconciliation. This is, of course, a common theme in contemporary Gothic fiction of current attempts to define the new era with faith, trust, dialogue, performance, and sincerity that can work to skip postmodern cynical irony.

The issue of consciousness places more emphasis on the stable boundaries between "self" and "other". The new zombie is no longer described by horror discourse, but by the substance. The new discourse begins with justification with the idea that the main source of zombie's violence is not original but it causes by different reasons.

How did this start? How did we become what we are? Was it some mysterious virus? Gamma rays? An ancient curse? Or something even more absurd? No one talks about it much. We are here, and this is the way it is. We don't complain. We don't ask questions. We go about our business. (Marion 5)

The difference, therefore, between 'self' and 'other', in these examples, extends beyond the typical boundaries of hatred discourse towards more understanding to end up an era of violence. As

Kevin Alexander Boon defends the contemporary zombies by describing them as “characters who have lost self-identity or the capacity for volition, yet they are not literary the resurrected dead or the technologically-altered living” (Boon 40). The zombie is supposed to serve as an example of the pitfalls that come with human fear, but members of the new generation, such as Julie, of that society do not necessarily view them as such. The young, the human or maybe the zombie, believe that dialogue and understanding is the best way to diminish the resentment in their relation.

As a young author, Marion goes on to indicate the distinction between the zombie within the horror genre and the zombie as a peacemaker. The version represents a critique of the nihilist thinking of postmodernism and its unproductive resentment. The reconciliation between the self and others is determined by a serious dialogue or what is called by Eric Gans a “non-victimary dialogue” and the outside appearance does not always reflect reality. Most of the victim discourse of the 20th century is therefore formed out of the circles of the formal institutions after WWII. In the postmodern epoch, both the perpetrators and the victims are insecure about their position and both are subjects and objects of such resent thinking. To step beyond the predator- victim resentful, thus, there must be a trustful dialogue between them. In the novel, Julie finds a good chance to achieve peace on the earth by starting a channel of understanding between the campus of zombies and the campus of humans.

The uncanniness nature of the zombification is, fourthly, normalized by the zombie’s effort to have a name- to have a signification in society. It is an attempt to create a monster’s awareness of the need to be a member of society by achieving a signification. Through language” Otherness” is generally demonized and alienated as it lacks a name or signification. Language or discourse of monstrosity carries racism in the first place. So, in the novel, to diminish the monopoly racist dimension of that discourse the monster ascribes a name for himself, and on the other hand, to have a name means to have space in symbolic order –other than being a “thing” which disturbs human natural laws. The philosophical and theoretical of an unnameable or unrepresentable “thing” and its place within the mind of the subject has been discussed by many critics, among them Zizek and Lacan, who believe that the unknowable is usually connected with fear and horror.

Drawing on Lacan’s psychological theory, Maria Beville, in *The Unnameable Monster In Literature And Film* argues, that the “void” or “absent presence” is the starting point of our fantasies, unity, and wholeness. In other words, the gaps or dashes usually presuppose a lack in the experience (something unknown) leading to fear and horror, and that relationship between “I” and the external world begins with that sense of awareness. This process of inter-subjective and cultural participation with the external laws and orders paves the way for the next step of socialization or in the Lacanian term is the Symbolic Order (language). Thus, the Zombie R. in his world of unknowable is simply another “Other”, that is why he shows moments of awareness of not having a name, he consciously justifies the unnameability saying:

I’m sorry I can’t properly introduce myself, but I don’t have a name anymore. Hardly any of us do. We lose them like car keys, forget them like anniversaries. Mine might have started with an ‘R’, but that’s all I have now. It’s funny because back when I was alive, I was always forgetting other people’s names. (Marion 2)

In this sense, entering the stage of symbolic order means separating between knowledge and ignorance or between subject and thing. Then the zombie R, by having a name, moves from a lack or unrepresentable to familiar or known. Julie asks R. astonishingly:

‘You have a name?’

I [the zombie] nod.

Her lip curls in an amused half-smile. ‘What’s your name?’

I [the zombie] close my eyes and think hard, trying to pull it out of the void, but I’ve tried this so many times before.

‘Rrr,’ (Marion 68)

The Zombie R. moreover, distinguishes himself from those of Boneys (skeletons in the novel) who have no names and therefore, they are different from zombies and remain in the lack or void since they don't have proper names, "The Boneys nudge them forward and they give us tentative smiles, hug our legs. I pat them on their heads and ask their names, but they don't have any." (Marion 37) To this, Beville believes that the unnamable has no ground on the experienced world, and hence, "[t]he 'Thing' is the lack: the negative that ever escapes symbolization and that is therefore beyond the imagination of the subject." ( Beville 59) Aesthetically this is a radical or a sea change within the creation of the monster.

Supporting the above point, Freud's theory of uncanniness is also based on the ideas of fear and horror as those ideas are connected with unfamiliarity or unknowable, therefore a strange/ new/ hostile can easily become a source of producing feelings of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. In other words, uncertainty or uncanniness first is linked to the unconscious mind which under certain circumstances returns into unconsciousness causing suffering and discomfort. But Julie finds the zombie very homely and kind to humanity in general and her in particular. Julie asks the zombie R. about the reason behind saving her, she says: "Why me? she demands, blinking an angry tear out of her eye. Why did you save me?" ( Marion 10 ) And this is, of course, a turning point in the history of zombification.

### Conclusion

To sum up the discussion, Isaac Marion, as a young writer, intentionally draws the reader's attention toward a new relationship between Otherness/zombies and humans. The shift in cultural consciousness is mirrored with the emergence of the new patterns of Gothic narrative fiction and with the emergence of the other/ zombie's consciousness. Traditionally zombie behaves without consciousness to his life and of his surroundings and walking without any memory to his past status. However, the case of the zombie R in *Warm Bodies* is quite different. The zombie R acts differently, he does not confine himself to a cultural crisis or act on its behalf. Being a contemporary zombie means to proceed on a continuous journey searching for alternative present and good future. So what people and society accept presents itself as familiar and canny. The universalizing account of horror, in fact, is facing a serious problem in contemporary Gothic fiction. The primary function of such horror figures fails to maximize Freud's account of uncanniness. It implies that to establish a bond between "self" and "other", discourse must always be mobilized. The monster attempted to love and be loved, eating well, be trustworthy, and a good citizen. In other words, the discourse that articulates the contemporary monster's narratives slips the knowledge of the stereotype of otherness. So what makes the zombie frightening is his difference in which he eats human flesh, deformed body, no conscious, and no social signification. However, the study argued that the universal zombie's stereotype failed to describe the contemporary representation of the undead. We had seen that the zombie R, unlike his ancestors, was endowed with more human-like traits. He had a conscience, name, emotions, and memories. This turning point in Gothic history cannot be explained within the traditional theories of monstrosity such as Sigmund Freud's Uncanniness, Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection, and Jeffery Jerome Cohen's Monster Theory. Instead, the study explained the change within the tent of Post-postmodernism in which the symbolic order of the society must be stretched to include otherness. There must be also a serious and fruitful dialogue between the self and other reaching for a peaceful society.

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