

The Grotesque as an Expression of Superiority in Kevin Kwan's Crazy Rich Asians

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Abstract

For centuries, the grotesque has always been associated with the macabre, bizarre and mysterious or ugliness. In fact, the grotesque often carries pejorative connotations for it challenges traditions and deviates from what is accepted as the norm. Contrary to what is popularly perceived, it is indeed possible to explore the grotesque from a less morbid lens. Over the years, the epistemology of the grotesque has expanded exponentially that it is now possible to examine the grotesque without inferring profusely to death, violence or the supernatural. This paper aims to examine the grotesque in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* by primarily paying attention to three major grotesque elements that include the excess and extravagance, misfits and narcissism. The paper will specifically focus on the female characters that are of Chinese descent and it also examines how grotesque elements such as excess and extravagance, misfits and narcissism have been used as a means for some of the wealthy characters in the selected text to validate their superiority over the others. This study aims to show that the grotesque can go beyond its literal meaning that is usually negatively perceived and that the grotesque can potentially serve as an expression of superiority for some individuals.

Keywords: Kevin kwan, grotesque, excess and extravagance, grotesque laughter, misfits, crazy rich asians.

Introduction

The release of *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan marks a new milestone for Asian American writers in many ways. This paper aims to look at how the grotesque elements such as excess and extravagance, misfits and narcissism were used to present a contrasting viewpoint in a novel that exudes beauty and opulence by specifically exploring the hidden sides of the superrich. It also aims to prove that the grotesque can go beyond its literal form and its presence can be traced even in works where traditional grotesqueries such as monsters, ghosts, death and violence are not overt.

The grotesque is omnipresent in our world whether one chooses to acknowledge its presence or completely disregard it. Although the term grotesque is used colloquially today to describe anything which brings negative connotations such as ugly, bizarre, strange, scary or even abnormal, the epistemology of the grotesque is

undoubtedly more far-reaching than its literal form. The term is also often used derogatorily in various aspects of the arts and literature. As Clark sees it, the grotesque manner appears startling, demonic, disorderly, and depressing, it is not surprising that its deployment has frequently discomfited and annoyed the popular audience. Moralists particularly object that such art lacks piety, joy, and affirmation. (21). Meanwhile, Edwards and Graulund posit that grotesques fiction violate the laws of nature that result in clear-cut taxonomies, definitions, classifications break down. Consequently, there is a built-in narrative tension between the ludicrous and the fearful, the absurd and the terrifying (4). However, this study aims to go beyond the grotesque from its typical violent, bizarre and fear-provoking concepts but rather, it focuses on the more subdued elements of the grotesque such as excess and extravagance, misfits and narcissism.

Edwards and Graulund define extravagance as 'wasteful and excessive. To be extravagant is to show off and lack in moderation. To call someone or something extravagant can be a critique. To be extravagant is to stray away from the beaten path, to wander outside the limits of what is normal. It is to transgress the norm. Yet the extravagant can also be something delightful and enviable, particularly when it is associated with glamour and sophistication. (71). This research aims to study the portrayal of extravagance in *Crazy Rich Asians* in relation to the concept of conspicuous consumption by Thorstein Veblen. According to Veblen, the most obvious form in which conspicuous consumption occurs is seen in consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady and the rest of the domestic establishment (33) The families featured on the novel are indeed no strangers when it comes to living up to what Veblen terms as conspicuous consumption and a close reading on Kwan's novel will reveal how their opulence has in fact wander off the line of normalcy.

Meanwhile, misfits are those who find themselves as outcasts and thus unable to gain acceptance into a certain group. Misfits are grotesquely-inclined as they are different from those who call themselves normal. Generally, misfits are subject to harsh and unfair treatment by the others and social exclusion may be one of the ways they are kept away from a particular group. Kaplan D. Williams says that to be rejected and excluded from the group, and thus from all the benefits of membership (2).

In relation to the idea of narcissism, it actually falls under the sphere of the grotesque as the grotesque too, refers to anything that is incongruity to the norms as explained by Clayborough (9). For the purpose of analysing the characters in this novel, narcissism will be examined from the perspective as identified by James F. Masterson. As noted by Masterson, narcissistic individuals are often arrogant as they can intensify their self-importance by diminishing and belittling somebody else. Next, narcissistic individuals will also be studied in relation to the feeling of envy where they resort to using contempt to minimize others.

