

**GROTESQUE IDENTITIES: AN INTERPRETATION OF SELECT
CHARACTERS IN MIZO FOLKTALES**

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**GROTESQUE IDENTITIES: AN INTERPRETATION OF SELECT
CHARACTERS IN MIZO FOLKTALES**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “Grotesque Identities: An interpretation of Select Characters in Mizo Folktales” written by Hmingsangzuali has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M. Phil regulations of Mizoram University. This dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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DECLARATION

I, Hmingsangzuali, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institute.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The concept of grotesque evades explicit definition due to the application of the term in innumerable genres in various art forms. The origin of the word itself is derived from the Italian word '*grotta*' meaning *cave* and it could be traced back to the 15th Century Roman paintings, figurines and crafts (Rosen 126). The graphic illustrations contained "human and animal figures ...intertwined with foliage in ways which violate not only the laws of statics and gravity, but common sense and plain observation as well" (Harpham 461). In literature, there has been plenty of contemplation of the concept of grotesque as to its legitimization as a literary genre. Cecile Bocianowski explains that the problem lies in the nature of the genealogy of the concept because it has been applied to various fields such as "decorative arts, dance and the fine arts" (313). The determination of grotesque art is usually based on aesthetic spirit that is drastically different and provocative. The concept is inherently ambivalent and stacked with possible divergent interpretations to which Bocianowski comments "the grotesque would affirm itself in order to better challenge and question its own nature, leading to a conception of the term which takes into account both its polymorphous and its evolutionary aspect" (315).

In literary texts, certain elements such as physical deformity, psychiatric disorder, uncommon species of animals, mythical characters, shapeshifters, hybrid of two or more species of animals and supernatural beings have been in literary scene in numerous works over a long period of time. However, the concept of grotesque could not be confined to particular form or manner because new aspects of interpretation within the concept have been continually explored. Since the concept owes its heritage from art forms that deviate from set norms, its extension to literature is also pervaded with the same mood of transgression. It defies existing literary rules to challenge the

system of genre categorization itself. The metaphorical symbolism of monstrous and hybrid forms alone in text do not suffice as an encompassing framework for grotesque theory in literature.

The primary feature of grotesque has been noted as “the structure of estrangement” (Harpham 462). This characteristic of grotesque is implicated to those elements in text that stand out for their bizarre quality. “The bizarre is that which distances itself from the usual order of things, that which is difficult to understand, precisely because of its strangeness. By analogy with this idea of strangeness, the term was further used to refer to anything that induces laughter due to its unlikely, eccentric or extravagant nature” (Bocianowski 317).

The role of humour becomes very significant in the concept of grotesque. Geoffrey Galt Harpham has traced laughter in grotesque to that of Baudelaire’s theory of laughter where such laughter is an expression of “not one man’s superiority over his fellows, but the artist’s superiority over nature” (463). However, Harpham continues to state that grotesque comedy is not free from censure. He expounds on the notion that grotesque humour is a play on morality and that it ultimately evokes ambiguity and confusion. It is an intuitive reaction against the underlying tension of the serious content (463-464).

The laughter in grotesque is also linked with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. In his work *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin contemplates on the cultural significance of the festivity around carnivals. He interprets that the popular culture around carnivals has direct resonance on aesthetic theory. “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside of it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of freedom” (7). He draws direct connection of grotesque theory to that of the

carnavalesque where laughter and terror combine to form a complete unit. There is a break in normative hierarchical structure. To him, the carnival becomes emblematic of the concept of grotesque. He posits that laughter is an inseparable counterpart to grotesque and is an important signifier within the concept of grotesque. He affirms on the notion that the conceptual grotesque provides an alternate world that challenges the idea of status quo in cultural practices.

The grotesque theory moves beyond its origin of visual art to focus on elements in text that has intense magnitude to grab attention because of their “strangeness”. This implies to those elements that display excessive deviation from all sense of social norms. It is a concept that perpetuates the premise of “otherness”. Bakhtin has echoed this characteristic of grotesque function in text as explained by Rosen, “For Bakhtin, an understanding of the Grotesque entails constructing a new paradigm of aesthetic reflection; legitimization lies not in domesticating it, but in stressing and considering its otherness” (133).

The concept of grotesque owes its continuation to the conceptual defiance of existing norm. The interpretation of text by means of grotesque theory is thus directed by a comparative study in binary oppositions. However, there is a problem that arises out of such reading because the reading assumes a presupposition of structural order that exists within and outside of the text but the idea of structural order varies from one culture to another. So the consensus on the mode of interpretation falls on reader response as expressed by Harpham, “...easily the most crucial and measurable aspect is the effect of the grotesque on the reader, listener, or spectator” (462).

The modern theory of grotesque aesthetic provides innovative form of analysis to uncover tensions or shifts in the sense of social values and morality. It challenges and

qualifies the metaphorical expressions of various symbolisms in text. The application of grotesque theory reveals aspects of aesthetic continuity as stated by Rosen “... “grotesque” becomes the term suitable for qualifying an aesthetic category. It now applies to all the arts, since its range of meaning has widened sufficiently to allow it to express change, otherness, aesthetic renewal” (128). The select folk identities and their tales are loaded with grotesque symbolisms that maintain their relevance in the modern world because of their subversive contents. Certain narratives and imagery are framed in such a way as to provoke ambiguity in their historical moment of creation. Taking the various cultural and social changes in Mizo society into consideration, the ambiguity of these identities offers plenty of room for analysis.

The study focuses on contextualizing the select characters both in their historical time and the modern perception of their significances. The application of modern grotesque theory promotes refusal of conformity. The process of alienation of the familiar world becomes vital in understanding of the binary and opposing nature of modern aesthetic thought. Grotesque as a theory is a relatively modern conception and so Rosen traces the problem and views regarding the establishment of grotesque as a legitimate theoretical base for reading texts. The combination of alienation and legitimization within grotesque theory reveals the state of human reality where such contradiction is a source of new mode of understanding human reality.

Bakhtin has developed his concept of the grotesque from his theory of multiple narratives within a single discourse. He stresses on the multiplicity of counter voices that exist within the current of the single authoritative voice. The same multiplicity of narratives in text is reflected in his theory of the carnivalesque. He traces the cultural practices around carnivals as an embodiment of the grotesque concept. In this manner,

the grotesque aesthetics becomes a cultural practice that cannot be isolated from the society. He views the notion of grotesque to be an organic part of a society that could not be separated from life. He rejects the idea of classifying grotesque features in text as inferior to other forms of expression in aesthetic consideration.

In grotesque realism... the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egoistic form, severed from other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body (Bakhtin 19).

Folklore studies have revealed that the essential part of folklore contains “irrationality” and that it entails “beliefs in ghosts and demons, fairies and goblins, sprites and spirits; it referred to credence in omens, amulets, and talismans” (Ben-Amos 10). Although the fantastic element is only one among many characteristics in the study of folklore, it is also an important indication of the sense of imagination in a culture. The traditions involving certain ritualistic and religious beliefs in specific cultural group have direct influence on their folk narratives. However, folklore transcends their origin of tradition to become a reflection of the essence of identity of a collective society. “Modern fieldwork has shown us that folklore need not be tradition, whether one considers it as a historically concluded phenomenon or as a process in time” (Alver 45).

The production of Mizo folklore reflects the cultural history of Mizoram and the cultural history of Mizoram is classified into three stages by James Dokhuma. The pre-colonial past of the Mizo till the advent of Christianity in the first stage. The second stage is the post-Christian Mizoram where Mizo social and cultural functions are still heavily cohesive with traditions of the previous stage. Although there is a drastic

transition in religious belief and practices, the purely agricultural based society still maintains certain form of solidarity within the different communities in Mizoram. The social traditions and practices are also in tune with the previous cultural stage. In the third stage, James Dokhuma categorises the period marking the advent of modernity till present Mizoram. It is a stage where agricultural based economy is replaced with other forms of profession. In this stage, there is a shift in cultural spirit due to the introduction and development of academia and technology. The cultural landscape is heavily influenced by both the transition of religion and economy in this stage. The folklore of Mizoram is situated in the first stage of Mizo cultural history (11).

Among the various forms of Mizo folkloristic expressions, folktale is one of the most enduring forms of cultural celebration. Mizo folktale as a genre covers plethora of subjects and themes such as myths, legends, fantasy, fables, religious beliefs, relationship with nature and so on. The oral folk narratives of Mizo people reflect rich cultural heritage of the people. Ben-Amos has described the close relation between the people and their folklore as a reflection of the collective community itself. “Each improvised and embellished the text, yet conformed to the communal aesthetic and ethical standards. Such an interpretation of the communality of folklore also allowed the viewing of folk prose and poetry as expressions of social fears and wishes, ideals and values. Folklore reflected the collective experience of society and was the mirror of itself that the community constantly faced” (12). As such the study focuses on the interrelation between the Mizo society and their sense of aesthetic as reflected in their folktales.

The proposed research will focus on 15 Mizo folk characters drawing primary sources from P. S Dahrawka’s *Mizo Thawnthu*(1964) and B. Lalthangliana’s *Pi Pu*

Zunleng: Studies in Mizo Culture and Folktales(2007). The characters chosen for the study include “The tales of Lalruanga and Keichala”, “The tales of Liandova te unau”, “The tales of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli”, “The tale of Hlawndawhthanga”, “The tale of Kungawrhi”, “The tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia”, “The love story of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga”, “The love story of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma” and the adventures of Chhurbura.

The folk aesthetic of the select characters reveals certain human conditions in its purest form. The sentiments expressed in the tales cover the fear about mortality and beliefs about the afterlife, the tragedy of warfare, interactions of human with fantastic creatures and supernatural beings, the metaphysical quality of human love, interaction with other race and social criticism. The select tales also reflect the complexity of the relation of human with their natural environment. The theme of death is often employed in a fantastic manner as in “The tale of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli” and in “The tale of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma”. Death is averted in the former by the use of magic and in the latter the tale further explores the afterlife. The theme of powerful romantic love is also featured heavily in the tales. Tales of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga, Zawltlingi and Ngambawma, Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli explores both the tragedy and transformative power of romantic love.

The select characters and their tales also feature fantastic creatures and supernatural beings that reside within the natural world. Mizo folk aesthetic sensibility and religious beliefs and practices are closely related and therefore these fantastic creatures draw their inspiration from these religious beliefs. The pre-colonial Mizo religious belief is closely linked to nature and benevolent supernatural beings like Khuanu, Puvâna, Vanchung-nula, and Vanhrika are believed to reside in *van*. The literal

translation of *van* is ‘sky or heaven’ in the modern Mizo context. There is an implication that the meaning of the word *van* as the firmament of the terrestrial world in modern Mizo context may also be applicable in the old Mizo belief. Various Mizo social historians have explained about the narratives involving these supernatural beings who reside in *van*. K. Zawla states that natural phenomena like thunder is believed as the sound made by Puvâna when he drags a huge tray across the sky and Vanchung-nula is a maiden in the sky who fetches water and showers earth in the form of rain from the sky (43).

Another such indication of the close relation of Mizo per-colonial religious belief and the natural world is the creation of supernatural beings called *ramhuai*. This category of fantastic creatures is believed to be spirits that reside in the jungle and some are believed to dwell within the vicinity of human settlements. The literal translation of the term is ‘spirits that dwell in jungle’. The simplified term *huai* is often suffix to specific natural elements like rivers, rocks, trees, caves, hills, crossroads in a jungle, etc. They are regarded as spirits that cause physical harm on human beings. Therefore there are various forms of rituals performed to appease these spirits. However, these spirits are not regarded as exerting only negative form of influence to human. James Dokhuma explains how these elemental spirits are also attributed to interfere in a positive way. They are believed to interact with individuals and appear in their dreams. Those favoured individuals are often endowed with success in their hunting trips or being aided in times of need by the *huai* (71).

This relation of human with the natural world has intrinsic connection with Mizo aesthetic sensibility. These fantastic creatures feature heavily in these selected folktales. The select characters either belong or interact with creatures from the natural

world. This dynamic of human-nature relationship also shows the boundary between the human world and the natural world. It reflects on the condition of human within and outside of the natural world. The tales serve as an important tool of examining the human condition through aesthetic measures. Through the interaction of human with nature, the tales reveal man's innermost fears, hopes, beliefs and ideals that frame the collective sense of morality and social functions.

The supernatural is also presented in novel and inventive ways in the tales. One such tale that combines supernatural being and the human is "The tale of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli". The tale depicts the story of a supernatural heroine Aithangveli. She is described as a goddess called vanchung nula from *van*. She ventures to the land of humans in search of the most handsome man named Thlihranthanga whose beauty she has heard from her mother. She disguises herself as an old lady and shows up at Thlihranthanga's home. She is hired as a hand that tends livestock. She tends the livestock at the family's *jhum* which is far away from the village. She takes off her disguise during the day. Thlihranthanga becomes suspicious of the old lady so he watches her in secret. When he sees the beautiful goddess in her true form he falls in love with her instantly.

Thlihranthanga hatches a plan with his father and aunt without the knowledge of his mother. He plots on a way to marry the beautiful Aithangveli. His mother has deep prejudice against Aithangveli because she does not know Aithangveli's true identity and form. But after Thlihranthanga's plan becomes successful he marries Aithangveli. The mother becomes so ashamed of her prejudice against Aithangveli after she finds out that she is a beautiful goddess. The couple enjoy their union for a short while and after they have a son Aithangveli's parents decide to take her back to *van*. Although Aithangveli

warns her husband of the impending event, Thlihranhanganga could not save his beloved. Their young son also passes away not long after Aithangveli disappeared. Thlihranhanganga becomes so grief stricken that his heart gives away and he dies of a broken heart.

Thlihranhanganga's father sends message to Aithangveli informing her about the death of her husband and son. She comes back to earth and brings back both her husband and her son to life. The tale is an interesting revelation about the perception of the past Mizo religious beliefs. In their belief, both benevolent and malevolent forces are regarded as actively interacting on the human world. There are tales where supernatural beings are humanized and have close interaction with humans as in the tale of Aithangveli. The character of Aithangveli is a maiden from *van* who is humanized not just through her marriage to a man but also endowed with the power of bringing back the dead.

Although modern Mizo cultural landscape has seen great transformations due to various factors and influences from modern globalization, these folktales and other forms of folk expressions still constitute vital component in defining cultural identity. These folktales and characters reflect the lived and shared experiences of the Mizo people from time immemorial. They contain the collective social values that still prove valuable even in the modern Mizo society. They inform the present social values because they are tested by both society and time. "Any expression had to pass through the sieve of communal approval before it could be considered folklore" (Ben-Amos 11). The subjects and themes of these tales could be interpreted as the sincerest form of expression about human nature. They are also artistic expressions shared by the society at large.

The study incorporates the modern grotesque theory of aesthetic to select folk characters. The tales contain diverse folk characters that exhibit a wide range of purpose and meaning. These tales are created without any form of censure because they are the genuine expression of Mizo people living in a time that necessitated their narrative to be intuitive of their natural inclinations. The tales combine realism and fantasy to reveal about various social issues. The themes and subject matter of these folk tales are framed with the intentions of educating the community about human vices that could harm the system of their social functioning.

One of the most dynamic Mizo folk characters is the character of Chhurbura. He is a versatile character whose comic absurdity and heroism makes him a powerful folk figure. He is attributed with many tales accounting many comical adventures. Unlike other folk characters that are heavily incorporated with magic and the supernatural, Chhura is the most human character among them all. Some tales feature him as a complete fool like the tale where he ventures to sell some pots to another village. He carries the pots on his shoulder and after a while his load hurts his shoulder and decides to switch sides. Instead of putting the pots on the other shoulder, he thinks that it would be smart to turn his whole body to the other side. He does not know that he has merely retraced his step back to his village. When he reaches his village, he enters his neighbour's house thinking that he is in another village. A hilarious interaction with his children and wife ensued where he does not recognize his own family.

In his other tales he is portrayed as a clever rogue who outsmarts his enemies in some absurd manner. His bizarre antics earn him few enemies. In one of his tales he travels to *Mawngping khua*¹. One morning the villagers see Chhura defecating from a balcony. The villagers ask him how he could perform such task. Chhura replies that his

parents had made a hole in his buttock when he was a child using a hot skewer and he offers to do the same for them. The villagers excitedly bring him their children. He puts a big skewer in the fire and performs his atrocious task on all their children. He puts them in a basket and tells them to wait for three days during which he has made good with his escape.

He is pursued but he always manages to outsmart his pursuers. In one tale his enemies lie in wait for Chhura in his *thlam*². Chhura has suspicion that his enemies are waiting for him there. He calls out to his hut and says that his hut always greets him with a sound when he calls out. He loudly exclaims that there might be someone hiding in his hut which is why his hut is unusually quiet that morning. So his enemies let out a yell after which Chhura runs away. In another tale, Chhura is eventually captured and put in a basket. He is hung on a bridge above a deep river. Even in this story Chhura is able to make his escape in a comic turn of event.

Chhura has an older brother named Nahaia who is a lazy cunning man. Chhura and Nahaia have few tales together in which Nahaia is seen as an opportunistic man with no conscience toward his brother. He pulls tricks on his brother to steal Chhura's prized possessions. In one of the tales, Chhura is featured as a hero at the time he captured an ogress. In return for her freedom, the ogress offers a bargain. She offers to give various magical items like axe and hoe but Chhura refuses until she offers *sekibuhchhuak*³. This magical object could churn out delicious cooked rice and meat. When Nahaia comes to know of Chhura's *sekibuhchhuak* he decides to trick his brother into giving him the wonderful object. Nahaia sets a bunch of hay on fire and calls out a false alarm to his brother. He calls to Chhura to save his *sekibuhchhuak*. Chhura thinks that his house is

really on fire and throws out his *sekibuhchhuak* to Nahaia. In most of their tales, Nahaia always gets the best of Chhura and tricks him to get his way.

The tales are narrated with imaginative use of various dramatic devices that engage the audience with awe and wonder. There is a significant use of bizarre characters and actions to attract attention. This narration technique brings out aesthetic quality that is most informative about the experiences of past Mizo way of life. The narratives contain sudden shifts in characters and events but follow a linear path to convey a single plotline. The select tales show the reverence and admiration bestowed to traditional heroes and legends. Traditional heroes from the select tales like Lalruanga, Hrangkhupa, and Phawthira are portrayed with many noble character traits that showcase the ideology of Mizo sense of morality.

