
Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia took her doctoral degree in English Studies at the University of Aveiro, Portugal, in 2005. Her areas of expertise are Postcolonial Literatures and Contemporary Fiction in English. Here she presents a comparative analysis of two interrelated literary fields – postcolonial and feminist theory – through the prism of the grotesque. The author is interested in the deconstruction of postcolonial and gender politics. *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque: Texts of Contemporary Excess* is a comprehensive study, drawing in a complex weave of theories and contemporary fictions.

*Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque* divides into two sections: the first third of the text is devoted to cultural and literary criticism and the location of the Grotesque; the remaining section is given over to dialogical readings and practices of the postcolonial and feminist grotesque. Pimentel Biscaia systematically accounts for the canon, a pantheon of names whose usefulness as references might be enhanced with a handy index. She presents an historical overview, discusses dialogism as methodology and links the research to the poetics of the carnivalesque-grotesque. She also introduces various theorists – René Girard, Mary Russo, Julia Kristeva, Marthe Reineke and others – who provide the wall for a series of dialogical readings; these gender-informed perspectives are used to critique the iconic images of female grotesqueness, the abject and versions of a sacrificial economy. The author then focuses upon the contemporary novel as an extension of the hyperbolic carnival tradition. She envisions the carnivalesque-grotesque as a resurgent mode in postmodern literature and engages with a selection of ‘texts of contemporary excess’ by Githa Hariharan, Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Ben Okri and Robert Coover.

The grotesque implies a curio – strange, fantastic, ugly or bizarre. The cover illustration of *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque* shows a half-human half-plant figure, sculpted in stone as one of the supports to the balustrade of the convent of San Martin Pinario in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, photographed by the author. Pimentel Biscaia suggests that the grotesque axiom came into critical being in the early sixteenth century with the excavation of a hidden cave in Nero’s *Domus Aurea* (Golden Villa), revealing ‘ornamented grottoes of intertwining plants, flowers topped with figures and animalised humans’ (12). The astonishing discovery caught the imaginations of the artists of the time who were lowered into the cave to gawk. The hybrid forms strained the limits of credibility and imagination, engendering feelings of both fascination and revulsion because of their deviation from classical standards of beauty, restraint and order. Pimentel Biscaia quotes Rushdie: ‘If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance … perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitude, one must make oneself grotesque.’

Imagine! In Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1988), an Indian man experiences metamorphosis into a goat after he treads on English ground. What a metaphor! In a sanatorium this man encounters a great many other hybrid freaks, every one unique in appearance but in the same existential condition as himself. Pimentel Biscaia suggests that their strange stigmata and sense of estrangement from the world is the mark of their foreign

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status, particularly in the case of immigrants. Difference is recognised and may be interpreted in two ways, as a virulent disease – plague – or as ‘an external mapping of bodies’ (10). Pimentel Biscaia juxtaposes the theories of Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin in order to examine the political potential of the grotesque.

Wolfgang Kayser evokes an ‘alienating grotesque’ in response to the sinister pall which descends on the estranged individual, casting doubt on naturalisation and identity, rendering the world unreliable and absurd, constituting life as a frightening and hazardous enterprise. Kayser argues that art has the power to exorcise the evil forces through the chimerical displacements of physical distortion, animal illusions, masks, props and the practice of mockery; in effect the evocation of the grotesque is used to ‘draw fire’ away from the body and imaginatively deflect and subdue the threat. However, Pimentel Biscaia suggests that Kayser is concerned only with the Romantic aspects of darkness and monstrosity – noir – and delegates the redeeming possibilities of comic laughter, to the very edge of consciousness, in his fear of ‘existential obliteration’. Pimentel Biscaia confesses that she prefers an extension of Mikhail Bakhtin’s less violent options for bringing about the recalibration of an inclusive and benevolent society.

Bakhtin’s theories are often criticised for optimistic but idealised mythologies of the carnival body, grotesque realism, and the dialogical imagination, with roots in the folk traditions of the Saturnalia and the medieval Festival of Fools which ‘allowed everyone to evade rules, conventions and established truths’ (11). He envisioned a sacred space with the potential to transcend the elitist separations and oppressions of a class system, through consciousness-raising and also revived interest in the visceral and scatological excesses of a Rabelaisian world of grotesque realism: ritualised effrontery, supposedly of the underclass; the insulting banter of the market; vulgar gestures; mockery; mésaillances. Pimentel Biscaia suggests that although there was a link between popular forms of carnival and anti-authoritarian drives, the one-sided rhetorical dogmatism which separated people one from the other could be transformed to pluralistic relativism by Bakhtin’s rule which dictated free and familiar contact among all people at the level of bodily experience. Redemption for human misery was to be found in camaraderie and laughter – liberating tension from the belly or cracked with ironic self-reflection.² Pimentel Biscaia quotes John Morreall: ‘the person with a sense of humor can never be fully dominated.’³

Pimentel Biscaia defends her methodology. She is aware that Bakhtin paid scant attention to women writers; however, she argues that dialogism is an incomplete process which women can enter at any time in the interests of intercommunication: ‘a dialogical perspective enables us to read relationships and writing as part of consciousness in dialogue with themselves (gender, class and race as inter-dependent factors) and with other consciousness’ (407). The dialogical method was supposed to produce a reasoned construction of subjection and historical experience. Pimentel Biscaia also refers to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s model of the polyphonic novel, as a privileged extension of Bakhtin’s ideas. She writes that ‘polyphony has become a central trait of the twentieth and twenty-first century novel’ (33). Multiple spheres of reality are realised in the distinctive ontological worlds of each character and this exchange of worlds is what constitutes ‘reality’.