Extravagance Beyond the Normal

The opulence featured on *Crazy Rich Asians* is definitely beyond the realm of what most ordinary folks can ever imagine. While extravagance and opulence are quite usual

in their own right, extravagance and opulence that cross the limit of normalcy is deemed grotesque. The amount of wealth possessed by three of the families featured on the novel namely the Youngs, Shangs and Khoos is undoubtedly way beyond what the average folks can ever comprehend. Through the Kwan's lengthy descriptions on some of the affluent characters and particularly through the perspective of the character Rachael Chu, readers get a peek into the secret lives of these very entitled individuals. Kwan writes, *Carol's palatial bedroom, on the advice of her husband's security team, the bedroom was hidden away in the pool pavilion, a white travertine fortress that spanned the swimming pool like a postmodern Taj Mahal. (2).* Carol is one of the many crazy rich characters featured on the novel and by comparing her bedroom to the majestic Taj Mahal which is a symbol of wealth and decadence, Kwan mystifies her by putting her in a league of her own. It is all because she is never meant to be ordinary by virtue of her wealth. However, this will not be the only time where Kwan exaggerates the wealth of his characters to the point of excess, through the lens of Rachel Chu, readers also get to experience vicariously just how affluently some of the characters in the novel live.

You can't imagine how staggering rich these people are, Marie-Helene. The houses, the servants, they style in which they live. It makes the Arnaults look like peasants. What's more, I've been told that Astrid is a double heiress- there's an even more enormous fortune on her mother's side. (33)...she was born into the uppermost echelon of Asian wealth- a secretive, rarefied circle of families virtually unknown to outsiders who possessed immeasurable vast fortunes. (35).

They live a life that even some monarchs cannot afford. Furthermore, the hyperbole used by Kwan of likening them to peasants in comparison with those crazy Asian family members makes the filthy rich Asians almost god-like as they have exceeded what it means to be human. Furthermore, it dehumanizes the superrich Asians and such exaggeration does not only cross the border of what is considered normal but it is also grotesque-inclined because it disturbs our perception on what it means to be wealthy. The use of exaggeration fills the pages of *Crazy Rich Asians* and the abundance of exaggeration found in

the novel can be read as Kwan's way of dissociating the affluent societies from the commoners. The line,

'That was a Gurkha! They are the deadliest soldiers in the world. I used to see them all the time in Brunei.

The Sultan of Brunei only uses Gurkha as his private protection force. What is a Gurkha doing here?' (122) clearly indicates that Youngs are head and shoulders wealthier than the average wealthy. Their ability to have the Gurkha guarding the gates of their mansion when the Sultan of Brunei use them exclusively as his private bodyguards is once again exaggerating the fortune of the Youngs. By prostituting the abilities of the Gurkha as guards, it heightens the stature of the Youngs. The affluent lifestyles of the families become grotesque-inclined as they fall beyond the range of wealth that most could make sense of. This can once again be traced from the line,

'Is this a common thing in Singapore? Importing royal maid from Thailand?' Rachel asked incredulously. "I don't believe so. This service was a lifetime gift to my grandmother." "A gift" From whom?" The King of Thailand. Though it was not the last one, not Bhumibol the current king. Or was it the last one before that? Anyway, he was apparently a great friend of my grandmother's. He decreed that she must only be waited on by court-trained ladies. So there has been a constant rotation ever since my grandmother was a young woman'. (138).

It is not their wealth that makes opulence appears to be grotesque, it is the wealth that exceeds all regular standards, norms and expectation of the society that pushes extravagance to the point of grotesque. When examined critically, the portrayal of extreme extravagance and excess can in fact serve as a way to distinguish the super wealthy folks with ordinary ones. As they live a life that others can only dream of, their superiority over the others can always be upheld.

The Ordeal of a Misfit

Social misfits are those who are denied the acceptance into a particular group or circle. Their differences could be marked by multiple factors that include race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or nationalities. Misfits can be read as grotesque characters because they are deemed different and are treated as outcasts. Rachel Chu is obviously one of the biggest social misfits in *Crazy Rich Asians* because she is ostracized despite being highly

educated and of the same race as the other characters in the novel. Rachel becomes the target of Nick's family members' backlash. Eleanor makes it very clear that Rachel is not who Nick is supposed to marry even before she has met her. She does not care if Rachel is well-educated or Chinese, all she sees is that Rachel's family background is just too inferior to measure up.

"Don't be funny with me! Her family comes from some ulu ulu village in China that nobody has ever heard of. The investigator thinks that they were most likely working class. In other words, they are PEASANTS!" (80).

Despite being a university professor, everyone in Nick's family still judges Rachel based on her wealth and family background.