Lalruanga is endowed with exceeding intellect that makes him as one of the most revered folk heroes. He has many tales accounting on his adventures where his intelligence, wisdom and power of magic help him avert all sorts of adversaries. In his tale with Keichala, he is portrayed as a brave man who dares to befriend a *keimi*⁴. He is seen as brave enough not only to befriend the monster but earns the monster's admiration. Keeping in consideration the hostility and fear levelled on a monstrous form like *keimi*, the hero Lalruanga is represented as a hero so noble that he approaches the monster in a dignified manner. His victory over Keichala is represented from his ability to overpower the monster through his mental prowess and not by any means of physical violence.

The traditional hero Hrangkhupa is portrayed as a man who is able to win his justice against all odds. He is abducted by malevolent spirits called *huai* when he is still a small child. His benefactor Hawnglaia kills Hrangkhupa's wife in fear that

Hrangkhupa would become too powerful to undermine the authority of Hawnglaia. Hrangkhupa not only avenges Hawnglaia's crime but assert his dominance over Hawnglaia by carrying out different acts of heroism.

The hero Phawthira is featured in "The tale of Kungawrhi". He is represented as an extremely brave character who surpasses his brother Hrangchala in bravery. He and his brother rescue Kungawrhi from a *keimi*. When they are engaged in a fiery pursuit to escape from the monster, Phawthira kills the monster with a sword. Kungawrhi is abducted by spirits at night from their camp due to the cowardice of Hrangchala. Phawthira again rescues Kungawrhi. On their way back out of a cave of the spirits his brother trapped him in the cave by cutting down the vine which is the only way out of the cave. He is stuck in the land of the spirits for a long time and waits patiently for the seeds of the vine he has planted to grow. Finally, he is able to return to his village and kills Hrangchala and marries Kungawrhi.

The select tales also explore the theme of death in different manners. The fear and apprehension around the issue of death and afterlife is a common theme in Mizo folktales. The select tales of Aithangveli, Tlingi and Ngama, deal with death that has certain implications about the old Mizo belief. In the pre-Christian era, the Mizo people believe that the soul of the dead goes either to *Mitthi Khua*⁵ or *Pialral*⁶. *Mitthi khua* is a place for the souls of the common people while *Pialral* is for those people who performed the rituals of *Thangchhuah*⁷ and is comparatively desirable. Those who achieve *Thangchhuah* not only enjoy contented life while they lived but also in the afterlife as well.

The belief about life after death in pre-Christian Mizoram is not very far off from the natural communal way of their life. It is believed that the souls of the departed

journey to *Rih dil*⁸ which is a lake situated in the Indo-Myanmar border. After the souls cross *Rih dil*, they journey to a mountain called *Hringlang tlang*⁹ where they could see the land of the living. From the top of the mountain, they could have a clear view of their villages and long to go back home in the world of the living. To help them move forward in their journey they have to wear a flower called *Hawilopar*¹⁰. This flower allegedly has magic which make them unable to turn their head back. So the souls continue on their journey with heavy hearts. Then they reach a spring called *Lunglohtui*¹¹. The water from this spring is also magical. It is an elixir that makes the dead to forget about their past life. So when the souls of the dead drink from *Lunglohtui* they immediately forget about their heartache and desire to return to the land of the living.

Then they reach a gate leading to *Mitthi khua*. At the gate, there is a guard called Pawla. It is said that Pawla carries a slingshot and strikes whoever crosses the gate with the terrible instrument. His strikes are said to be very painful. The wounds from his strike could last for days. However, Pawla does not dare strike the souls of infants and those who perform *Thangchhuah* during their lifetime. This belief shows the unprecedented prestige the Mizo people hold for the title of *Thangchhuah*. *Thangchhuah* is a prestigious and coveted title that exalts the beholder both during and after one's lifetime.

There are two ways in which one can attain the title of *Thangchhuah*. The first way is by killing a variety of wild animals. There is a requirement of different species of animal one has to kill. The pre-Christian society is faced with dangers from various natural events. They are faced with threats from predatory animals and inter village war. So men with excellent hunting skills are celebrated and respected for their skills and

bravery. Such brave men are called *Pasaltha*¹² and they are not only skilled hunters but also strong warriors who could protect the community from enemies. These men aspire to achieve *Thangchhuah* and whenever they kill an animal within the required species of animal for *Thangchhuah* they perform a ceremonial rite called *aih*. This ritual entails “sacrifice of domestic animal and perform a ceremony over or for (a wild creature killed in hunting or a foe killed in fighting). This is done with a view to getting the spirit of the slain into the power of the slayer after death, and also to protecting him from evil consequences during this lifetime” (Lorrain 4). Each ceremony of *aih* include singing, dancing, dinking of *zu*¹³, chanting *hlado*¹⁴ while firing a gun.

The second way to achieve *thangchhuah* is by performing rites of passage that involve different levels of religious rituals. Any person who has built a family of his own and practices his own *sakhua* is eligible to pursue the title. The rituals involved for the achievement of this form of *thangchhuah* are very difficult and exhaustive. It takes a long period of time because it involves a tremendous amount of wealth and only few could achieve it. When one reaches each milestone for *thangchhuah*, there is a ceremonial observation of the occasion with characteristic variations of each ritual. The rites of passage include animal sacrifices and worship of different gods, goddesses and ancestors, drinking of *zu*, dancing and feasts. The culmination of these rites of passage is *khuangchawi*¹⁵.

These customs and beliefs permeate through the structure of Mizo folktales. In the select tales, the issue of afterlife is explored in “The tale of Tlingi and Ngama”. In the tale of Tlingi and Ngama, *Mitthi khua* is depicted as a mysterious and fantastic place where human reason is completely overturn. The titular hero Ngama visits his deceased lover Tlingi in the land of the dead. When Ngama reaches the land of the dead he sees a

group of men chopping delicate shrubs. They tell Ngama that the soft stem of such delicate plant is a lumber for building Tlingi's house floor. To the amazement of them, Ngama uses his hands to easily slice up the plant. At night Tlingi sleeps in reverse and faces the opposite side toward the foot of the bed. Ngama is met with other circumstances that perplex him like the time that the whole village hunt a black caterpillar saying that it is a bear. Even their fishing trip is described with comic absurdity where they gather a bunch of dead leaves instead of fishes from the river. The dead are depicted as possessing magic which in one instance show them as vanishing into thin air on their way back from their fishing trip.

In the tale there is a theme of romantic love story that defy the laws of human reason. The love between the primary characters is the central theme. The tale demonstrates how the characters are destined together even before their birth. However, the parents of the heroine could not agree to their alliance. The tragic love story enters into the fantasy world of the dead to show the transcendental quality of human love.

The same kind of tragic story is also seen in "The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga". The tale is a subversive revelation about social vice that result in the separation of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga. Their love story has become a symbol of true tragic story in Mizo folklore. Lianchhiari is the daughter of a village chief who falls in love with a man much lower in social rank. However, she disregards all the reproaches and condemnations she faces due to her relationship. Due to a deceptive agent in their relationship, the lovers are separated never to reunite again. She carries on with her feelings even after her marriage to another man and have a family.

There are many instances where she challenges social norms to assert her feelings for Chawngfianga. She boldly disregards social reproof and criticism. The

narrative of a lovelorn Lianchhiari represents the ultimate tragic love story in Mizo aesthetic. Her loyalty to Chawngfianga and the hopelessness of her circumstance cuts her as a very heartbreaking figure whose injustice that could never be revoked. Her lost love affects her so deeply that she never cares to hide her feelings from her husband and her children. Her children blame her for her unlawful feelings. When they confront her about it she merely brushes them off saying that she wishes her children were her children with Chawngfianga.

The portrayal of social injustice is seen most clearly in the tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala. They are two brothers who are ostracised by their society because they are orphans. It is a cautionary tale on the evils of social discrimination. The brothers are subjected to hostile treatment from their community. They become orphan at a very young age when they could hardly earn their livelihood. They are sons of a widow who leaves them for a husband and so the elder Liandova is left to find means to provide for their survival. Since he is the elder of the two, he is also acutely aware of the attitude of their society toward them. His younger brother Tuaisiala is still an innocent child who is not yet comprehensive of the degree of their tragic condition.

The two brothers struggle to find their sustenance in different instances of the story. They sometimes accompany hunting trips to the jungle but they are treated unfairly by others. Even when they are successful, they are given only the unwanted part of an animal. Since they have no instruments form farming they came up with a clever plan. They tie a swing at the outskirts of their village and the villagers on their way to their cultivation use to ride on their swing. At that time, the brothers would use their instruments to clear a small area nearby to grow rice. However, they are aided by various benevolent agents that would reverse their fortune.

When the brothers climb to the top of social hierarchy, they do not forget the mistreatment they get from their community. They humiliate their community by dumping the old bones the villagers had given in their past. When they see the evidence of their pathetic charity, they become so humiliated that they disperse in the middle of Liandova's *khuangchawi* celebration. Even their mother who has left them at a very young age pays them a visit after their fortune change. She is so ashamed of her action that on her way back to her village she turns back to look at her sons' village and is filled with remorse. She collapses and dies out of shame in the spot.

The concept of identity is multi-faceted and pluralistic in itself. These characters selected for study exhibit various nuances that maintain their modern relevance in literary studies. They are a collective of characters that demonstrate arrays of characteristics known for their ambiguity and complexity. Their tales show versatile themes like violence, murder, adultery, death, discrimination and alienation. Some of the characters have monstrous forms and mannerisms. Their significance moves beyond the confines of folkloristic study because their tales are filled with metaphorical structures that implies deeper connotation on aesthetics.

The study will interpret these familiar folk characters within the grotesque framework. It will trace the aesthetic representation of the select characters and their narratives from grotesque theory to determine their degree of connotation on humanity and social life. It is an attempt to bring out their relevance on the modern society and individual. The select characters will be analysed from their metaphorical representation both from their physical forms and actions in their tales. The select characters will be given critical appreciation using grotesque aestheticism to bring out their significance on the Mizo sense of aestheticism and view of life.

Notes

¹ *Mawngping khua* is the name of a village where the residents there do not have holes in their body to defecate.

² *Thlam* is “a jhoom-house; a house built on the jhoom or cultivated clearing in the forest, used as a shelter or temporary home and also as a barn” (Lorrain 476)

³ *Sekibuhchhuak* is a magical horn that can churn out cooked rice from one end and cooked meat from the other end.

⁴ *Keimi* is a “mythical tiger-man, a person possessing the magic power of changing himself or herself at will into a tiger, and back again into a human being” (242).

⁵ *Mitthi khua* is the land of the dead. It is a place for those souls who do not achieve *thangchhuah* during their lifetime.

⁶ *Pialral* is the Mizo pre-Christian paradise for the souls of those who attain the coveted title of *thangchhuah* during their lifetime.

⁷ *Thangchhuah* is “the title given to a man who has distinguished himself by killing a certain number of different animals in the chase, or by giving a certain number of public feasts” (447).

⁸ *Rih dil* is a lake situated in the northwestern Chin State in Myanmar. It is believed to be passed by the spirit of the dead in their journey in the pre-Christian Mizo belief.

⁹ *Hringlangtang* means the hill where the living are in clear view.

¹⁰ *Hawilopar* is a mythical flower. “The spirits of the dead pluck and wear these blossoms in their hair and ears and after that have no desire to turn and look back upon the earth which they have left behind” (144).

¹¹ *Lunglohtui* is a mythical spring “of which the spirits of the departed drink and lose all their longings to return to earth” (303).

¹² *Pasaltha* is a term for a brave man, hero, hunter or warrior.

¹³ *Zu* in Mizo folkloristic context is a traditional beer made from rice.

¹⁴ *Hlado* is “the hunter’s cry or chant which is raised directly a wild animal has been killed in the chase, and also on the road home, and before entering the village” (148).

¹⁴ *Khuangchawi* is the culmination of several rites of passage in Mizo belief to acquire a place in Pialral or “Lushai Paradise”. It entails several days of celebration with dancing, public feasts and sacrificial ceremonies. It is celebrated with great pomp by the entire village.

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CHAPTER 2

The Terrible-Grotesque Identities

In grotesque aesthetic, the terrible grotesque is an interpretation of symbolism that focuses on the dark and bizarre elements in a work of art. It is an attempt to make meaning out of the extremely exaggerated portrayal of life in art. There have been numerous attempts to categorize the elements of grotesque in art and literature. John Ruskin describes the terrible grotesque as “Art arising from irregular and accidental contemplation of terrible things; or evil in general” (1709). He traces the presence of grotesque in art to bring out its implication on ideology pertaining to art and thus he connects the terrible grotesque to the sensualist ideals. Geoffrey Harpham has aligned Ruskin’s terrible grotesque to Wolfgang Kayser’s concept of the “fantastic grotesque” (464).

Michel Steig in his criticism of the grotesque connects Ruskin’s concept of “evil” to “the unconscious, or more specifically, the id” in psychoanalysis (255). He locates the anxiety in the terrible grotesque to that of Freud’s concept of the “Uncanny”. He draws parallel the uncanny with Ruskin’s concept of the ‘fearful’ which is anxiety provoked by language in literature. Freud develops his concept to explain the capacity of the human mind to connect the external object which in this case is the literary language to that of “repressed infantile fantasies, wishes, or modes of thought” (Steig 256)

The grotesque forms in text entail ambiguity and uncertainty due to its subversion of existing norms and sense of morality. In her contemplation of grotesque aesthetic, Elisheva Rosen explains, “...the very structure of grotesques calls attention to itself- as ornaments they are both too noticeable and too expressive. They upset the organization of a figurative system and the hierarchy on which it is based” (Rosen 127). However, this very nature of subversion has been a powerful medium to contest and realign aesthetic value by adopting new modes of thinking. “For by acknowledging the

lack of certainty at the heart of grotesque texts, we remain open, multiple, and, as such, we can embrace uncertainty over certainty: this, then, resists totalization, in all its many forms, and offers many routes into multiple readings” (Edwards and Graulund 3).

Tales like “The tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia”, “The tale of Hlawndawhthanga”, “The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga”, “The tale of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma” and “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” contain characters reflecting on the terrible grotesque. The power struggle between Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia demonstrates grotesque ambiguity that reflects deeper implication about human survival and domination. The complexity of the instinct-intellect dynamic in the story of Hlawndawhthanga provokes anxiety specially from the symbolism of Hlawndawhthanga’s hybridity. The subversive love story of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga exposes social discrimination by exercising acts outside the social norm. The morbid love story of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma explores the transition of a familiar theme of love to the fantastic grotesque through the excessive display of their affections. “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” reveals an imperfect society that consciously alienates two orphan brothers and the tale evokes the image of the terrible grotesque amidst serious themes in the tale.

The central theme of each tale provides insight about the characters and their behaviour which could help in determining different aspects of terrible grotesque they provoke. In “The tale of Hrangkhupa”, the heroism of Hrangkhupa provokes uncertainty because of his actions and attitude to achieve his heroism. He disregards morals and ethics that dictate the functions of society. The insidious revenge acts are motivated out of the rivalry of the characters’ constitution in their rule of Zialung village. The close reading of the development of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia revealed their internal

resolve that results in crimes that far outruns the initial provocation and cause. The simple narration of the tale makes the characters flat and since the style of narration does not elaborate their internal struggle; their characterization is limited to the confines of their criminal acts. Thus we can conclude that the tale is crafted with the intent to shock and invoke fear.

In their struggle for supremacy, the primary character Hrangkhupa is framed in such a way that he achieves triumph from wrongs committed by his guardian. In fact, the tale revolves around the heroism of Hrangkhupa and the story starts with a bizarre prediction about his birth. His father overhears a conversation between *Zialung huai* and *Zih Huai* discussing of a birth of two babies. The eerie conversation in a mystical forest reveals the destinies of those babies. One is destined to die from a tiger's attack at a young age and the other is revealed as the protector of *Zialung* village and so named him *Zialung Khaw Chhan Hrangkhupa*¹. The heralding of the titular village hero Hrangkhupa is presented in such magical yet horrifying fashion. *Huai* in Mizo belief represented supernatural beings that were mostly feared and occasionally appeared in Mizo tradition of the past. They were mostly referred as malevolent spirits though benevolent *huai* were also believed to interfere in human matters.

The aesthetic sensibility behind the creation of a paradoxical hero resonates with Ruskin's theory of "noble grotesque" (Ruskin 1748). Ruskin emphasizes the ability of grotesque symbolism to bring out the 'noble truth' that transcends the limitation of normative human perception. In the process of grotesque aesthetic representation human imperfection is shown to enlighten the reality beyond the empirical world. "And thus in all ages and among all nations, grotesque idealism has been the element through

which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed, from the most sublime words of true Revelation” (1754).

Thus, the presence of *huai* in the tale could be contextualised as an element of the grotesque put in paradox with the creation of a traditional hero. Ruskin traces his theory of the symbolic grotesque to sociological factor because he believes that psychological creation of such art is influenced by the cultural conditions of the time and so believing that grotesque is a form of cultural criticism. This nature of contrast and juxtaposition of the normative and the horror is featured numerous times in grotesque aesthetic. Ruskin believes that such grotesque art is a cultural production arising out of the mass consciousness and thereby reflects the collective identity of a specific culture (Edwards and Graulund 17).

Hrangkhupa was continually supervised by *huai*. The collective *huai* attempt to lure him away from his village. When he is a small child these *huai* transform themselves into different animals as baits. These attempts show the eagerness of control that these *huai* have over the character. They finally succeed when Hrangkhupa grows up to be a boy. He is discovered after the abduction at the outskirts of Zialung village by Hawnglaia and his hunting party. Thus we see the special circumstances that influence the making of Hrangkhupa as a hero beyond the traditional sense because there is also a terrible grotesque quality of his heroism.

The characterization of Hawnglaia also shows traits of the horrific. When Hawnglaia and his hunting party found the abandoned Hrangkhupa in the outskirts of Zialung village they decide to put the boy through horrendous trials. They plant their spears on the ground with the pointed end facing up and they threw the boy in the air to land to his fate among the spears. Since Hrangkhupa is guarded by *huai*, no harm befalls

on him and he always falls in the spaces between those spears. Then Hawnglaia and his party place traditional dao swords with the sharpened blade facing up in the spaces between the pointed spears. Once again, they throw the boy in the air to land to his fate but Hrangkhupa escapes death as before because the swords fall to their sides when Hrangkhupa was about to land on the ground. This particular horrendous exercise seems excessive and exaggerated. The horrendous imagery of an abducted boy thrown to these terrible acts is very symbolic of the terrible grotesque.