Pimentel Biscaia follows through in the second section of *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque* with an exceptional series of comparative readings, which focuses on the contextual practices of the postcolonial and the feminist grotesque in a selection of contemporary novels.

Part 1 is called ‘Sacrificing the Animal-Woman’ and examines the trope of Woman as spectacle and martyr. Pimentel Biscaia defends David Danow’s theories which firstly link feminine abjection and sublime terror to the suffering caused by totalitarian regimes. She argues that the grotesque can even transcend death in visions of the apocalypse. Secondly Danow associates the carnivalesque-grotesque with the despotic, excessive and soul-destroying rule of the patriarch of a nation and the indiscriminate fathering of countless helpless children. The Mother figure is the site of resistance. The focal point of this section is the scapegoating of animal-woman, and the figuration of freaks, maternal objects, witches, sacrificial victims and the inverse icons of resistance to the violence of imperial and patriarchal hegemonies.

Both *When Dreams Travel* (Hariharan) and *Shame* (Rushdie) include animal women as characters. However, women are shown to cooperate in their own martyrdom because they have been sadistically corrupted to value the honour of self-sacrifice. Pimentel Biscaia argues that Bakhtin believed that the carnivalesque-grotesque had lost its popular/folk roots, but it is critics like Danow who suggest that the yearning for rebirth survives in the magical realism of Latin America and that the darker Romantic grotesque is revived in the realist grotesque literature of European origin which pertains to the Holocaust. Pimentel Biscaia writes that *Shame* exhibits both types of grotesque; however, she also chooses to discuss *Del amor y otros demonios* (García Márquez) in order to prove that the carnivalesque-grotesque defined in Bakhtin’s theory still exists.

García Márquez’s novel tells the story of Sierva Maria – a child of neglect and ill-treatment – who is both attributed with animal traits and negated by the Church. Pimentel Biscaia argues that in historical records the young girl with a poor education, impoverished indigenous culture and whose behaviour is ‘unguarded’ is marked by gender and social position as primary scapegoat and victim for control and silencing. Sierva Maria is stigmatised as a witch by her singing and then chastised for her ‘lack of cultural and social differentiation’. The girl is perceived by the Church to be tainted by familiar association with the black Other and therefore brutally contained for having possession of an inappropriate freedom for a woman. But she is only a child of twelve. Her vulnerability and innocence are made sinful in order that the corrupt white ‘superiors’ in the Church can reinforce the mores of economic and cultural dominance. Sierva Maria is opportuneely incarcerated as a carrier of the plague; isolated and rejected she dies in abject conditions. However, García Márquez has marked the girl’s difference as an iconic expression of indigenous resistance to colonial rule and endows her existence with an aura of sanctity. Pimentel Biscaia writes that the beginning of the tale, which is also its narrative’s ending, focuses on the image of the girl’s corpse as it is exhumed; it reveals a miraculous growth of bright hair – an element taken from folk legend – and a strange childish appearance, rather than a body in the process of decomposition. The miracle symbolises the continuation of an innocent’s life-form and testifies to an immaculate spirit which even the corruption of death could not destroy.

In Part 2, *The Famished Road* (Okri) pits existential despair against the ward-spell of African magical realism. Mythologies of nationhood and postcolonial rebirth are exploded. Let there be no illusions. Grotesque checkmates grotesque. The poor and down-trodden
starve. The well-off Madame Koto’s body becomes gross with an excess of prosperity, while the teeming multiplicity of the spirits and beggars overwhelm the reader with horror, rather than generate sympathy. Pimentel Biscaia argues that both sides of the equation could represent the abject state of the Nigerian people under an ineffectual and corrupt political system. Such dissolution perpetuates a chain reaction and even the spirit child, Azaro, is subsumed by the apathy of his compound and his inability to retaliate against the powers of darkness. Pimentel Biscaia writes that Okri employs Kayser’s ‘alienating grotesque’, rather than the Bakhtinian celebration of the people’s vitality and the earth’s fecundity which defies genocide: here the people cannot rise to the seasonal and cyclical renewal which is the essence of the carnival. Okri places Nigeria on the rim of the void and holds out no hope of salvation in the exorcism of the country’s psycho-socio-political demons. The power of the ex-patriot pen to carry the scream abroad – to evoke phallic intervention from the outside rather than from within – is the only gesture of resistance and consciousness-raising left when social and political systems fail and the bastion of the spirit is ineffectual to resist oppression.