Rachel is also subject to harsh treatment by Nick's friends who come from the upper crust of the society. In the eyes of these entitled young people, one ceases to exist when one does not come from an exclusive family background. This can be seen from the lines,

"I'm Sorry, but I don't have a cousin named Vivian," Rachel replied in amusement. "Aren't you Rachel Chu?" "Yes," "Isn't your cousin Vivian Chu? Doesn't your family own Taipei Plastics?" "Afraid not," Rachel said, trying not to roll her eyes. "My family is originally from China." "Oh sorry, my mistake. So what does your family do?" "Um, my mother is a real estate agent in the Palo Alto area. Who are these Taiwan Plastics people everyone keeps talking about?" Parker simply smirked. "I'll tell you, but excuse me for just one moment," She unbuckled her seat belt and made a beeline for the back cabin. It was the last time Rachel would see her during the entire night. (178).

Rachel is given a cold treatment by the girl the moment she finds out that Rachel is nothing more than an ordinary person. Her holier-than-thou attitude says it all, she obviously thinks that Rachel is way beneath her. To most of Nick's family members and friends, Rachel is nothing more than a gold-digger. It does not matter how hard Rachel tries to fit in, she will always be kept outside the marble gate. The most overtly grotesque part of the novel happens when Rachel is on a private island with Nick's friends. Out of jealousy and hatred, they decided to take it out on Rachel,

She turned on the lamp by the table and opened the front flap of her bag. She screamed, jerking backwards in horror and knocking over the table lamp. He bag was filled with a large fish that had been badly mutilated, blood seeping out from its gills. Violently scrawled on the vanity mirror above the chair in fish blood were the words "CATCH THIS, YOU GOLD DIGGING CUNT!" (204)

The Pursuit of Gratification through Narcissism

Narcissistic individuals portray themselves in different ways and as seen through Eleanor and some of Nick's wealthy friends, their narcissism is presented through a sense of arrogance and envy. As pointed out by Masterson, narcissistic individuals resort to using contempt to degrade and minimise others as a way to intensify their own sense of self-importance. In line with this, the envious friends of Nick certainly exude what Masterson termed as narcissistic individuals and it can be seen from the following lines;

As Rachael was trying on the white blouse in the dressing room, she overheard two girls in the next dressing room chatting away.

"Did you see what she was wearing? Where did she get that cheap-looking tunic top- Mango?"

"How can you expect her to have any style? Think she gets it from reading American Vogue? Hahaha."

"Actually, Francesca said she's not even ABC- she was born in Mainland China!"

"I knew it! She's got that same desperate look that all my servants have."

"Well here's a chance for her to get some decent clothes at last!"

"Just you watch, with all that Young money that she's going to upgrade pretty damn quick!"

"We'll see- all the money in the world can't buy you taste if you weren't born with it." (181)

In order to boost their sense of self-importance, these wealthy girls resort to using mockery to ridicule a girl whom they hardly know. Rachel turns into their target just because they are envious of her and their envy presents itself in a way that is grotesquely narcissistic.

Even Eleanor is no stranger when it comes to being narcissistic. In her desperate attempt to keep Rachael away from Nick, she has numerous times ridiculed Rachel's background;

"She is not suitable for you, Nicky. She does not come from the right background."

"Stop it, Mum. I'm so fed up with this ridiculous snobbery you and your friends have towards Mainland Chinese. We are all Chinese. Just because some people actually work for their money doesn't mean they are beneath you." (334)

Eleanor's narcissistic remark is filled with arrogance. Debasing Rachel's family background may probably help her to increase her self-importance and also establish her sense of superiority over a girl whom she regards as inferior.

Conclusion

As Wolfgang Kayser puts it, through defamiliarization, the existing world is made estrange and thus it pushes us to see the world from a brand new perspective. The extravagant world that Kwan takes us into through *Crazy Rich Asians* is definitely one of the estranged worlds that many readers find both baffling and perplexing. Normality is constantly challenged through the use of exaggerations, excess and extreme extravagance. *Crazy Rich Asians* breathes fresh air into the whole notion of grotesque as being book that is devoid of traditional grotesqueries such as monsters, ghosts, death and violence, readers are still able to enter a world where the grotesque is significantly present. More significantly, the grotesque elements are presented in the novel not just for the mere purposes of creating the shock effect or a sense of defamiliarization but as seen in the text analysis, the grotesque can serve as a means for some individual to validate their sense of superiority. The world of *Crazy Rich Asians* is paved with opulence, class and extravagance but when looked at the reversed side of the sophistication, lurks grotesque elements waiting to be unearthed. This has proven once again that the grotesque can exceed beyond its literal form for it is vast-ranging and omnipresent in all literary texts.

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