Hawnglaia's character is framed in such a way that he acts as an inefficient foil against the might of Hrangkhupa. His continual defeat by Hrangkhupa shows his pitiable position in the tale yet it looks as if the sympathy of his fate is suppressed mostly by the complex circumstances of the hero. He is perpetually in fear of Hrangkhupa and is filled with anger and desire for revenge but is too helpless to avenge his injustice. In the initial part of the story he exhibits a noble gesture of adopting the orphan Hrangkhupa. He finds him a wife and settles him to rule over a small section of his village. But it is also mentioned that Hawnglaia often collects *fathang*² among his citizens. So it might be due to his greed or inefficiency of his rule that necessitated the excessive collection of *fathang*. Hrangkhupa makes a request to Hawnglaia for special exclusion from *fathang* for him and his subjects. These requests made Hawnglaia anxious thinking that Hrangkhupa was undermining his authority. He resolves to take drastic measure by killing Hrangkhupa's wife in his absence and starts a hostile war between them.

The extreme exertion of power by Hawnglaia could be aligned with the kind of 'grotesque sovereignty' described by Michel Foucault. Foucault has asserted the concept of power as a separate entity that goes beyond the control of those who are in power. It has its own intrinsic characteristics that sometimes manifest itself in manners that defy

normative boundaries of human law and reason. Foucault called out those persons exerting such arbitrary sovereignty by reasoning that, “The grotesque is one of the essential processes of arbitrary sovereignty” (Foucault 12). He asserts that the dynamics of cause and effect in such kind of sovereignty is disproportionate and bizarre. He further elaborates, “This grotesque mechanism of power...this grotesque cog in the mechanism of power, has a long history in the structures and political functioning of our societies.” (12)

Foucault’s ‘grotesque sovereignty’ not only attributes horror and anxiety but also acknowledges the comical and ludicrous aspect of those who exert such kinds of power because of the incongruent nature of their person and character to that of their cruelty. This line of analysis corresponds with the character of Hawnglaia because he does exert arbitrary sovereignty but fails to counteract retaliation of Hrangkhupa and falls at his desperate mercy for most part of the tale.

When Hrangkhupa takes on his revenge his retaliation goes beyond avenging his injustice, he takes upon himself to assert his dominion over Hawnglaia in a rationale of a grotesquely terrible hero. His first revenge was at the ‘Se chhun’³ ceremony of Hawnglaia. He takes his spear and seizes the honour of killing the ceremonial mithun from Hawnglaia. His action is a bold offense against Hawnglaia and it frightens Hawnglaia so much so that he and his family migrate to another village called Rianglei. Hrangkhupa vows that he will kill Hawnglaia’s mother and secretly pursues them at Rianglei. He disguises himself as a lady and walks past Hawnglaia and his party unnoticed. He enters Hawnglaia’s home and severs the head of Hawnglaia’s mother who is sitting near their hearth. The scene is described in horrific detail where Hawnglaia hides the severed head under his garment but the blood of his victim drips down his leg.

He pretends to Hawnglaia that their dog has bitten him. The oblivious Hawnglaia tells him to ask his mother for yeast to apply on the wound. Hrangkhupa goes back in and throws handful of ash on his leg and goes away.

Hrangkhupa's crimes do not achieve the terrible grotesque solely for their image of blood and gore but also for his lack of conscience, his obsession with domination and power. His physical act of crimes is corresponded by his degenerate behaviour. The psychological implications of his behaviour are reflective of the kind of grotesque which provoke anxiety and indeterminacy because his character is crafted to represent the hero and protector of Zialung village. Moreover, the textual structure of the tale does not presume on the immorality of the character. His crimes are mingled with humour through the absurdity of his circumstances to alleviate the gruesome theme. The comedy is carried out in a very subtle manner so there is no adequate relief from the horror. One instance is the scene that follows his flight after the murder of Hawnglaia's mother.

After Hrangkhupa kills Hawnglaia's mother he is pursued by Hawnglaia and his party. When he reaches Lungbial river, the river is so flooded and tumultuous that he cannot cross to the other side. Hawnglaia and his party catch up on him so he climbs upon a bamboo stalk. Hawnglaia commands to cut the bamboo to capture him but his men were in a celebratory mood and tell him that Hrangkhupa is as good as dead. They decide to have a ceremonial dance around the bamboo tree. In that moment, Hrangkhupa summon his guardian spirits to help him escape. All of a sudden there is a huge storm of wind and rain. The wind blows two bamboo stalks from the other side of the river to the bamboo tree where he is hiding. He gets hold of the trees and ties them with his *diar*⁴ and climbs over to his escape. He then calls out to Hawnglaia banging the severed head of Hawnglaia's mother on a nearby bamboo tree. He vows to Hawnglaia that he will

perform the rite of *se chhiah*⁵ with Hawnglaia's mithun in honour of Hawnglaia's dead mother to humiliate him.

The transition from the scene of Hrangkhupa's murder to his entrapment at the bamboo tree signifies the sardonic humour through the irony of his situation. He goes beyond reason for his revenge yet his humanity imposes a limitation much like Hawnglaia's display of arbitrary sovereignty. Hrangkhupa's predicament as a man at his wit's end brings out the ludicrous comic aspect. The humour arises out of the absurdity of his fate and the eventual scenario that unfolds after his cry for help to the spirits marks the transition from the comic grotesque to the terrible grotesque.

The bizarre way that Hrangkhupa carries out the murder of Hawnglaia's mother produces a reaction of alienation from common reality in the modern context. This scene also signifies the transitory nature of grotesque from common reality to the realm of uncanny and mystery. The description of the mutilated body being represented as symbol of victory by the hero and seemingly without conscience reflects his terrible grotesque identity. The haunting scene at the concluding section of the story describes an eerie scene. Hrangkhupa revels with a sinister sense of victory over Hawnglaia. Hawnglaia has relinquished all hope of defeating the might of Hrangkhupa and calls for a truce. He visits Hrangkhupa at his village as an act of faith. The scene that awaits him at Hrangkhupa's house is a picture of exaggerated monstrosity. Hrangkhupa has put as a display the remains of Hawnglaia's mother's head and that of the mithun. He offers a traditional drink called *zu* as a symbol of peace offering. He gloats over Hawnglaia for the fact that he could easily re-marry even though Hawnglaia has killed his wife but Hawnglaia could not bring back his mother. He then performs a horrific act of lighting up a pine twig and puts it on the skull of Hawnglaia's mother; mocking him that his

mother lights a lamp for him one last time. At this point Hawnglaia is so helpless over his fate that all he could do is secretly wipe his tears.

Ruskin has described the grotesque aesthetic as the state of confusion when the mind is confronted with truths it cannot fully understand. The grotesque scene in the end of the tale signifies the challenge the narrative poses to the audience about the nature of human 'psyche' when confronted with the complexity of the hardships of life and the struggle for supremacy. Hrangkhupa's ridiculing humour at the defeat of his foe seemingly contradicts the alienation from objective reality but in fact brings out that evil tendency to rise above others regardless.

In the tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia, the system of social hierarchy is presented as the ultimate system to achieve justice for the hero Hrangkhupa. However, his actions and attitude contradict the idea of a hero in itself. In fact, it brings out the terrible grotesque identity because his actions are excessive and go beyond the accepted norm and law of social justice. His character is not noble but is made out to be one. The technique of narration favours the hero to commit terrible acts as necessity to achieve justice and becomes a cultural hero. In contrast to the positive portrayal of social hierarchy in the tale, "The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga" subverts hierarchical structure of their society. In the tale discursive modes of power in a society is subverted by the primary characters. Social hierarchy of their time imposed discrimination of class that separates the lovers.

Lianchhiari is a daughter of the chief of Dungtlang village. She falls in love with a man named Chawngfianga who is born from a lower class of clan. During the pre-colonial Mizo society, inter-marriage between ruling clans and the common clan is socially unacceptable. Since Chawngfianga belongs to the clan within *hnamchawm*.⁶ So

the union between the two is not acceptable because Lianchhiari is expected to marry from the ruling clans. Lianchhiari maintains her feelings for Chawngfianga even after she marries another man. She makes a daring demand before her marriage that she will not marry anyone who would be jealous of Chawngfianga even though Chawngfianga has moved away to another village to escape death and marries another woman.

“The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga” follows the love story of renowned Mizo folk figures whose tale is as fascinating as it is subversive. The thematic content of the tale showcases the transformative power of aesthetic narrative. The shocking actions of the primary characters challenge authority on class distinction and their narrative boldly defies human morality. They display their affection to the extent that they break social code of morality and decency. The ambiguity resulted by their actions leads to multiple readings about romantic relationship and social hierarchy till date.

An important point to note is the fact that limitations are set for the ruling and non-ruling clans regarding marriage; Lianchhiari’s family do not discourage their relationship. When the relationship of the primary characters becomes public, it causes a scandal. Lianchhiari even expresses her regret in a song about her indiscretion and how it tarnishes her family’s name. Not long after the incident, the lovers decide to get married. Unfortunately, a *palai*⁷ sent by Chawngfianga to discuss the prospect of their nuptial turns out to be a cunning man. The man becomes jealous of Chawngfianga when he sees that Lianchhiari’s father is very accepting of Chawngfianga. Lianchhiari’s father says that he will accept whatever Chawngfianga could afford as bride price.

The *palai* relays false information to Chawngfianga that his proposal angers the family. He tells Chawngfianga to move to another village that night itself or else Lianchhiari’s family will kill him. In fear for their life, Chawngfianga and his family

move to another village. The prejudice of the malicious *palai* sent by Chawngfianga is the major cause of their separation. The dishonesty of the *palai* indicates his misuse of the social law by exerting duplicity to separate the couple. The *palai* exhibits the terrible grotesque human traits such as jealousy, discrimination and bigotry. He projects his jealousy toward Chawngfianga whom he considers socially inferior to Lianchhiari. He projects the terrible grotesque by exerting his influence guided by his distorted consciousness of social class combined with his personal grudge against Chawngfianga.

Though Lianchhiari could not help the unfortunate events that separate her from her lover, she insists on challenging the social norm. Her actions after she is married to another man cause concern regarding human morality and ethics. However, the complication of her narrative gives deeper understanding about human relationships. She puts her emotion above all else. Lianchhiari's assertion of her love for Chawngfianga upsets the concept of normalcy within social structure. She carries on her unlawful feelings unrepressed throughout her life which makes her abnormal to the society she lives in. Thus she is known as a lovelorn woman who defies social law to assert her feelings. It makes her so infamous and her tale becomes legendary.

Lianchhiari's indiscretion about her unlawful feelings provokes anxiety for their complexity. One instance about her indiscretion is at the occasion of their *chawn*⁸. Chawngfianga has come to their village to sell goods. As soon as she sees Chawngfianga she runs out to greet him and takes him by the hand to have a drink of *zu*. They sing and drink in celebration of the festive occasion. They enjoy each other's company even after all the other guests have left. Lianchhiari's husband could not stand to see them together. He confronts Chawngfianga if the two had a romantic history but Chawngfianga dismisses the accusation saying that he never dares to get close to a person of prestigious

background as Lianchhiari. However, Lianchhiari is a little more unscrupulous than her lover and urges on Chawngfianga to insinuate to her husband that Chawngfianga has been physically intimate with her and that she has been completely attached to him ever since.

Lianchhiari's bold admission of her past to her husband is symbolic of her affection for her lover but it also gives her a terrible image. She exercises an excessive obsession that translates to grotesque corporeality because her feelings are placed outside the norm of social function. The narrative of the primary characters could be connected with the terrible grotesque due to the excessive intensity of their feelings and their exertion of those feelings in a conventional social set-up. It is coloured with tragic nuances that paint the characters in the light of unfortunate figures condemned by their social circumstances.

The same tone of tragic love story could be seen in "The tale of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma". The remarkable love story of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma has been a folkloristic staple in Mizo culture. They are fondly called in short as Tlingi and Ngama. Their story became an inspiration for the Mizo festival of *Mim Kut* which was a festival dedicated to the departed souls. The tale has few versions but the essence of the story is more or less similar which is about the sorrow of losing one's partner. There are few instances in the story that has grotesque aspects due to the fantastic and poignant narrative. The tale also gives glimpses of the Mizo's belief about the afterlife in the pre-colonial era.

The tale starts in a strange and bizarre way where the fate of the titular characters intertwines since their infancy. Their mothers used to work in the same *jhum* cultivation and before work they used to leave their infants in a small hut. Although they

always put the babies at the opposite farthest corners they would find them sleeping side by side by the end of the day. They eventually grow up and fall deeply in love with each other. The tale contains elements of fantasy where human reality is combined with ethereal themes. The element of fantasy is sometimes exaggerated to the point where the characters become grotesquely fantastic. One such example is the event that happens after Tlingi and Ngama are discovered after their elopement. The parents of Tlingi still refuse their alliance and so Ngama is driven to desperation and he casts a charm on Tlingi. Ngama collects the footprint of Tlingi and hangs it above the hearth. Tlingi became terribly sick because of it. Then Ngama would take down the footprint to cool down before he visits Tlingi. She would be well enough to sit every time Ngama visits her. He would tie the footprints back above the hearth after his visits and Tlingi would again be in the throes of death. But one unfortunate night a string of soot catches fire that burnt the string with which he ties the footprint. The next morning Ngama could not find the footprint no matter how hard he searched for it. Tlingi dies soon after the unfortunate incident.

Ngama's dangerous play on life and death leads to a disastrous outcome that turns the whole tale into a dismal affair. The succeeding events portray Ngama as a brave hero who dared to go at any length to be with his love. The intensity of love between the primary characters forms the core of the tale. A major paradox in the tale is the fact that romantic love is portrayed as a force of divine providence but the horrible transition to the afterlife provides a morbid impression of their romantic love. This alienates the theme as an object of estrangement from human reality.

The episodes that followed the death of Tlingi have elements of grotesque fantasy in them through the juxtaposition of putting a living human with the dead.

Ngama commits a horrific act that makes Tlingi to become the ultimate grotesque figure in the story. When Ngama reaches the land of the dead, the lovers are overjoyed once they were reunited but things become strange for Ngama. At night when they sleep, Tlingi sleeps in reverse with her head toward the foot of the bed. The following day the whole village hunts a bear but, on closer inspection, Ngama found that their so-called bear was a black woolly bear caterpillar. Ngama crushed the caterpillar with his foot to the amazement of the hunters. They put the head of the caterpillar above Tlingi's door. The interplay of grotesque and fantasy is seen in many instances during Ngama's adventure to the land of the dead. The element of grotesque fantasy is thereby achieved from the interaction of Ngama with the dead. His absurd attempts to reunite with his lover during his stay are not successful because of the incongruity of their realities. This led to Ngama to return to the land of the living and takes his life to properly reunite with his love.

In "The tale of Hlawndawhthanga" fantastic grotesque is explored through the life of the titular character. Hlawndawhthanga is a *keimi* who is torn between two worlds; the human and the animal. His character can be aligned with Ruskin's concept of the terrible grotesque because his character does not conform to social structure of human beings. His character is a combination of human form and a tiger form. Such a grotesque monster could never belong to the human world. "Monstrosity and grotesquerie merge in the hybrid forms that disrupt the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of 'human' and 'non-human' " (Edwards and Graulund 39).

The grotesque forms have been linked to this kind of amalgam of human and animal features from centuries ago. Such grotesque creatures serve as caution against

immorality by invoking fear. They symbolises chaos and uncertainty when social order is shattered. It signals the limitation of human beings in the context of society and civilization. In such creatures, their human traits form connection to the reality of human beings but their monstrous form alienates them from society. Thus the uncertainty of their monstrous form provides multiple interpretations. “These hybrid forms have an impact on their audiences precisely because they are so human; they enable us, in other words, to see humanity in a new light, revealing ourselves in unique guises, and linked to other forms of life” (17).

“The tale of Hlawndawhthanga” demonstrates the fantastic grotesque where there is a play on the battle of intellect and instinct. The concept of man-tiger called *keimi* features numerous times in Mizo folktales. It is a fantastic creation of the Mizo people that indicates the kind of symbolic grotesque to evoke certain responses of the audience. This mythical creature is usually endowed with the complexity of human qualities. There is routine battle of conscience whether which trait, the instinctual animal or the moral human, is dominant.

Hlawndawhthanga’s characterization could be contextualized as a symbol of the duality of human nature. There is a battle between reason and an uninhibited instinct. The monstrous form of a fearsome tiger serves as a metaphor for human instinct symbolised in extremity. The titular character is set in contrast to the world of human beings to highlight the challenges he poses against the normative social construct.

Hlawndawhthanga attains his monstrous form by accident. He is the eldest of three brothers and a sister. The siblings are all strong and handsome youths who excel both at home and in the jungle and they all share close bond among themselves. Their family is well respected in their village. One day the three brothers go to work at their

jhum in the jungle. It is a particularly hot day and they soon finish the water they bring from home. Hlawndawhthanga volunteers to search for water. He ventures near and far in the forest to search for water.

Just when he nearly abandons his quest, he sees a puddle of water inside a big tree trunk. The water looks suspicious as it seems unusually reddish but since he is so thirsty he takes big scoops with his hands and drinks his fill. He then brings the water for his brothers. His brothers have collapsed from thirst by the time he returns. He gives them the water after which they regain consciousness. But something very peculiar happens in the evening when they are about to go home. They metamorphose into strange and bizarre beings. Their nails elongate into claws and gradually resemble that of a tiger's. After few moments they all turn into three full grown tigers. They wrestle and run around their *jhum* and just then a deer lets out a loud grunt nearby. They chase down the deer and devour its flesh and they disappear afterwards.

The physical transformation of these characters and their experience symbolizes the breaking down of the logical world. With the distortion of reason, we enter the realm of hybridization and heterogeneity where the self and the foreign are combined to reveal dangerous and unstable possibilities. Their transformation provokes fear described as uncanny in a psychoanalytical criticism. The Uncanny, in Sigmund Freud's words, is "that class of the frightening which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (336). There is the sensation of recognizing the foreign as familiar and such kind of response results in discomfort and anxiety. The transformation of the three brothers to full grown tigers could be metaphorical of any physical or mental traumatic transformation in our common reality. Hlawndawhthanga and his brothers have involuntarily achieved a shift to grotesque because their physical and behavioural

transformation provokes disturbing responses such as anxiety, pity and fear of the unknown.