Pimentel Biscaia concludes her work with a reading of Robert Coover’s Pinocchio in Venice. She feels that this novel is an extraordinary compendium of both the cultural and literal found in the historical festival traditions and the spirit of the carnivalesque. The last chapter is called ‘In the Heart of Darkness’ and follows a descent narrative through a nightmarish puppet land. Pimentel Biscaia suggests that this novel has roots in Europe’s Carnivale but leans towards dark fairy-tale rather than political agenda. Coover does not align himself with any ideology but plays with the movement between the ordered academy and the chaotic world of carnival inversions. Pimentel Biscaia writes that this novel incorporates three forms of folk culture: comic verbal compositions, abusive language, and ritual spectacle performed ironically for the intellectual. Maternal tenderness is deconstructed in a humorous and blasphemous representation of the Virgin, Pinocchio incarnates the role of Christ and the crucifixion is invested with sexuality. In a culmination of excess the grotesque Madonna of the Organs subverts the mythologised icon of womanhood in a double-gendered body. Coover’s text is postmodern: identity is a shifting construction; ambivalence is a catalyst to the imagination; the work is parodic intervention in the sacred metatexts.

Pimentel Biscaia argues the transition from modernism to postmodernism – a change in aesthetics from the epistemological to the ontological dominant – through Brian McHale’s metaphor of the urban crossroads of great cities: the writer can play it safe or dare to cross the street into new territory. She suggests that this line in critical thought brings the literatures of Latin America, North America and Europe into congress through the polyphonic structure of the contemporary novel; magical realist discourse and grotesque imagery meet in the crossing. In theoretical terms, postcolonial texts of magical realism and European literary discourses in the fantastic come closer together through a postmodern umbrella. She postulates that the native voice is used to question authority but in answering back the relationship between the European academic centre and the margins is problematised. Our historical era is one where identities are in flux, contextualised by cultures of class, gender, race, sex, education, social role and so forth, but perforce hybrid, heterogenous, fractured and of necessity anti-totalising. When everyone is supposed to matter equally, which pole has greater ‘authority’? ‘The questioning beast’ raises issues of power nodes, transgression, policing and official censorship.

Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque squarely argues – within a sound academic frame – an anti-realist poetic as legitimate rhetoric. The manifestation of the grotesque has a
particular aesthetic function in the life of the polis – control and correction. Pimentel Biscaia cites Alton Kim Robertson’s theory: the grotesque is at the locus of conflict between two principles, the subjective perception of order and its own negation. The grotesque appears at the gateway of ‘the gaping chasm of categorical separation’, in extremis where there is only order and anarchy as absolutes and ‘their only border is the grotesque.’ Pimentel Biscaia also suggests that the grotesque is tied to phallic anamorphosis. In Lacanian terms the pre-existence of the Word (Symbolic) or the Law-of-the-Father decrees the status quo in a two-tiered hierarchical system. The Semiotic and Woman are both negatively theorized and controlled in order to repress any threat to the masculine power base. Therefore the deconstruction of both language and abjection of the weak are integral to any feminist project. Pimentel Biscaia also argues that an examination of the feminine grotesque has produced a thetic crisis as a result of boundary failure between the Symbolic self and non-authorised elements of the maternal body. She wants to know if women’s language of non-violence and feminist projects can win out against the violence of silencing by the word-of-the-father.

Pimentel Biscaia is of the opinion that grotesque icons, as a communal expression of ‘the people’, have not faded from rhetoric; however, she also suggests that a concept of ‘people’ as opposed to aristocratic elite or the institutional hierarchies of the Church has disappeared in capitalist Europe where materialism and a capitalist market is the driving force, although in certain parts of Africa and South America popular culture, local customs and religious beliefs are very much alive. Bakhtin’s carnival is interpreted as a celebration for all people of an antic disposition and Pimentel Biscaia believes that contemporary writers enjoy the feast. Coover creates a carnival event which plays with the sacred and the profane. Márquez represents the mythologies of a localised oral culture. Rushdie uses thousands of years old traditions of storytelling in a post-modernist novel, showing the influence of the oral on writing. Harirahan re-interprets the classics (The Thousand and One Nights) ‘because it is also about the transition to the written word’ (431) and the failure of women to sustain a position of power in a masculine world: ‘the floating dismembered body of Shrahzad is unquestionably an image of her defeat and the heartless violence exerted on women’ (412).

Never say die! Pimentel Biscaia concludes that the grotesque is an open-ended figure, tied to historical context but more a movement than a reified object: ‘expanding lines of cultural resistance, openness and reappropriation’ (30). She finishes with the observation that the grotesque has ‘comfortably settled and grown’ into ‘postmodern literature by reason of its preoccupation with Otherness and its audacity in investigating the human condition, particularly through the novel which presents the best tools to develop the dialogical potential of the grotesque’ (413).

I have one caveat. A handy reference book which so comprehensively outlines both the background and maps the contemporary guise of the postcolonial and feminist grotesque deserves an index.

Christine Runnel

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