The tragedy of their situation is intensified when their plight is put in context of the human world they had lost. Their family become anxious after their disappearance. A man tells the family that he had seen three tigers in their *jhum* when he returned from his own. This led them into believing that the brothers have been killed by those tigers. The whole community goes in search of them. They see prints of tigers but the bodies of the three brothers are nowhere to be found. They search for three days but their efforts were all in vain. To the surprise of the village, the three brothers turn up at their village after three days looking exactly like the day they left for work. Their return to the human world anticipates the horror that was about to follow. The secrecy of their transformation poses a threat to the human world. The incongruity of their nature and the human world is magnified after their return.

Life returns to normal for some time for the brothers but this does not last very long. Their tiger instinct often gets the best of them and they start to transform into tigers at night and killed domestic pets from the village. This section of the tale reveals the full transformation and failure of the characters to inhibit their animal instinct. The covert acts of stealing domestic animals by predators were familiar occurrences in the social history of Mizo people. The tale employs the uncanny and fears of this phenomenon and enhances the effect by giving the full narrative of the predators that dwell in their vicinity and share part of their humanity as well. However, their sister is very observant and tells their father that their family's domestic animals are never harmed from the killings. Also the three brothers are all absent each time an animal disappear. From then on, the father and sister start to have suspicion and observe their every move very

closely. Soon they find out the truth and so do the whole village. The killings become frequent and the villagers are intensely fearful of the three brothers. They could not reside long in their village. Their monster form could not make them conform to the social standard. So they wander from village to village. They hunt as they please where ever they go. Their terrible reputation becomes so immense that no one dares to venture outside their own village.

At this stage in the tale the secrecy of their nature has been revealed in full disclosure. Their grotesque transformation reflects the bizarre, excessive representation of the abnormal. Their abnormality provokes ambiguity where their nature of uncertainty challenges the construct of the 'normal'. They are violent, cunning and frightening. Their behaviour provokes anxiety because it defies the constructed conventions of society.

Hlawndawhthanga warns his brothers of their frequent killing spree in various villages but they do not pay heed which ultimately led to their death. The significance of the incident is the contrast between the ability and inability to inhibit the immoral part of their psyche. Hlawndawhthanga is endowed with a higher degree of intelligence for self-preservation. His humanity is maintained throughout the tale and is constantly in conflict with the animal part of his self.

Hlawndawhthanga becomes more aggressive after the death of his brothers. He falls in love with a girl in a certain village. He often visits her and on these visits he has to pass through another village. He steals animals from that village each time he visits his love interest. The villagers become so desperate that they implore the girl to rid of him for them. The girl tells the villagers to set a trap on his way. But Hlawndawhthanga

easily jumps over the trap. The girl challenges him to get under the trap. Trying to impress the girl Hlawndawhthanga gets under the trap and meets his death.

Hlawndawhthanga is described as displaying a complex emotional range. He grieves the death of his brothers by becoming more violent and aggressive. The death of his brothers worsened his grotesque quality. However, he is further complicated with the capacity to have a love interest which is also ironic because he met his death for his humane quality that preserves him from death previously. The tale ends in a true grotesque note where the death of the monster could not be completely justified because he died for a very humane reason.

In contrast to the story of Hlawndawhthanga where civilization is the guiding force for exposing threats against constructed norms, “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” exposes a malignant society where civilization betrays humanity. In “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” the complexity of social structure is explored through the victimization of the two brothers. Liandova and Tuaisiala are two folk characters that are forced to live a grotesque existence. The limitation of humanity is the prevailing theme throughout the text. The two brothers have to face social injustice in many forms to finally climb to the top of the social hierarchy. The tale follows their extreme struggle for survival. Their unfortunate circumstance begins at a very young age when their father dies and their mother leaves them for a husband. Their mother’s action aggravates their poverty to the point that a mere boy, Liandova is left to find sustenance for himself and his brother.

Their life of extreme depravity isolates them from their society. They are portrayed as grotesque outcasts who lived in a terrible society. The depiction of their extreme poverty and the cruel society creates awareness on social responsibility and the

interconnectedness of an individual and the society. The lack of sympathy displayed by their community has deeper implication about the hardships of those who belong to the marginalized group of people in the society. One instance that shows clearly about their struggle is the part where Liandova works for some villagers who promise to feed him yams for his labour but they exclude his brother Tuaisiala who is too young to earn his meal. Liandova secretly drops yams for his brother through the openings of the bamboo floor. The innocent Tuaisiala loudly complains his share of the yams because they were small. After they are caught, they are cast out to find other means to gratify their hunger.

The apathetic community is not only indifferent to the plight of the brothers but also hostile to them. They continually bully the brothers and deprive them of their fair share on hunting trips. There is the one incident where they exert this unfairness when Liandova and Tuaisiala accompany a hunting party. Tuaisiala noticed a python but after they kill the animal all they could spare for them are the stomach and intestines. Even in this incident, they are cast away to clean the foul smell of their share of the animal. The harsh reality of the brothers throws light about social imperfections by displaying social evil that sidelines certain class of people to lead life of extreme deprivation. It is mentioned in the tale about the perpetual hunger they endure to the extent that they share a single grain of millet. This evokes horrific picture of emaciated, scrawny and malnourished children who are forced to lead a life of hunger and psychological trauma. The general attitude of the community toward the brothers, as seen in many instances of the tale, is nothing less than pitiless and degrading.

However, aesthetic justice prevails that changes their fortune drastically. Their feverish hope of salvation comes in the form of few benevolent agents. The first incident of fortune is when they rescue a snake from a flying crow. The snake turns out to be the

off-spring of *Khuavang*⁹. The guardian spirit takes the form of an old lady. She provides and cooks for their meal during their absence from home. When they find out about their benefactor they plead her to stay with them but she promises that she would always be close by when in need. She makes another appearance when Liandova calls for her help and blesses them with bountiful harvest from their small field of rice.

The tale features grotesque figures like that of the guardian spirit called *khuavang* and her snake offspring. The portrayal of the brothers' change of fortune in such manner gives the tale an element of the terrible grotesque. The guardian spirit is portrayed as a strange character that is alienated from the human world but interacts freely in the human world. She has a terrible grotesque form but she plays a very positive role in the story.

Another incident where the fortune of the brothers is reversed could be seen when the brothers go for a hunting trip along with a hunting party. Tuaisiala notices a log with eyes when they cross a stream. When he tells his brother, Liandova tries to silence him because he is afraid that even if it was an animal they would not give the brothers their fair share. Tuaisiala is still an innocent child and so repeats loudly about what he saw. The hunting party is sceptical and threatens the brothers that if Tuaisiala's claim was false they would beat him and his brother. When they return to the stream, what they thought was a log turns out to be a big python. They kill the massive python and share the meat among themselves. But they give only the stomach and intestines to Liandova and Tuaisiala. They jeeringly tell the brothers to wash their meat far downstream because of the smell. However, the unpleasant business turned out in favour of the brothers because the python had swallowed a rich merchant along with his

precious goods like beautiful beads. The unpleasant affair turns to their favour and rewards them with wealth.

Another benevolent agent comes in the form of a well known chief named Lersia who disguises himself as a leper. The rest of the village do not show any kindness to him and the sympathetic brothers invite him to their home. Although they could not offer their guest much, the guest was so moved by their kind gesture that he rewards them with delicious meals and drinks. He also promises to give them a female mithun to start off a herd. The wise boy Liandova has the thoughtfulness to take advice from a widow who lives next to the chief's house. She advises them to pick the smallest mithun that hides in the corner and so they choose the smallest among the chief's herd and ended up with a large herd of calves in no time.

The two brothers have the ultimate reversal of social position when their chief's daughter Tuaichawngi chooses Liandova as a husband among all the eligible bachelors in the village. When Tuaichawngi points to Liandova as her choice, Tuaichawngi's father cuts off her finger because he is so contemptuous of Liandova's poverty. Tuaichawngi's father and the villagers have no knowledge of the brother's wealth because they hide all their possessions from their village due to the villager's hostility towards the brothers. However, before their wedding Liandova shows incredible amount of wealth in paying the bride price. He pays large amounts of precious necklaces and numbers of mithun as bride price for Tuaichawngi. They become the most renowned and respected family in the village.

Aesthetic justice is given in full toward the end of the tale. Liandova's mother pays them a visit to celebrate their *khuangchawi* ceremony. When she sees her sons' success she hangs her head in shame for her selfish action. She collapses and dies in

shame on her way back to her village. Liandova also humiliates his community by showing their collection of pieces of old bones, the wretched token of the villagers' meagre charity. The villagers are so ashamed and leave the scene in humiliation.

The tale demonstrates the power of grotesque aesthetic to transform human perception by showing human vices and social injustice. The employment of fear and anxiety in the tale is shown through the severe depravity of Liandova and Tuaisiala. There is also heightening of anxiety from the disparity between the poverty-stricken brothers and their hostile community. The benevolent agents carry out their roles in some very grotesque manners and thus aesthetic justice is carried out by bringing some grotesque figures and bizarre incidents. The thematic structure of the tale uses these grotesque figures to subvert and inform about the underlying motifs of social criticisms.

The feature of folktales as being productions of collective consciousness made them unique to differentiate the characteristics of grotesque elements and as such categorization could be based on the general perceptions down the ages. The select characters under this category are based on the intensity of fear and anxiety they provoke regarding their actions and attitudes. The human mind has the capacity to invoke or recall certain traits that are deemed atrocious, evil, base and morbid.

The terrible in grotesque aesthetic entails the dangerous terrain of uncertainty, horror and fear. The select characters and the interpretation of their identities serve symbolic reflection of that part of our reality that we often relegated. Grotesque aesthetic holds a mirror to reflect on the reality of an imperfect society on different scales and level within the society and individual. Human traits like greed, excessive indulgence, struggle for power, sexual perversion, and other abominable acts are given attention in the select texts to reflect on the reality of human condition.

Notes

¹ *Zialung Khaw Chhan Hrangkhupa* is a title given to Hrangkhupa. The literal translation of the title is “the protector of Zialung village”.

² *Fathang* is a “tax or tribute paid usually to a chief consisting of one or more ‘dawrawn’ baskets of unhusked rice” (Lorrain 134).

³ *Sechhun* is one of the rites of passage to achieve *Khuangchawi* in the social history of Mizo.

⁴ *Diar* is a Mizo traditional turban.

⁵ *Se chhiah* is “a sacrifice [of mithun] offered for the dead in order that the spirit of the slain may accompany the departed to the other world” (475).

⁶ *Hnamchawm* refers to “the common people, all save those belonging to the ruling clan” in Mizo social history (169).

⁷ *Palai* in this context is an intermediary sent by the man’s family to the woman’s family to discuss the prospect of marriage. It is usually a close relative or a trusted friend who could represent the voice of the man and his family.

⁸ *Chawn* is a modification form of the noun *Chawng* which is “the name of a sacrifice and three day’ feast and dancing given by a single individual or a family- the first of a series of sacrifices and feasts to ensure entrance to the Lushai Paradise”.

⁹ *Khuavang* is “the name of a guardian spirit” (267).

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CHAPTER 3

The Comic-Grotesque Identities

The interplay of horror and humour is a very important feature in grotesque concept. Comedy is employed to modulate the horror and fear provoked by grotesque features. The fear and anxiety aroused by grotesque elements are subdued and moderated by laughter. Michael Steig has given his analysis on Lee Byron Jennings' concept of laughter as "disarming mechanism". He states "the disarming mechanism of humour is applied directly to the fearsome forces, which are thus ostensibly defeated" (255). However, there is always a threat to the humour in grotesque and so he directly quotes Jennings "the playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror" (255).

Grotesque humour is derisive, provocative and ridiculing. The intensity of horror-humour dynamics may vary in different grotesque themes. Some grotesque figures commit humorous actions but the laughter is not entirely on the actions but more focused on the characters themselves. In other instances, the laughter may be focused on the extreme distortion of the character's physical features or about social satire on certain issues. Thus, comic-grotesque is an umbrella term to describe laughter that is coloured with anxiety and uncertainty. It is usually about laughter restricted by social norms. Grotesque comic creates a superior-inferior hierarchy in its textual form. The site of laughter in comic grotesque is put in inferior position. So it could be a form of humiliation and pain. Certain grotesque themes provoke intense fear and anxiety and so there is a necessity to make certain form of detachment and separation from the object of laughter that these grotesque figures impose.

This function of humour as a form of alleviation from fear and anxiety has been given a psychoanalytic interpretation by Steig. He draws similarity between Jennings's

concept of “disarming mechanism” to Freudian concept of defense mechanisms of human psyche on the ego

Jennings’s concept of a disarming mechanism seems parallel to the kinds of intra-psychic process described by psychoanalytic ego psychology. Theorists in that field would surely call this mechanism a *defense*, functioning to protect the ego from the guilt or fear-producing fantasies arising from the unconscious, by means of distortion of these fantasies through denial, condensation, splitting, projection, sublimation and so on. (255)

The select characters and their tales in this chapter are interpreted in the line of grotesque satire. The comic element in their tales is overshadowed with dark and malicious implications. These implications are social, psychological, and racial.

”The tale of Lalruanga and Keichala” is one of the most well known tales in Mizo folklore. They are two strikingly different characters which makes their friendship a unique one. There are many instances of intended humour in their interactions. They are entertaining but most of all their differences make their story engaging. Lalruanga is one of the Mizo folk heroes known for his wit and magic. His counterpart Keichala is a *keimi* but unlike Hlawndawhthanga he is portrayed as *keimi* by birth. He comes from a society made up of *keimi*. So his differences from Lalruanga could be interpreted as a racial matter. The dynamic of their friendship is sometimes aggressive. Lalruanga’s heroism is achieved from his ability to outsmart Keichala. A terrible grotesque figure like Keichala could only be overpowered by another fearsome character like Lalruanga. So their interactions are narrated with humour to alleviate the tension and ambiguity of their racial background.

Lalruanga's ancestry is told in various versions but all are narrated with mystical and bizarre quality nonetheless. Lalruanga's paternal grandmother Kelngoteii is a parentless baby found in the local blacksmith. She is raised to be a beautiful girl. A peculiar turn of events puts her at the mercy of some village young men. They help her carry back home but sexually abuse her. So when she gives birth to a baby boy out of a crime they name the baby Zauhranga. The terrible circumstance of the young mother is not given further attention in the tale but such grotesque social realism is raised to the consciousness in this part of the tale.

Around the same time her friend is impregnated by a river spirit called *Tuiruang Huai*¹ and she has a baby girl named Zawltleipuii. It is believed that the two children are destined for each other before birth. During their pregnancy, whenever the mothers experience stomach-ache they rub their stomachs and the pain goes away. When Zauhranga and Zawltleipuii grow up they fall in love and get married. Unfortunately, their first born dies during his childhood. In Mizo social history, the soul of the dead is believed to journey to the land of the dead after three months. So after three months, Zauhranga lies in wait for the soul of his deceased child in the graveyard. When Zauhranga sees the soul of his dead son leaving his grave he grabs hold of it. The soul demands to leave but Zauhranga refuses to let go of the soul. The soul transforms into different animals to frighten him. Zauhranga relentlessly holds it and finally the soul tells Zauhranga that he will have another son. He tells Zauhranga to name him Lalruanga. Then the soul turns into a bee and stings Zauhranga's hand and vanishes from him.

The maternal ancestry of Lalruanga has the grotesque element of a hostile spirit impregnating the grandmother. The angle of this narrative is not explored in detail and is

portrayed to add the mystery of the lineage of the titular character. The macabre scene of Zauhranga's adventure in the graveyard has a quality of magic realism by bringing out the agony of a bereaved father in such dramatic fashion. The mystical element behind the tale has a dreamlike quality with a touch of the horrific. The juxtaposition of the father's tragedy is set against his morbid affair with a ghost. The seriousness of his misfortune is shifted to the realm of grotesque humour and fantasy from the absurdity of his interaction with a ghost to dissuade his pursuit. This scene also foretells the arrival of Lalruanga.

The fantastic lineage of Lalruanga foreshadows his unique personality. Even when he is still in his mother's womb he foretells the weather for the day to the annoyance of his mother. And upon his birth, he catches a mouse that is running along the beams at the foot of the bed. Such exaggerated grotesque account of the character's behaviour could only be regarded as dramatic device to shock and captivate the audience amidst the appalling imagery of a talking foetus and a baby fully function to catch a mouse right after birth. His behaviour and personality is portrayed with an influence from the supernatural. However, he is not framed as a supernatural being because he is set as a contrast to his supernatural counterpart Keichala. The description of his qualities and peculiar circumstances are all attributed as part of his identity as a traditional hero.

Horror and humour goes hand in hand when dealing with the character of Lalruanga. Another instance of this quality is the story of how his father cuts off the tip of his tongue while he was a child. Zauhranga cuts off the tip of Lalruanga's tongue because he is afraid that his son will talk too much. Lalruanga finds out about this when he courts a certain lady in their village. The lady is so annoyed with Lalruanga that she chastises him by saying that his father has cut off his tongue because he is so annoying.

So Lalruanga confronts his father about it and his father told him that he has hid his severed tongue between their bamboo walls. When he retrieves the severed tongue, it is shrivelled and dried out but he places it back in his mouth and it magically attaches back again. The characterization of Lalruanga combines the worlds of the human and the non-human. However, he is identified as a human who happens to acquire his unique attributes from forces of the non-human world. His humanity is never alienated from the human world and he is considered as part of a structured human society. Without the humour, the character portrayal of Lalruanga in all seriousness would make him to be a horrific monstrosity tracing from the prediction of his birth by a ghost, his bizarre pre and post natal antics, his excessive disposition like that of talking and his obsession to outsmart everyone. These grotesque attributes are treated with comic reverence.

The complex friendship between Lalruanga and Keichala comes from their competition to outsmart the other character. They are both apprehensive of each other in the beginning. Lalruanga approaches Keichala with a fear of Keichala's animal nature. Keichala admires Lalruanga because of his tricks and quick wit. Lalruanga is also endowed with magical ability because he catches a Mizo god called Vanhrika who teaches him the art of magic. The story goes that Lalruanga keeps missing animals in his makeshift trap. He knows that the trap is set off every time he checks but there are no animals in the trap. So Lalruanga lies in wait one day and sees Vanhrika, a supernatural being, coming down from the sky to steal the animals. He catches Vanhrika and in exchange for his freedom, Vanhrika teaches Lalruanga the art of magic which makes him perform various magical tricks in the story. His friendship with Keichala is one of lively competition. Keichala is a Mizo mythical creature called *keimi* who can shapeshift into a tiger at will. He represents the grotesque counterpart to Lalruanga in the tale and

unlike Lalruanga whose grotesque identity could be traced in his actions and circumstances Keichala represents the symbolic grotesque from his hybridization of human form with that of a tiger. This characteristic of Keichala provides an impact of immediate powerful grotesque quality without the need of immense verbal elaboration.

In the tale, Keichala is very civil in his behaviour in spite of his monstrous form. Keichala is portrayed as belonging to a fictional village of *keimi* where the collective of *keimi* reside without the knowledge of human beings. The events and characters are designed to showcase the many talents and wit of Lalruanga. There is a sense of rivalry between Lalruanga and Keichala right from their first encounter. Both of them perceive the other with fearful inquisitiveness which develops into a sporting competition to overpower the other. Their diplomatic relationship eventually evolves into a trusting bond that saves the life of Lalruanga.

Lalruanga and Keichala are both apprehensive of approaching the other in their first encounter. With the help of magic, Lalruanga is able to convince Keichala that he keeps a host of people with him the night Lalruanga sleeps in his *jhum*. Keichala is intimidated to approach Lalruanga and he calls out to Lalruanga to meet him halfway. They challenge each other on a duel to crack a big boulder in half. Lalruanga outwits Keichala by shooting his arrow right at the mark where Keichala had previously bit on. Lalruanga suggests to Keichala to show parents to each other. Keichala promises to bring him to his village. They travel a long distance during which they compete on various feats of contest as sports. Lalruanga comes out as winner in all these feats. These feats are all carried out in a sportive spirit. The lively competition between the two characters is not played out to be intentionally grotesque for it to be indicative of their grotesque personality. However, the scale on which they carried out their sport is not

only wasteful but also exaggerated. Thus the grotesque corporeality is achieved through the ecological exploitation and excessive consumption by the two primary characters.

One such example is the episode in the forest where they encounter a pack of wild boars. Lalruanga asks Keichala to guide the pack towards him and he shoots many boars with his bow and arrow. He takes out the arrow each time he kills a boar and pastes the wounds with resin to make it look inconspicuous. He then asks Keichala to determine where he makes the fatal execution on the carcasses. Keichala could not find any wound and asked how he kills those animals. Lalruanga replies that he merely points them with his index finger and calls out “That one, that one”. When Keichala’s turn came, he tries what Lalruanga has told him but fails to kill a single boar. He becomes so desperate that with the last boar that runs his way, he punches it with his fist to death. He turns the boar over to cover the wound. Lalruanga catches the trick right away when he turns the animal to the other side.

The site of eco-critical grotesque lies in the excessive hunting for sport with a comedic twist from the ignorance of Keichala. This kind of heuristic contest could be found numerous times in the tale. The comedy of Lalruanga’s foil to Keichala set the tone of the narrative and this sense of comedy has few dark turns. The comedy is focused on the misfortune of Keichala. What is made out as an innocuous humour could also be interpreted from the context of Keichala’s status of an alienated ‘other’ throughout the story. He is described as barbaric and a being to be feared but also one who possesses conscientious capability as demonstrated from his act of saving the life of Lalruanga in the end of their tale.

Another instance of grotesque humour is the episode where they are about to reach the village of Keichala. When it is time to set camp, Lalruanga asks Keichala if he

wanted to get water for cooking or start a fire. Keichala chooses to get water from a nearby spring. After he leaves, Lalruanga starts a fire using his lighter and pours out water from his enchanted container. Later when Keichala returns he is shocked to see that Lalruanga has almost finished his cooking. Keichala asks Lalruanga how he manages to do all those tasks. Lalruanga sheepishly replies that he has summoned both water and fire by pinching the base of his nail. Keichala decides to try the trick the following day. He ends up injuring himself very bad. The presence of such dark humour insinuates the ridiculing mockery of the character. Keichala's physical hybridity signals ambiguity and shock that translates him into a subject of ridicule. The alienated form from the normative bodily form incites grotesque laughter and in the case of Keichala he is additionally placed in some unfortunate circumstances as well.

The laughter triggered also signifies the social implications as stated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and His World*, explaining the difference between the pre and post-modern laughter in which the pre-modern laughter, "is not subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people" (Bakhtin 12). The scene of Keichala's suffering from his bleeding finger to ignite a fire shows the comic grotesque. It is made appealing from the juxtaposition of the attraction of the humour and malicious attitude toward the character. This kind of humour relies on the superior and inferior dynamics. It could be described as cruel, absurd and brutal especially when it marginalizes an individual from a collective group of people. However, there is a paradigm shift in the tale when Lalruanga visits the village of Keichala.

The day when they are about to reach Keichala's village, Keichala runs ahead of Lalruanga because he wants to make an appeal to his community to appear in their

human forms. So he calls out from a distance notifying about the arrival of a human guest. Lalruanga has secretly followed him. Lalruanga witnesses a horrific scene where the villagers are scattered about in their tiger forms. After they heard the call from Keichala they all transform into their human forms. The grotesque imagery of a group of hybrid beings is used to explore the dramatic shift of Lalruanga's advantageous position in the tale to that of a victim formerly bequeathed to Keichala. When the narrative is set in the human world, Keichala is treated with utmost horror and dread. He is a victim of collective animosity; an enemy to be obliterated if chance would allow. When the role is reversed Lalruanga makes use of his circumstance to demonstrate his sharp intellect. He is portrayed as a conscientious character that demonstrates human ethics and morality. The racial issue in this line of reading is played out strictly in favour of the human world.

After they reach the village, Lalruanga finds out that Keichala's family are royalty of the village. He asks to see Keichala's parents and when he meets them Keichala's parents are two huge fearsome tiger couple. The scene is described with a horrific imagery of an old tiger couple grinning wildly to show their long sharp fangs with leeches feeding on their gums. Since Lalruanga is a smart man he transforms a nearby plaintain leaf into a beautiful cloth. He carefully removes those leeches all the while telling Keichala that Keichala's parents are wonderful. The racial difference between the two characters is portrayed with an overstatement of bizarre characteristics of the citizens of *keimi* village. The exaggerated tone of ridicule signals the discursive construct of the inside-outside paradigm. It sidelines Keichala's community to the periphery. In the context of the tale, the discriminating factor is brought out through a non-existent realm of a fantastic invention of a whole new species and culture.

The night of their arrival Lalruanga turned in to sleep early and pretended to sleep. He overheard Keichala having a conversation with his parents. As a reward for Lalruanga's cordiality, the tiger couple advises their son to show utmost hospitality to their guest. So the next morning, when Keichala asks if he wanted a large or small pot of Mizo traditional rice wine. He replies with humility that being a guest would only suit him to have the small one. As he is advised the night before, Keichala takes out their biggest pots of rice wine and feeds not only Lalruanga but the whole village. The following day Keichala makes another offer to Lalruanga if he wanted a small or big domestic pig for his meal. Lalruanga replies as before choosing only the small one. Keichala directs to kill the biggest pigs from their herd and to prepare a big feast for the whole village.

From the moment of his arrival Lalruanga is very civil and courteous to Keichala's family. He is rewarded with the same sense of cordiality by Keichala and his family. Ruskin's concept of "noble grotesque" (1754) is seen in the interaction of the two characters to bring out the possibility in grotesque theory to transcend the limitation of normative human society. However, the uninhibited instinctual nature of the native of the village is brought out right at the end of the tale. The animosity that was given to Keichala is made to topple the fate of Lalruanga. This is also the reason why their relationship could be read as diplomatic and political. Lalruanga had earned the faith and trust of Keichala enough for him to save his life.

When the time came for Lalruanga to leave, Keichala has been advised to save the life of Lalruanga from the villagers. So Keichala puts a whiff of wind inside Lalruanga's match box. He tells Lalruanga not to open the box until he is at a safe distance. Lalruanga leaves before dawn to journey towards home. At sunrise, the

villagers call out to Keichala challenging Lalruanga to a match of wrestling which is a way of implying that Lalruanga would become their meal if he loses. Keichala always makes excuses for Lalruanga saying that Lalruanga is still busy with his morning routines like combing his hair, having his meal and so on. In the meantime, Lalruanga has reached a certain distance. He is overcome with curiosity and he opens the box. All of a sudden, a strong whiff of wind blows out from the box and blows at the hay roof of the balcony of Keichala's house.

At that moment, Keichala thinks that Lalruanga has reached a safe distance and tells the villagers that his guest has left at dawn. They immediately pursue Lalruanga with ferocious pace. Keichala is very concerned that they might overtake him and so he outruns his friends and catches up to Lalruanga. Keichala hides Lalruanga in the nearby burrow of a wild animal and hides the entrance by sitting on it. When his friends arrive he tells them that it would be best not to continue since Lalruanga has gone too far off. He suggests they rest for a while and his friends oblige. He asked his friends what they fear the most. They all stay silent when one blind *keimi* says that if Lalruanga had summoned dark clouds and let it rained heavily with a single drop the size of an eggplant and in that moment if Lalruanga had whistled a tune he would be most afraid. Lalruanga has overheard the whole exchange and does exactly what is described by the blind *keimi*. His pursuers are so afraid that they all run home as fast as they can.

The reading on racial grotesque focuses on the dehumanization of the human but the select tale demonstrates the racial matter from the symbolic presentation of two entirely different species. The tale confers human qualities to the non-human. The narrative contradicts the racial discourse by denying the same humanity that was given to the non-human. The tale focuses on the racial discourse as a site for grotesque

humour. The culture around Keichala and his people are described with a sense of tension and contradiction. The study of contradiction reveals the conflicting traits of human quality presented in the tale as separate entity. The dissimilarity of Lalruanga who is the intellectual figure is presented with an instinctual counterpart Keichala and they are united in harmony through humour and human morality.

The same incongruity of human and non-human is also found in “The tale of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli”. The love story of a non-human Aithangveli and a human Thlihranthanga portrays the same unity of different species through humour and fantasy. Comic exaggeration plays heavily in the tale to achieve the relationship of the primary characters. Aithangveli is a maiden from *van*². Once she goes to their *jhum* with her mother, she finds a beautiful plant bearing red ripe fruits. She asks her mother if there ever is a person as beautiful as the plant. Her mother replies that the son of Sesuahsanga called Thlihranthanga is the person she is looking for. She then journeys to search for the most beautiful man her mother talks about. On her way she meets a very old lady. She asks the old lady for permission to wear her skin to disguise herself. The old lady replies that since she is so old she no longer has the will to live. She tells Aithangveli to kill her and takes her skin to wear.

The beginning of the tale sets the tone of the story by introducing supernatural beings and makes a vague allusion to their humanized civilization. Aithangveli and her mother are described to live in a very similar world of human beings in spite of their identity and locale being supernatural. The form of the tale is similar to that of fantasy genre but Aithangveli’s horrific act provides sudden alienation from fantasy. It provokes grotesque imagery that shatters human morality. There is a disruption of similarity between the human and the non-human world. She becomes a fearful grotesques figure

because of this particular incident. However, the tale traces the adventure of the supernatural being Aithangveli in the human world where she marries a human and has a child with him.

Aithangveli is never intended as a traditional heroine but devised as a grotesque figure oscillating between two extremes. She is terribly grotesque in her actions but also physically extremely beautiful. The tale does not completely sever the traditional portrayal of a female because her features are described as very beautiful by human standard. She is eluded with a sense of mystery and wonder. There is a sense of fantasy and terror that reflects the kind of uncertainty in grotesque aesthetic. The tale progresses on how she interacts in the human world.

After executing the terrible act, she hides under the house of Thlihranthanga and makes a noise like a chicken. The father asks Thlihranthanga to see if one of their chicks had left the coop. But on his return, he reports to his father that there is an old lady. His father tells him to ask the lady if she is willing to tend their livestock. The old lady agrees and she is taken to the house. Later Thlihranthanga builds a small hut for the old lady from which she could tend the herd of mithun. She requests Thlihranthanga to install a swing inside the hut to entertain herself during the day. Everyday Thlihranthanga brings the old lady lunch but she makes a peculiar request of Thlihranthanga to make a noise ahead at the entrance of the *jhum*.

Thlihranthanga's mother has deep prejudice against the old lady that every time she packs lunch for her she would make unsavoury dish of rice infested with rat faeces. But Thlihranthanga pities the old lady so he always gives his scrumptious lunch of fine rice and meat. Thlihranthanga becomes curious to know why the old lady requests him to always make noise ahead of his arrival. He decides to observe the lady in secret. What

he sees shocks him so much because Aithangveli has taken off her disguise. She splendidly rides the swing singing sweetly all the while.

The character of Thlihranthanga is framed to represent the ideal version of human to counterpart the extraordinary supernatural being. He is described as very handsome, a son of the village chief and possesses noble qualities that go beyond the temporal affection demonstrated from his kindness shown to the old lady. The narrative posits on the romance of the handsome human and the terrible super being. This romantic affair can be interpreted to the elusive idealisation of the image of the female. Aithangveli is eluded with extreme beauty but does not follow human morality. She is fantastically grotesque in behaviour but described as a desirable being for her male counterpart. The absurdity of their relationship is treated with comic relief in few instances like that of the mother's reaction and Thlihranthanga's obsession.

When Thlihranthanga conveys all he saw to his father on his return, he asks for his father's counsel. His father tells him to catch Aithangveli and not tell his mother about their discovery. Again the next day Aithangveli is sweetly singing and riding the swing. He then stealthily catches her from behind. He would not let go of the lady regardless of her resistance. He tells her that he would marry her. Thlihranthanga has an aunt described as *zawlnei*³ and he secretly devises a plan with her. He tells her that when he pretends to have a terrible stomach-ache she must advise his family to let him marry the old lady to appease the spirits. That night Thlihranthanga pretends to have a terrible stomach-ache and rolls on the floor. His aunt went along with his plan and in spite of his mother's reluctance Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli are married shortly after.

On the night of their wedding, the mother who has no knowledge of Aithangveli's identity is so appalled by the match that she put all sorts of miscellaneous

objects between the couple. The next morning, the couple were found sleeping side by side without all the pile of junk. Aithangveli has taken off her disguise and her beauty and radiance is so immense that the glow from her skin filled the house with light. Her mother-in-law thinks that Aithangveli's radiance is actually the light of the sun beaming into their house. Thlihranthanga has burnt the terrible disguise in a fire the night before. When Aithangveli tries to wear her disguise she finds out that it is gone. When her mother-in-law sees her beauty she flees from the house. She refuses to come back for a long time because she is so ashamed of her cruelty. Thlihranthanga's mother becomes the object of ridicule. Her prejudice against Aithangveli is derided. The twist in this part of the plot indicates the element of fantasy in the tale. Even though Aithangveli does not conform to the human world she is humanized to the extent that she is reluctant to leave the human world.

In the tale, the couple has a son shortly after they married. But since Aithangveli is a supernatural being, her parents decide that it is time for her to return. Aithangveli warns her husband of what is about to happen. She tells him that her parents would invoke a strong tempest to take her away and that Thlihranthanga, in no circumstance, should let her out of his grasp. When the tempest begins to blow Thlihranthanga holds her tightly against the ground. He resists the urge to save their belongings as they fling wildly about in the wind but there is a small pot that sadly tumbles around near the fireplace. Thlihranthanga decides to save just that one pot but the moment he slightly loosens his hold Aithangveli is swept away by the wind.

Thlihranthanga mourns his loss terribly. To add to his grief their child dies shortly after. Thlihranthanga is so bereft of his wife's departure and their son's death that he dies of broken heart. His father sends a message calling Aithangveli for a visit

since her husband and her son have died. When Aithangveli is about to leave for her visit her parents give her a magical sugarcane. Thlihrantheta's house is filled with mourners by the time she arrives. She chews on the sugarcane and splatters the juice while mumbling a charm to revive her husband. After a short while she does this, Thlihrantheta comes back to life. Aithangveli enquires about their son but they reply that the child died so long ago that it would be impossible to bring him back to life. She commands to bring the bones of her child. She covers the bones with plaintain leaves. She chews on the sugarcane and casts another spell. The child also comes back to life. They are happily reunited and Aithangveli takes her husband and son to her home in the supernatural world.

The thematic structure of the tale is not heavily loaded with grotesque elements. It is mostly achieved with the estrangement from Aithangveli's non-human qualities. The excessive exaggeration of the female figure provides a sense of mystery and fantasy. She can be symbolised as a manifestation of a repressed desire to idealise the opposite sex. The magical element of her attributes is infiltrated with grotesque imagery which indicates apprehension and uncertainty about such idealisation. Though she does not belong to the natural world she is portrayed with redeeming qualities like the ability to bring back the dead.

"The tale of Kungawrhi" also follows the same theme of fantasy genre. The female titular character Kungawrhi is also portrayed with allusion to the supernatural world but in a much different manner. She is narrated to have been born out of an old man's septic thumb. Her exaggerated story of origin and her small size provokes grotesque laughter. The humour of Kungawrhi's character is both attributed to her unnatural origin. The absurdity of her conception invokes laughter out of the grotesque

imagery of a humanlike character born out of a repulsive wound. Her smallness also brings out grotesque humour over the incongruity of the circumstance.

However, Kungawrhi grows up to become a beautiful maiden who is sought after by many suitors. Among these suitors is a *keimi* who is desperately in love with her. He collects the footprint of Kungawrhi and puts it over the fireplace. Kungawrhi becomes very sick because of the spell. As days pass, Kungawrhi's father becomes dismayed so he proclaims that he will let Kungawrhi marry any person who can find a cure for her sickness. The abhorrent suitor claims that he will cure Kungawrhi and revokes his spell by putting back Kungawrhi's footprint. He marries Kungawrhi shortly after. He takes Kungawrhi to live in his village. On their way to the village an old lady witness the *keimi* transforming into a tiger to cross a flooded river. He tells Kungawrhi to tightly hold his tail. The old lady runs home and tells the horrible scene she has just witnessed. Kungawrhi's father makes another proclamation that anyone who could save his daughter from the *keimi* would marry her.

The tale features *keimi* as a contradiction to human morality and social norm. It symbolises the psychological concept of the 'id'. This physical symbolism signifies the unconscious and instinctual part of human psyche which must be subdued in a social setting. It is a force of nature that one must repress in order to function in a structured society. So Kungawrhi's marriage to *keimi* has to be revoked. Her salvation comes in the form of two heroes. The brothers Phawthira and Hrangchala step up for the task. They travel to the land of *keimi* where Kungawrhi successfully hides them from her husband. When they could manage to escape, Kungawrhi's husband pursues them with a ferocious pace. The older brother Phawthira is the braver of the two. He lies in wait for Kungawrhi's husband and single-handedly kills the tiger.

Although Phawthira is able to thwart the enemy, they are faced with another obstacle to return to their civilized world. The place they set their camp that night is near the home of spirits called *khuavang*. These spirits are regarded as benevolent spirits in Mizo cultural history but they are portrayed with a tendency of mischief in the text. Phawthira and Hrangchala take turns to guard their camp. Phawthira volunteers to keep watch first. The spirits visit their camp and ask who they are. Phawthira bravely describes their journey in a loud voice. The spirits murmurs that he is a brave man and so they do not dare to disturb him.

When it is time for Hrangchala to keep watch, the spirits come back and questions exactly as before. Hrangchala is so afraid of them. He gives the same reply as his brother but his voice heavily trembles. So the spirits murmurs that he is a coward. They abduct Kungawrhi and take her to their cave. The ambiguous portrayal of a benevolent spirit *khuavang* signifies the complexity of the relationship of the past Mizo society with the natural world. These spirits are revered as guardian spirits but they are featured in the tale as grotesque figures that abduct the heroine. The fear and anxiety is not just focussed on the alienated unnatural forces but also to the benevolent forces. This signifies the uncertainty of all forms of supernatural forces believed to preside over the natural world in the pre-Christian Mizo belief. This uncertainty can be interpreted as a desire to achieve complete idealistic form of human civilization.

The heroism of the two brothers is put to the test in the episode of their interaction with the spirits. Hrangkhupa is portrayed not only as a coward but also treacherous. Phawthira rescues Kungawrhi from the abode of the spirits by dropping items from his garments like hairpin, comb and *diar*. All these items are described as possessing magical quality and cause a lot of damage to the abode of the spirits. The

spirits relent to the might of Phawthira and give back Kungawrhi. However, on their way back out of the cave they have to climb out through a vine. Kungawrhi and Hrangchala climb out first. When Phawthira is climbing on the vine, his brother cuts off the vine and leaves him to his fate.

Phawthira resides long enough in the land of the spirits to marry and have three children. He plants another vine to escape from the cave. Finally the vine reaches far enough for him to escape but whenever he climbs on the vine his children would call out and plead to go with him. He comes up with a trick. He boils a stone and tells his children to call him back only when the stone is soft and tender. The children wait for the stone to cook while Phawthira climbs out to his escape. When he reaches his village Hrangchala has claimed all the reward due to Phawthira. Hrangchala has married Kungawrhi and becomes a chief of the village. Phawthira is overcome with anger and cuts his younger brother into three pieces. When the commotion dies down Phawthira explains the reasons for his act. All was forgiven and Phawthira is made a village chief and marries Kungawrhi.

The comic grotesque in the tale could be found in various instances of the story. The cowardice of Hrangchala is intended for a humorous enactment of human limitation. Hrangchala's betrayal reflects about his greed and jealousy over his brother. Although justice is served in the end Phawthira has to go through some horrible ordeals to avenge his injustice. He is portrayed as marrying a grotesque spirit and has children from the marriage. The humour of his story is infiltrated with the pain of his struggle. His misfortune is described in a humorous manner. He goes through so much just to be deceived by his own brother. Through his bravery he is able to overcome different forces

that hinder his path to victory. His character can be symbolised as a victory of human nobility and ideals.

In contrast to tales reflecting on human ideals, “The tales of Chhurbura” are filled with immoral and licentious themes. He is attributed with many tales that portray him in various roles. His tales are all intended for humour. However, the implication of his roles in the tales has been given different interpretations. In spite of his vices and immorality he is regarded with affection and endearment because he is mostly known as a clever fool. He is usually found in compromising situations. Sometimes he outwits the best of his enemies and sometimes he is a victim of his own folly. He is never far removed from human reality and as such his flaws and faults are received with warm reception. Margaret Ch. Zama has commented about the implication of Chhura’s comedy, “He evidently provides more than comedy, for any fool can do this. A more important function seems to be to provide a release valve for all of the anti-social desires repressed by men who tell and listen to such tales, be it greed, avariciousness or forbidden sexual desires ” (213).

In some tales he is portrayed as a complete fool especially in the tales that feature his brother Nahaia. Nahaia is an extremely lazy person who always tricks his brother to get what he wants. In one tale, Nahaia and Chhura both build a house. Nahaia’s house is so poorly constructed that there are numerous holes in the roof. But he convinces Chhura saying that the holes in the roof are very convenient to look at the stars in the night sky with his wife. Thus Chhura exchanges his house with Nahaia. In this kind of portrayal, Chhura is made out as a dim-wit character to induce grotesque laughter by mocking the character’s lack of reason.

In other tales, Chhura provokes laughter from his immoral behaviours. Tales like his travel to *Mawngping khua* portrays him as a man who could kill an entire village without any conscience. Another tale that suggests his immorality is where he tricks his mother-in-law to have sex with him. He puts his hand under a rock to catch a crab. He pretends that a crab has bitten him so he tells his mother-in-law to call out to a nearby rock for an advice. He runs ahead of his mother-in-law and hides behind the rock. He tells her that she could help Chhura only by physical intimacy. Chhura runs back to his ruse. His mother-in-law denies hearing any voices. But after three attempts Chhura loses his patience and fulfils his sexual desire on his mother-in-law. Such grotesque humour could be seen in many of his tales. Sometimes the laughter is from his misfortune but other times the laughter is focussed on his immoral acts.

He is also portrayed as possessing noble qualities. However, his redeeming qualities are also coloured with grotesque humour. In one tale he captures *phungpuinu*⁴ that is feared by many. He threatens the monster that he will display her for the entertainment of children. She pleads for her release in exchange with her most treasured items. Chhura refuses until the monster agrees to give him her *sekibuhchhuak*. It is described that the magical item could generate savoury dish of fine rice and meat. In this tale, Chhura is portrayed as a hero who could subdue a monster. He carries out different kinds of humiliation like grabbing her by her hair, putting her in a basket and threatening her to be put on a display.

His portrayal as a fool gives him defense against judgement of his character. Another angle of approach suggests that Chhura's vice and folly humanizes him and brings him closer to the audience. As implied earlier of Chhura's personification as repressed fears and anxiety of the instinctual part of human, his lack of morality is

portrayed as his lack of sense. His image as a fool gives him protection against judgement from social norms. The humour from his comedy, in turn, alleviates the audience of the same judgement. His terrible acts and lack of conscience of those acts are treated with a sense of humour. The grotesque humour is targeted on Chhura but certain form of detachment is given to the humour. Chhura represents a comic-grotesque figure because he embodies the fear and anxiety from his immorality but there is always detachment in the form of humour attributed from Chhura's representation as a fool.

The characters studied under the category of comic grotesque are depicted to have been influenced by the supernatural in order to convey certain provocative themes and metaphor. They are framed with the combination of the human and non-human. The more human characters like Thlihranthanga, Lalruanga, Phawthira, Hrangchala and Chhura are put in contrast either to non-human characters or fantastic circumstances. They bring out the anxieties of breaking the boundaries of conventional set norms by actively interacting with the non-human and the supernatural. The absurdity of their circumstances reveals the paradox that exists between the absurdity and significance of human struggle.

The select tales showcases human struggles with grotesque metaphors through shocking physical or circumstantial transformation. This transformation reveals the incongruity between the attitudes of the characters and their situations. There is a routine disruption and alienation from normative social structure which provokes grotesque laughter. However, such laughter is overshadowed with doubt and uncertainty because the laughter is mixed with the consciousness of the horror within. The combination of the horrible and the comic provides wide range of signification such as trauma, death, deformity, hybridity and other aspects of absurdity in life.

Notes

¹ *Tuiruang huai* is a spirit of a river named Tuiruang.

² *Van* in the context of the tale is a Mizo concept of a different realm where supernatural beings reside.

³ *Zawlnei* in a folkloristic context is “to have a familiar spirit, or to be possessed by a spirit” (Lorrain 562). The aunt of Thlihranthanga is portrayed as having the ability to communicate with beings from the supernatural world.

⁴ *Phungpuinu* is a female monster categorised under *huai*. This type of *huai* is believed to dwell in the close vicinity of human settlement.

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CHAPTER 4

Contemporary Relevance of Grotesque Identities

Modern grotesque theory reveals aspects in grotesque such as reader-response, comic-grotesque interrelation, and aestheticism. The conception of grotesque theory exposes the problem of quantifying the theory within a definite demarcation because the evolution of the concept of grotesque undergoes continual transformation due to cultural and social forces at work to form perception regarding human vices and morality. Modern grotesque theorists put their focus primarily on the response of the reader because it provides the most potential for study and continuity. Study in reader response reveals the close interrelation between humour and fear in grotesque. Fear and amusement are phenomenon that balances the mechanism of grotesque.

Elisheva Rosen in her essay “Innovation and Its Reception: The Grotesque in Aesthetic thought”, expounds on the notion of grotesque as connected to confusion in the midst of a struggle for freedom and liberty. The premise of this view is that the grotesque is an exaggeration beyond the perceivable reality and the presumption that it will never exist in the tangible world. This idea has consigned the grotesque to the realm of expression and metaphor and in effect, liberates it from the confinement of specific culture and time period. Rosen explains that grotesque is an attack on established order and such attack could be reversible implying the forbidding overtone that perpetually reigns over employment of this kind of artistic expression and yet how its subversive nature is also the source of enlightenment (Rosen, 127).

The select characters are analysed based on their physical form, social behaviour, race, and their role in cultural perception. Primary characters like Hlawndawhthanga, Keichala, and Kungawrhi are portrayed as grotesque forms. Their physical features are attributed with non-human representation. The concept of *keimi* is interpreted from a grotesque form in tales to signify the disruption that interfere in the human world. Their

ability to transform into a tiger conjures images of grotesque monsters that are meant to invoke fear and horror. The source of horror lies not in the animal itself but the collapse of order between the human world and that of the animal. The imagery of an animal with the ability to combine human form challenges the idea of human identity itself. In the case of both Hlawndawhthanga and Keichala, they are represented as possessing certain level of humanity but intense fear and animosity surpass their humanity. These creatures symbolise a delicate balancing of humanity and the uncertainty of the lack of humanity. As Edwards and Graulund explain, “The world of grotesque imagery is not always the ordinary world of human beings, but nor does it necessarily signal a realm of unadulterated monstrosity” (37).

In another portrayal, like that of Kungawrhi’s husband, they are treated with complete alienation from the human world. Hlawndawhthanga achieves his humanity because he is not predisposed as *keimi* but he acquires his transformation by a terrible accident. His tale is about the fear and anxiety of his coexistence with human beings. By comparison, Keichala is humanised from his interaction with a human Lalruanga. The premise of both tales, as illustrated earlier in previous chapters, allows them to share the human world in a very complex manner. However, Kungawrhi’s husband is portrayed as a grotesque monster because of his monstrous form and is completely detached from the human world. His interaction in the human world is not given detail attention in the tale but his character enter into the scheme of the tale as a completely alienated figure whose company is to be averted at all cost. As soon as Kungawrhi’s father realises the true nature of his son-in-law, he makes an urgent declaration calling worthy contenders to rescue his daughter from the monster. The development of the tale reveals the story of how two noble brothers make their dangerous quest to rescue Kungawrhi.

The story depicts Kungawrhi's husband as a terrible monster who is clever and calculative. The tale shows him as if he has been anticipating attempts of his wife's rescue. When the two heroes are hiding in his house, he could detect the smell of strangers due to his heightened sense of smell but Kungawrhi is able to convince him that the smell of human is hers alone. The story builds up on the feeling of apprehension and fear for the two brothers. Kungawrhi's husband is not completely convinced by his wife and he comes up with different tricks to catch his adversaries on their act. He is shown as a precarious character that makes intelligent plans to thwart the attempt of the two brothers. After Kungawrhi is rescued from him, he turns into a full blown tiger and pursues them in a frightful speed. He is eventually killed by Phawthira in a manner to showcase the heroism of Phawthira.

These grotesque figures symbolise the conflict between the psychoanalytical concepts 'id' and 'ego'. They embody both the instinctual appetite of a brute and the consciousness of human being. This contradiction signals the problem of relationship between animal and human. The symbolism of human-animal amalgamation is explained as both comic and grotesque by Alixe Bovvey, " these humorous and hideous creatures were a tantalizing suggestion of unknown worlds and unthinkable dangers, at once entertaining and electrifying, funny and frightening" (43). The physical monstrous form in grotesque has direct implication on identity as

Grotesque appearance, particularly when it is presented in an aggressive manner, such as violence, sexuality, or consumption, is never passive, so that which is transcribed on the body functions actively, inspiring the monstrous effect in the audience. In this, grotesque bodies reveal the principal significance of the body's appearance to identity. (45)

Kungawrhi's portrayal is also an amalgam of human and non-human. Her origin is described to be completely fantastic and grotesque. She is born out of an old man's septic wound. Her physical size itself is the source of comic grotesque. It is given in detail how her smallness is a contradiction and alienation from human reality. Grotesque humour also plays a vital role in the tale. She is conceived outside of human reality because she is born out of a man's thumb. The absurdity of her situation intensified when the tale describes how the old man feeds her half of a single grain in the beginning. The old man eventually increases her food to a full single grain and whereon she grows a normal human size and is treated as a full member of human society. Thus, her origin story could be explained as intrusion of grotesque element in the thematic structure of a tale from fantasy genre.

The intrusion of grotesque element could be seen in other origin story of select characters like that of Aithangveli, Lalruanga, Hrangkhupa, Tlingi and Ngama. Aithangveli belongs to the supernatural world and is completely alienated from human reality. She features in the tale as a stark contrast to human reality. Her action of killing an old woman and wearing her skin as a disguise provokes grotesque horror. Her beautiful appearance is also described in an analogy of a sun exuding light and radiance. Her characterization oscillates between two extremes because she does not follow human morality, as seen from her action in killing the old lady to wear her skin as a disguise, and she is portrayed as extremely desirable in her physical appearance. She pushes boundaries of human limitation from both her action and her physical form. She could not be identified as possessing human quality and her whole being posits estrangement from reality which is a very important characteristic in grotesque aesthetic. She stands as a symbolic metaphor for grotesque identities that are featured in a positive

sense in a tale. The narrative provokes a sense of celebration of the non-human. She is portrayed as being cold in her attitude and indifferent in certain situations as mentioned before but she is celebrated as the ideal partner for her counterpart Thlihranthanga. She breaks the boundary of social norms between the acceptable and unacceptable.

Aithangveli embodies the unity of opposite binaries. Such grotesque figures offer revelation of combination of terrible grotesque and life itself.

...grotesquerie represents the inhuman as simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, for the inhuman is always ‘in humanity’; it is in-human or ‘in the human’...The inhuman is, then, the otherness that always inhibits human from the inside. This otherness cannot be accounted for or rationalized, or in any way reassimilated into ordinary life, though it is a permanent part of that ordinary life. The inhuman is the other side of the human or cohabitant with humanity”. (87)

In contrast to Aithangveli’s alienated identity, Hrangkhupa and Lalruanga acquire their grotesque identity from external forces or influence. Hrangkhupa becomes a cultural hero due to the intervention and influence of *ramhuai*¹. His characterization is closely linked with Mizo’s pre-colonial supernatural belief about natural elemental forces at work on human affair. However, *huai* has never been generally regarded in a positive sense. The fact that *huai* plays a vital role in forming Hrangkhupa as a hero suggests Mizo sense of grotesque aesthetic. As such Hrangkhupa is not portrayed as a moral hero. His heroism is very problematic because although he pursues and achieves his justice, he commits a terrible crime. The description of his attitude reveals a terrible grotesque figure who takes pleasure in extreme humiliation and defeat of his foil. His complete lack of conscience in degrading his enemy portrays him as a ludicrous man

obsessed with revenge. Hawnglaia's crime against Hrangkhupa is also very excessive but the reversal of his fortune is also drastic.

Hawnglaia's character is framed for grotesque humour where his complete defeat provokes a tone of ridicule. The whole morbid affair between the two characters arises out of a petty business with a tax called *fathang*. Human limitation and the capacity for evil are shown from the exaggerated tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia. Both the characters are also depicted with humorous circumstances to alleviate the darker theme of the tale. Some scenes are narrated with an absurdly comic twist like the scene where Hrangkhupa kills Hawnglaia's mithun by pulling a simple trick. He walks backwards inside the shed to dupe Hawnglaia. Hrangkhupa carries out various similar feats of revenge that are both absurd and daring. This comic element in the tale allays the seriousness and horror of the story because "if the work is not comic, we might be suddenly confronted with the fixed brilliant stare of the monomaniac, the fanatic, the madman" (Harpham 465).

Lalruanga's tale of ancestry is also filled with bizarre incidents. His own birth is predicted by a ghost of his dead brother. This kind of foreshadowing has certain implication about the character. It invokes the image of a terrible figure that would deviate from social norm. Lalruanga is framed as a grotesque figure from the time he is still in his mother's womb. Although he represents the human world when in contrast to that of Keichala, his identity provides plenty of alienation from the human world. The mythology around his identity and his own actions trigger grotesque anxiety. However, he is never detached from the human world. The whole premise of his unique origin and character traits could be interpreted as dramatic device to create mystical quality of his heroism.

This grotesque metaphor as a dramatic device is also employed in the framing of the characters Tlingi and Ngama. The morbid love story between the two characters is so closely linked with Mizo cultural belief about life after death that their tale becomes an inspiration for Mizo festival called *Mim Kut*² (Zawla 54-55). The tragic love story follows a heartbreaking tale of two lovers who are separated by the heroine's parents but are united together in their afterlife. The hero Ngama is driven to the point of desperation to be with his lover that he casts a spell on Tlingi. His action proves tragic when he accidentally kills Tlingi with his spell.

The tale then enters into the realm of fantasy where human reality is mixed with bizarre world of the dead. Tlingi becomes a grotesque figure because of her lover's action. The tale features the world of the dead where there is great contradiction with the world of the living. The two paradoxical characters are brought together to signify the incongruity of their circumstance. This brings about uncertainty where the world of the dead poses a threat to the world of the living for Ngama. His humanity becomes a problem because his identity is so interwoven with Tlingi. The disruption provoked by Tlingi's identity could not be reconciled with Ngama. Their complex circumstance reveals anxiety about life and death. Human morality is reversed in the tale because living becomes a contradiction. The state of being alive signifies its opposite for Ngama. Thereby human reality is distorted to reveal certain truths about human condition.

Tlingi and Ngama's interaction in the land of the dead shows grotesque irony where their separation in the human world is still maintained even in the land of the dead. They could not achieve harmony because of the incongruity of their identity. Tlingi's world, which is also the grotesque realm, is presented as the desirable world. The tale topples human reason by challenging human morality through grotesque

presentation of the characters. The grotesque aesthetic in the tale breaks down the idea of stability about the human state and thus informing on the limitation of certain human ideologies.

This kind of grotesque subversion could also be found in the tale of Lianchhiari. Lianchhiari's narrative has a firm hold in human reality because she is a historical figure. Her gripping story has been told as folklore because it combines the fantastic and social realism. It is fantastic because of its exaggeration in the form of Lianchhiari's actions. The narrative structure celebrates on the defiance of Lianchhiari. She goes against the code of moral conduct because she is torn away from her lover Chawngfianga. Her transgression and excess paints her as a grotesque figure because she goes against human conscience due to the inevitability of her circumstance. When she is torn apart from her one true love she boldly continues to harbour strong feelings for her lover. After she and Chawngfianga are married to other people, their feelings become a social aberration.

However, she could not observe the structured social code of conduct and dares to follow her conviction. This defiance is done at the cost of her own family, her husband and her children. The tragedy of her circumstance extends beyond her personal loss and affects her whole family. She makes a terrible reputation of herself and the tale also conveys a tone of caution against immorality. The irony and ambiguity of Lianchhiari's tale is reflective of grotesque uncertainty. She is very much a part of society but there is a strong sense of alienation experienced by her. She is not bothered with social hierarchy when it comes to her lover. She defies social law for the ruling clan when she falls in love with Chawngfianga. Although she is not met with resistance from her own family, she ultimately faces social reproach in the form of Chawngfianga's

palai. The *palai* who is sent to discuss on the matter of the prospect of the lover's nuptial shows a particularly extreme prejudice on Chawngfianga. This could also be interpreted as symbolic of social opprobrium exercised to the lovers.

Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga develop their relationship amidst repression from a social law that fix a hierarchy between the ruling clan and the non-ruling clan in matters of marriage. Chawngfianga is very hesitant to reciprocate the feelings of Lianchhiari because he is very aware of the social law. Lianchhiari also feels remorse at a certain point when she feels they have taken their relationship too far. She could not bear to think her family would be judged by society. However, she never feels any sense of wrong in her relationship with Chawngfianga. Her strong feelings for Chawngfianga become a source of her grotesque identity. She exerts her feelings even after her marriage to another man. She demonstrates her feelings in some bold manners during a very conventional time. She urges on Chawngfianga to tell her husband about their relationship in the past with a tone of reproach and defiance. There are numbers of instances where she consciously defies social laws.

Lianchhiari's display of unlawful feelings echoes the kind of subversion in grotesque aesthetic. This kind of grotesque subversion in aesthetics achieves significance because "it injects harmony with disharmony, and it destabilizes what is 'acceptable' and 'normal' through an overdose, an excess, of the abnormal, the deviant, abject" (Edwards and Graulund 75). Lianchhiari's narrative implies on disorder and chaos in the face of social order. She becomes a very important symbol of subversion that draws aesthetic force from human reality because "the excessive can be both destructive *and* revelatory because it exposes the boundary" (75).

Social and moral code relating to illicit romantic affair has been very stringent in most society. The boundary of inside/outside paradigm within morality in social structure is revealed from the life of Lianchhiari. However, it also has further implication on certain discursive practices that provoke her actions. The discrimination of clans in matter of marriage forms the core of the tragedy of the lovers. The social rule becomes very intrusive and destructive for the couple because it manifests in various forms. It harbours discursive discourse that empowers Chawngfianga's palai to interpret the rule as a reflection of Chawngfianga's social position as the inferior. This kind of discourse allows him to wilfully exercise his discrimination and hatred. His jealousy and condemnation of Chawngfianga makes him take action which proves a tragic turning point in the lives of the two characters.

The grotesque ambiguity in matters relating to social hierarchy is also seen in the tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala. The two brothers are subjects of social discrimination in a depraved society. Their unfortunate fate as orphans makes them a subject of ridicule and oppression. To their community, their extreme poverty gives them identity as misfits. They are treated with hostility and intolerance. Their ill-fated destiny becomes a site for grotesque power exerted by their society. The tale employs grotesque elements to social realism in contrast to monstrous and fantastic forms in other select texts. The tale subverts the idea of human order and grotesque manifestation in the tale is located on social realism.

Ironically, grotesque figures and incidents in the tale provide alleviation from anxiety and uncertainty of the fate of the two brothers. Terrible grotesque figure like *khuavang* becomes a symbol of morality. The guardian spirit is depicted as having a black snake as its offspring. The role of grotesque figure reverses when it becomes an

agent of human morality. The horrible society of Liandova and Tuaisiala has demonstrated grotesque power through its actions and attitude. In a sense, there is a double subversion from the monstrous grotesque form. The spirit subverts human reality by its monstrous form and it also subverts human morality by displaying human moral code of conduct in the absence of it from human society.

The tale reverses the role of grotesque figures and incidents by depicting them as forces of morality. A village chief called Lersia is a human but he took a grotesque form by disguising himself as a leper. He beats himself with poisonous plants to simulate a reaction from his skin. He looks so unrecognizable that the village people mistake him as an insignificant guest and no one wants to invite him as their guest. The prejudicial community shows the same lack of morality they show to Liandova and Tuaisiala. The horrible figure of a leper becomes an agent of goodwill for the brothers. He returns the kindness of the brothers by giving them hearty meals and a female mithun to start off a herd. These benevolent agents change the fortune of the brothers to become the most respected figures in the village. The tale brings out grotesque subversion of power to highlight the limitation of human morality.

Liandova and Tuaisiala are forced to live a grotesque existence because their social position in their society is non-existent. They are never considered to be a part of the society because the society they live in is malignant and hateful. Such portrayal of a deformed state of society brings out the theme of social injustice and atrocities committed to the marginalised. The tale subverts the society as grotesque because of their lack of human morality which is a vital part of social structure. It highlights on the need of social consciousness about inequity and social responsibility. Ostracization of certain class of people in the interplay of power structure in a society is revealed as a

dangerous act. Thus the tale serves as a cautionary tale about immoral society that marginalised those who could not afford to follow or fit certain social functions.

The indication of racial issues as grotesque symbolisms could also be found in few of the select tales. In the tale of Lalruanga and Keichala, the racial difference of the primary characters forms the essence of the story. Keichala could be read as belonging to a different race although he is not depicted as belonging to the human world. He may symbolize beyond his grotesque form because of the depiction of his racial land in the story. As the origin of the tale dates back to pre-colonial Mizoram, the tale reflects the feeling of ambivalence of the Mizo people regarding different nations. The cultural hero Lalruanga is able to form a diplomatic relations with the race of Keichala. The tale explores the humanity of Keichala in spite of his grotesque form. The concept of ‘anxiety of influence’ could be contextualized outside the theory of language. It could imply on Lalruanga’s effort to explore the realm of the unknown race.

The tale follows the adventure of Lalruanga to a very hostile place where social moral code differs drastically. He has to rely on his intellect to form friendship and alliance in the land of uncertainty. He is able to form a deep connection with Keichala because of his intellect. Although the race of Keichala is given a limited portrayal, it is predisposed as barbaric nation because of their grotesque forms. The tale highlights on the limitation of a racial structure of different nations. It echoes the feeling of loss and isolation of both the characters in their racial struggle. Keichala is treated with a feeling of hostility in the human world and Lalruanga is treated with the same sense of animosity in the land of *keimi*. However, the tale also explores on a vague possibility of alliance between hostile nations because of their humanity.

This kind of representation of grotesque figures inhabiting different states could be found in different cultures in different ages. In such kind of grotesque depiction, there is always a clear boundary drawn between the binary of superior and inferior. In the case of Lalruanga and Keichala, Keichala belongs to the uncivilized and barbaric nation. The natives of *keimi* village are ruled by their animal instincts. Their grotesque form is associated with the savagery of an animal. Therefore, their characterization is given as a source of laughter and humour. Keichala is defeated by Lalruanga in all of their feats of sports with comic hilarity. This grotesque comic of Keichala also humanizes his character but his racial difference overshadows his finer qualities. The natives of his village attempt to take the life of Lalruanga but Keichala follows through with his humanity by saving the life of his friend.

In stark contrast to the racial issue of Lalruanga and Keichala, the depiction of Aithangveli and her supernatural race provokes grotesque ambiguity in a different manner. In addition to her portrayal as a foreign being interacting in the human world, the tale provides a small glimpse of her supernatural world. However, her racial profile is narrated as more impressive and awe-inspiring than Keichala. Her extraordinary physical beauty is indicative of the favourable treatment of her world. The supernatural race of Aithangveli is described with a sense of fantasy and magic. They could summon powerful magic on the elements as seen in the scene where Aithangveli's parents invoke a strong tempest to take back Aithangveli to their world. Aithangveli herself is also endowed with the power of magic. After her husband and son died in her absence, she brings them back to life with her magic.

The terrible grotesque takes the form of god-like creatures that do not conform to the rules of human society. They become objects of desire and symbols of superiority.

Their differences from human reality conjure an entrance to the realm of higher existence. Their abnormality from human world represents the unattainable ideal. This race of superior beings are humanized to interact in the human world to signify the power of human imagination to find means to cope with the harsh reality of human struggle. In the tale, Aithangveli takes her husband and her son to her magic world to escape from the terrible human world where pain and death reign supreme.

In the tale of Kungawrhi, the supernatural beings called *khuavang* are shown as living in a society of their own because when Phawthira is trapped in the cave of *khuavang* he is married to one of those spirits and have children. The physically grotesque forms like *khuavang* are mostly portrayed as benign spirits that guard over human. However, they are portrayed in the tale as a source of comic grotesque. They feature as foil to showcase the bravery of Phawthira. He courageously threatens them when they visit their camp at night. He rescues Kungawrhi from them when they capture her.

In the tale, the racial difference between the human and the non-human is explored in a very limited extent. Unlike the race of Aithangveli, the portrayal of *khuavang* is morbid and unpleasant. They are depicted as mischievous and unpredictable. A sense of detachment is maintained in the tale to show the boundary of their separation from the human world. However, Phawthira lives and settles in their society for a long period of time. Although his experience in the land of *khuavang* is not given detail description, they are not described as particularly hostile. There is a certain degree of apprehension about their society because Phawthira is not emotionally attached to them even though he marries and has children in their society. Their difference from human society is asserted much like the estrangement towards the race

of *keimi*. But unlike the race of *keimi* whose society is perceived as savage and uncultured, this race of supernatural beings is estranged from the point of cultural differences. These supernatural beings are perceived in Mizo society as benevolent spirits and their coexistence with human is never regarded with hostility.

The grotesque aesthetic as coping mechanism is most revelatory in grotesque humour. The tales of Chhura have entertained the Mizo people for their subversive and humorous content. The figure of Chhura provides an excellent example of “pure comedy” as substantiated by Steig (258). Chhura demonstrates grotesque comedy because he offers comedy that could be regarded as distasteful and unsavoury. However, this kind of grotesque humour reveals the underlying implication on human psychology. His comedy provokes terrible injustice to social order and morality. His characterization revels both at the ridicule of his own person and other characters in his tales.

In some of his tales his character is the subject of mocking laughter at his person. He is portrayed as extremely dim-witted and often outsmarted by his brother Nahaia. He is described as a complete fool who cannot differentiate between his left and right shoulder; one that does not possess basic ability to grasp heuristic knowledge about social functions. This aspect of his identity gives partial defense from the more serious themes in his other tales. He is also portrayed as a man with no morals. His complete lack of moral and human decency is meant to provoke grotesque laughter where there is a necessity for complete detachment from his character. He commits atrocious acts of murder in order to escape from the clutch of his enemies and sometimes he commits murder without any rhyme or reason. He is even portrayed as foolish enough to kill his own child. His sexual liaisons are equally grotesque in some of his tales. He is also described as a cunning trickster who could fool a lot of people in the same manner as his

defeat in the face of his own vice and folly. The folklore around Chhura's tales reflects grotesque humour in aesthetic confinement.

Certain redeeming qualities are also attributed to his character. In one of his tales, he captures a fearsome *phungpuinu* that frightens villagers. The portrayal of Chhura as a village hero is described as "The clever hero is also thus a great leveller who reduces those who have arrogated power and privilege to themselves" (Margaret Ch. Zama 214). Chhura is also described as particularly noble towards his brother Nahaia. His defeats from Nahaia are often interpreted as his respect and care for his brother. Nahaia is described as an extremely lazy and uncaring person who always takes an opportunity to gain from his own brother. In those tales, Chhura always relinquishes his possessions or reputation.

Chhura's characterization is based on the ignoble fantasy of human psychology. Though his tales are all intended for humour and entertainment, the implication behind this humour suggest the kind of anxiety arouse by the 'uncanny' in psychoanalysis. In such humour, there is strong sense of ambiguity because it reflects the reality of human psychology. "This is the basic paradox of the grotesque: it is double-edged, it at once allays and intensifies the effect of the uncanny; in pure comedy, in the other end of the spectrum from the uncanny, the defense is complete, and detachment is achieved" (Steig 258).

Grotesque aesthetic thought has been given wider acceptance because it offers novel mode of reading about various themes on social realism. The evolution of humanity has seen drastic changes as evidence from the many changes in the way we view human reality. Grotesque reading provides new understanding about human nature and the dynamics within social functions. It brings to light certain social realities in the

form of aesthetic expression that informs our perception regarding morality, human psychology and culture. The terrible and horrific aspect in grotesque aesthetic serves as metaphorical symbols about the vices and degradation in certain human affairs. The select grotesque identities serve such purposes as to transform social perception about human imperfections in an exaggerated and innovative manner. These identities disrupt the normative way of social functioning to emphasize the significance of various underlying forces that shape the modern prevailing modes of thinking.

Notes

¹ *Ramhuai* is “an evil spirit, a demon” (Lorrain 376). K. Zawla explains that *ramhuai* are believed to be those spirits that dwell in the jungle (43). They are evil spirits that need to be appeased because they can cause physical harm to a person. The simplified term *huai* is often suffix to specific natural elements like rivers, rocks, trees, caves, hills, crossroads in a jungle, etc.

² *Mim Kut* is a festival dedicated to the departed soul. It entails a three day observation of auspicious ceremony where various food items are offered to the souls of the dead.

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CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The study focuses on the aesthetic significance of select Mizo folk characters in the framework of grotesque theory. Mizo folktales enshrine traditions, customs, beliefs and values of Mizo society. However, Mizo society has undergone few transitional stages throughout its history. The colonization of Mizoram by Britain is completed in the year 1890 which directly affects the customs and traditions of the Mizo society (Lalthangliana 41). The arrogation of power by the colonial rule resulted in gradual changes in the cultural ethos of Mizoram. In addition to the effect of colonization, the introduction of Christianity in 1894 and the subsequent conversion of Mizo people to the new religion have irrevocably changed the cultural climate for the production of such tales.

In modern Mizo society, Mizo folktales symbolise remnants of a closed chapter in Mizo cultural history. The cultural significance of the tales becomes conceptual and theoretical. Various core themes in the tales are approximated based on the need and approval of the present such as social values, morality, relationship with nature and ideology about human nature. There are also discrepancies between the past and present Mizo narrative especially in the field of religion which cannot be bridged by any other means but with aesthetics. Though certain level of nostalgia and romantic representation of the natural landscape of Mizoram still features heavily in aesthetic representation of Mizo cultural experiences; folktales are rarely studied for social criticism of the present.

Due to the changes in the concept of morality and religious belief, Mizo folktales are conferred the status of archaic preservation. There is a very limited exposure of folklore and their significance in the modern Mizo society. The depleting sense of folk culture in modern Mizo society is expressed by Margaret L. Pachuau as “...a society where there has been an increasing focus upon the nuances of religion and subsequently,

in the process, there has been the consistent negation of myths, folk and cultural lore” (12). It has also been observed by Mizo cultural historians that globalization also plays an important role in the transformation of Mizo social life.

B. Lalthangliana expresses his dissatisfaction of Modern Mizo society in his *Pi Pu Zunleng* saying that foreign influences manifest in the form of trade and commerce, academia, government jobs, and Christianity. He states that although such influences claim their own values in their fields, they have also negative influences in the Mizo society. He reasons his claim by saying that Mizo society does a poor job in accommodating and uniting such influences with Mizo social values for the betterment of the society as a whole. He believes that external influences are not given their due study and research based on the sense of continuum in Mizo social and cultural values (42-43).

The relegation of folktales due to various influences has suppressed their aesthetic value which has direct bearings on Mizo cultural identity. The study has attempted to appraise the intrinsic connection of Mizo past experiences with their folk narrative. The select characters are interpreted from the theory of grotesque to uncover the anxieties of the society and their larger implications on humanity. The pre-colonial Mizo society has efficient systems and customs of function in the society in matters relating to governance in the village, social codes of conduct, and occupation. Therefore, it greatly values communality and social harmony. The select tales reflect the same sense of Mizo social responsibility and in effect reveals various forces that threaten the harmony of social functions.

The select characters are studied within and outside of the context of their historical timeframe to bring out their aesthetic significance in the modern context. The

conceptual estrangement from human reality in certain elements within grotesque theory reveals the change of morality in the society. The presence of non-human qualities and other grotesque elements in Mizo folktales often faces censure in the modern re-telling of the tales and in other cases some tales are completely sidelined from the mainstream discourse. The aesthetic sensibility of the past Mizo society is much more embracing of the grotesque representation of human reality. This is not, in any way, a reflection of a degenerate society by aesthetic measures. On the contrary, they are indicative of a deeper understanding of humanity in all its forms.

Grotesque theory challenges the idea of structural stability in human nature and that social functions follow a definite system. It acknowledges the various dynamics within a society and an individual. The representation of monstrous forms and ambiguous characters inform about the multiplicity of narratives. These characters bring to light the various impulses in human nature which we suppress and negate under social pressure. The grotesque theory provides an informative device to determine changes in social mores that inform individual perception. The select characters embody both the fascination and fear about humanity itself. They represent not only a single narrative but also reveal symbolic signification on different topics.

The select tales depict rustic imagery of the Mizo past. They are reminiscence of the memories of shared history where society is closely in touch with our humanity. They symbolise the time in Mizo history where relationship between human and their natural environs reflects their spirituality. The select characters could never be removed from the natural world in spite of the metaphorical devices and dramatic techniques employed to put them in contradiction at times. The grotesque concept is pervaded with the same sense of the natural and the organic. As Mikhail Bakhtin reflects on *Rabelais*

and His World, “Such a body, composed of fertile depths and procreative convexities is never clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it” (339).

These folk characters are a celebration of the natural within man. The grotesque bodies like that of Hlawndawhthanga and Keichala signify the familiar part of human psyche that must be suppressed. Interestingly, the treatment of the characters is very different in their respective tales. Hlawndawhthanga metamorphoses into a monstrous form in the tale and is put in the midst of a social structure that is not compatible with his nature. He is not reconciled with society in the tale both because of his difference from the society and with himself. He suddenly transforms into a grotesque figure and although his difference is contextualized with human society his real cause of anxiety is within his own person. He is strong, powerful and conscientious. He exercises great care for his survival as seen from his interaction with his brothers who are also in the same predicament. It is possible that because his transformation is too drastic and sudden for him to come to terms with especially when the contrast of his former self is attributed with extraordinary qualities in terms of physical appearance, wealth, and nobility. He cannot reconcile with the monster he has become and so his death in the tale signifies a much complex rationale.

Hlawndawhthanga falls in love with a female *huai* named Thialtangi. He kills as he pleases at a village on his way to his love interest and so the village offers sacrifices to appeal to the *huai*. As stated in the preceding chapters, *huai* is a spirit of elemental forces and this particular *huai* in the tale is a *huai* of Vuchhip hill. She hears the prayers and appeals made by the villagers to her. She advises them to set a tiger trap. The tale depicts the struggle within forces from the natural world, the instinctual trait of an

animal or human and the spirit representing nature itself. The spirit of nature is in favour of the human world. The tale comes into full circle when nature is depicted both as a destructive force as well as a redeeming force to the human world. It is difficult to assume that a conscientious man like Hlawndawhthanga, who has successfully averted death where his brothers have not, would knowingly walk through a trap that is potentially fatal. However, since the tale is a representation of the battle between the human world and the natural world, it is fitting that the ultimate power struggle falls in the hands of the natural world because the human world is so overpowered by it.

The destructive force of nature amalgamated to the human world in the form of a hybrid man Hlawndawhthanga shows the struggle within the human as well. Hlawndawhthanga walks into his own death fully aware of the danger. His trauma from his transformation worsens when his brothers die in their hunt. He is alienated from human society while living in it and his last hope for self preservation is his romantic affair. It becomes a final blow for him when his love interest urges him to walk into the tiger trap. He has easily jumped over the trap on his way to his beloved but his beloved patronises him into demonstrating his escape and asks him to go through the trap. Even after a big log falls on him Hlawndawhthanga still manages to carry its weight with his hands but his beloved taunts him to lay it on him which finally ended his life. The tale points out the danger of isolation due to excessive exhibition of the instinctual in a structured society.

This force of nature within man is defeated in “The Tale of Lalruanga and Keichala” in a different manner. The anxiety from Keichala’s hybridity is defeated by a human Lalruanga. So the metaphorical struggle could primarily be contextualized between nature and human. In this tale, Keichala overpowers the human in physical

strength but Lalruanga is able to win over him by his intellect. Even though the tale employs the tension of the human/non-human binary as a metaphorical structure, a fine balance is maintained between the two. The defeat of the instinctual is not through death or self-sacrifice. The hero Lalruanga is able to overcome the terrible force by exercising his wit and the help of magic which he acquired from a supernatural being.

The select tales mostly contain the influence from the supernatural. The intrusion from forces outside of the human world could be seen in different degrees. All the traditional heroes from the select tales either have assistance or struggle with the supernatural. Hrangkhupa, Lalruanga, Liandova and Tuaisiala, Phawthira and Hrangchala receive aid from some form of spirits. Phawthira and Hrangchala have to fight a *keimi* and *khuavang*. Phawthira is portrayed as marrying a supernatural being *khuavang* and have children with it. Hrangkhupa is a favour of *Zialung huai* and he is seen as summoning his guardians *huai* in times of need. Some sort of supernatural force intervenes in the origin of Lalruanga. His birth is foretold by the spirit of his dead brother. He acquires the gift of magic from a god named Vanhrika. Liandova and Tuaisiala are aided by *khuavang* to provide them food and harvest. The spirit takes the form of an old lady and helps them in when they are in dire need.

Most of the female protagonists from the select tales like Aithangveli, Kungawrhi, and Tlingi belong to the supernatural. They either belong to or transform into supernatural beings. Tlingi and Ngama are confronted with a tragedy of separation and in the process transform their tale into the realm of the supernatural. Tlingi becomes a grotesque figure after the tale depicts her life after death. Kungawri is a supernatural being born out of an old man's septic thumb. Her bizarre origin and physical size give

her a comic-grotesque identity. Aithangveli is a goddess from *van* who descends to earth in search of a handsome man.

The supernatural world gives these characters varying degree of grotesque identities. Sudden physical transformation into monstrous form, murder, vengeance, extreme deprivation, and obsessive behaviour set the tone of their tales which makes the characters fall into different categories within the grotesque framework. Characters like Hlawndawhthanga and Keichala achieve their terrible grotesque identity from the intense anxiety aroused by their physical form and behaviour. The general perception of their nature as violent beasts could be attributed as forming their persona as creatures of the unknown. Hawnglaia and Hrangkhupa achieve their grotesque identity through their violent actions like murder and other offensive acts of revenge. Other characters like Aithangveli, Tlingi, Ngama, Lalruanga, Kungawrhi and Phawthira achieve their grotesque identity through their demonstration of the human/non-human dynamics.

Among the select characters, there are few that demonstrate their grotesque identity through their human quality and have firm groundings on social realism. Even though “The Tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” is influenced by supernatural forces, the primary characters are known for their demonstration and exposure of human vices. Their extreme poverty and deprivation expose a cruel society. Their grotesque existence is directly correlated to the unhealthy and apathetic society in the tale. The society’s extreme want of charity and the complete lack of it provoke anxiety and discomfort on the very human level. Ironically, since the brothers belong to the weakest strata of social hierarchy their society’s attitude toward them reveal its lack of humanity.

Any social organization calls for cooperation and interconnectedness among the different classes of people for protection and progression. The pre-colonial Mizo society

prides itself for its principles of social responsibility and charity. However, “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” demonstrates the lack of both and it showcases the danger and effects of social apathy to the individual. The tale shows the insight and deep understanding of humanity by the pre-colonial Mizo society. Through the tale, they are able to demonstrate the connection of society and humanity because the core theme of the tale moves beyond social preservation.

The tale has its appeal for the structural framework within the human world. The destructive force makes its appearance from the vices within the society of the human and redemption is achieved through both non-human and human forces in the tale. The non-human influences that reverse the fortune of the primary characters are *khuavang* and a python. A village chief Lersia is from the human world that plays a crucial role in the lives of Liandova and Tuaisiala. Due to these agents and fortunate circumstances, the tale ends in full justice for the brothers.

Another tale that is steeped with lesson on humanity and social realism is “The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga”. The tale’s heroine Lianchhiari depicts a bold character that upsets social morality. Her defiance stems from her feelings for Chawngfianga. Although her love for him is genuine and true, it becomes immoral once they are both married to other people. The premise of the text is on the demonstration and display of an admirable human quality. However, due to a deceptive *palai* the couple are separated. Lianchhiari displays extreme defiance to her fate which showcases the terrible and destructive potentiality of her emotion. There is ambiguity in the nature of her defiance because it affects her other relationships like that of her husband and children. On the other hand, she demonstrates a strong female figure that is accepting of her feelings. She becomes a grotesque figure because of her human nature. The tale also

shows how excessive behaviour breeds isolation and alienation. Lianchhiari is alienated outside of the social norm for the very nature of her human quality.

The tale shows the limitation and boundary of social construct when put in contrast with the absence of distinctions within a society. Lianchhiari's tale provokes discomfort and uneasiness for her narrative that requires the erasure of social structure. Thus she achieves grotesque identity from the estrangement of her person from a conventional society because "...a grotesque work influences a collective consciousness, a shared set of social, cultural and historical assumptions that arise from conventional beliefs and attitudes" (Edwards and Graulund 12). Lianchhiari's transgression from social laws qualifies her as a grotesque figure whose actions provoke discomfort and anxiety.

Another character that has an appeal and influence from the uniquely human is the character of Chhura. The character Chhura fascinates and draws attention for his remarkable characterization. His characterization challenges the structure of a traditional hero. He is mostly known as a dim-wit character who entertains the audience with his bizarre antics. The comedy of his tales entails laughter at his person as much as his bizarre acts. In his tales he commits murder, infanticide, sexual deviancy, robbery and other crimes. Because he is substantiated as a fool in many of his tales his immorality and horrible acts are depicted with grotesque comedy. Some of his adventures document his fantastic journey to different places and some adventures are about his interaction with his family and relatives. He is depicted as a compulsive trickster who deceives people without any scruples.

The laughter provoked by Chhura's actions is pervaded with a sense of anxiety and apprehension. He continually escapes censure for his atrocious acts from the

audience which has an important signification. The assumption that Chhura is a complete fool is also problematic because there are certain instances where he demonstrates quick wit and intelligence. He escapes from the wrath of his enemies many times because of his cleverness. At the same time, he is also depicted as unable to perform simple tasks. His character exhibits a wide range of human traits and behaviours. He can never be fit into one character type because of the different roles he plays in his tales. One factor that contributes greatly to the allure of his tales is that he defies social norms without getting any retribution from the audience.

The popularity of Chhura could be alluded to the fact that his characterization is so identifiable in human nature. His deviation both in the form of his actions and characterization is grounded within the premise of the human. He is not framed to be noble and exceptionally dignified. There are no supernatural forces at work in his characterization unlike the other folk heroes. In fact, his tales show him as an anti-hero from his many immoral acts. His comedies are pervaded with a degenerate laughter at some implausible feats in a structured society. However, he effortlessly moves in between the inside/outside social paradigm.

Chhura's comedy represents the terror in comic laughter. Laughter in his tales circumvents the terrible grotesque quality of his characterization. He demonstrates destructive social pursuits but signifies the regenerative power of laughter. Through his humour he is able to show the terrible within human being. He embodies the desire for freedom from social and moral repression. His bold and outlandish behaviour points out the component of various social structures by opposing them. His comic irony points out the incongruities and disharmony in the face of strict moral rules put in context with

human nature. His tales contain the terrible managed by humour through irony and absurdity.

The select folk characters are each constructed with the combination of the foreign and the familiar. This has resulted in a feeling of discomfort and anxiety that either implicates the individual or the society. They showcase the paradox in nature because these characters could be ascribed as abnormal in different degrees. The select characters also show the powerful effect of defiance in the face of certain inevitabilities of life because “...the grotesque can criticize the idea that there is some ethically compelling aspect to ‘normality’ by suggesting that the normal range is simply a statistical category to which there is no ethical obligation to correspond. If normal just means within a common statistical range, there is no reason to be normal or not” (10). This abnormality harbours ambivalent responses where our predispositions are revealed and challenged. The characters stand out from common reality for their transgression from structured society, institutions and the individual. Their defiance of the concept of ‘normal’ whether through their physical attributes or actions reveal the delicate balancing of social order.

Grotesque ambiguity is a form of escape from self and opens new channels to contemplate human nature beyond our preoccupations. The select characters demonstrate grotesque identities because they challenge social norms to express human condition through aesthetic qualification. Its extreme exaggeration and excess create certain degree of apprehension and ambivalence both in the context of the reader and within the text itself. This ability of grotesque to transcend the predisposition of normative divisions of binaries offers numerous possibilities to explore various nuances in the text that offer aesthetic value. The select folk characters display the keen Mizo

sense of grotesque aesthetics and its power to educate on humanity and dynamics within a society; and the power of human imagination to align reality with the fantastic. The overtly horrible and the terrible in the tale are naturally accompanied by a unique observational humour intended to humanize those qualities of grotesque that alienates certain themes with a purpose.

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 - b) American Center Library, Anna Salai, Chennai, Tamil Nadu-600002
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ABSTRACT

**GROTESQUE IDENTITIES: AN INTERPRETATION OF SELECT
CHARACTERS IN MIZO FOLKTALES**

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The concept of grotesque is a theory that is elusive and problematic due to the application of the term in various art forms. The origin of the word 'grotesque' is derived from the Italian word '*grotta*' meaning *cave* and it could be traced back to the 15th Century Roman paintings, figurines and crafts (Rosen 126). The graphic illustrations contained "human and animal figurines ...intertwined with foliage in ways which violate not only the laws of statics and gravity, but common sense and plain observation as well" (Harpham 461). In literature, there has been plenty of contemplation of the concept of grotesque as to its legitimization as a literary genre. Cecile Bocianowski explains that the problem lies in the nature of the genealogy of the concept because it has been applied to various fields such as "decorative arts, dance and the fine arts" (313). The determination of grotesque art is usually based on aesthetic spirit that is drastically different and provocative.

Since the concept owes its heritage from art forms that deviate from set norms, its extension to literature is also pervaded with the same mood of transgression. It defies existing literary rules to challenge the system of genre categorization itself. The metaphorical symbolism of monstrous and hybrid forms alone in text do not suffice as an encompassing framework for grotesque theory in literature. Thus, the primary feature of grotesque has been noted as "the structure of estrangement" (462). This characteristic of grotesque is implicated to those elements in text that stand out for their bizarre quality. "The bizarre is that which distances itself from the usual order of things, that which is difficult to understand, precisely because of its strangeness. By analogy with this idea of strangeness, the term was further used to refer to anything that induces laughter due to its unlikely, eccentric or extravagant nature" (Bocianowski 317).

The role of humour becomes very significant in the concept of grotesque. Geoffrey Galt Harpham has traced laughter in grotesque to that of Baudelaire's theory of

laughter where such laughter is an expression of “not one man’s superiority over his fellows, but the artist’s superiority over nature” (463). However, Harpham continues to state that grotesque comedy is not free from censure. He expounds on the notion that grotesque humour is a play on morality and that it ultimately evokes ambiguity and confusion. It is an intuitive reaction against the underlying tension of the serious content (463-464).

The laughter in grotesque is also linked with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. In his work *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin contemplates on the cultural significance of the festivity around carnivals. He interprets that the popular culture around carnivals has direct resonance on aesthetic theory. “While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside of it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of freedom” (7). He draws direct connection of grotesque theory to that of the carnivalesque where laughter and terror combine to form a complete unit. There is a break in normative hierarchical structure. He affirms on the notion that the conceptual grotesque provides an alternate world that challenges the idea of status quo in cultural practices.

The modern theory of grotesque aesthetic provides innovative form of analysis to uncover tensions or shifts in the sense of social values and morality. It challenges and qualifies the metaphorical expressions of various symbolisms in text. The application of grotesque theory reveals aspects of aesthetic continuity as stated by Rosen “... “grotesque” becomes the term suitable for qualifying an aesthetic category. It now applies to all the arts, since its range of meaning has widened sufficiently to allow it to express change, otherness, aesthetic renewal” (128).

The select folk identities and their tales are loaded with grotesque symbolisms that maintain their relevance in the modern world because of their subversive contents. Certain narratives and imagery are framed in such a way as to provoke ambiguity in their historical moment of creation. Taking the various cultural and social changes in Mizo society into consideration, the ambiguity of these identities offers plenty of room for analysis. The select tales have been divided into terrible grotesque and comic grotesque depending on their dramatic representation implying the tragic or the comic.

This dissertation has interpreted the tales of 15 Mizo folk characters in the grotesque framework drawing primary sources from P. S Dahrawka's *Mizo Thawnthu*(1964) and B. Lalthangliana's *Pi Pu Zunleng: Studies in Mizo Culture and Folktales*(2007). The characters chosen for the study include "The tales of Lalruanga and Keichala", "The tales of Liandova te unau", "The tales of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli", "The tale of Hlawndawhthanga", "The tale of Kungawrhi", "The tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia", "The love story of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga", "The love story of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma" and the adventures of Chhurbura.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The production of Mizo folklore reflects the cultural experiences of the Mizo people. Among the various forms of Mizo folkloristic expressions, folktale is one of the most enduring forms of cultural celebration. Mizo folktale as a genre covers plethora of subjects and themes such as myths, legends, fantasy, fables, religious beliefs, relationship with nature and so on. The oral folk narratives of Mizo people reflect rich cultural heritage of the people. The tales are narrated with imaginative use of various dramatic devices that engage the audience with awe and wonder. There is a significant use of bizarre characters and actions to attract attention. This narration technique brings

out aesthetic quality that is most informative about the experiences of past Mizo way of life.

The folk aesthetic of the select characters reveals certain human conditions in its purest form. The sentiments expressed in the tales expose themes like fear about mortality, beliefs regarding the afterlife, the tragedy of warfare, interactions of human with fantastic creatures and supernatural beings, the metaphysical quality of human love, and social criticism. The select tales also reflect the complexity of the relation of human with their natural environment. The tales feature fantastic creatures and supernatural beings that reside alongside human beings in the natural world. Mizo folk aesthetic sensibility and religious beliefs and practices are closely related and therefore these fantastic creatures draw their inspiration from these religious beliefs.

The relation of human with the natural world has intrinsic connection with Mizo aesthetic sensibility. Certain fantastic creatures feature heavily in these selected folktales. The select characters either belong or interact with creatures from the natural world. This dynamic of human-nature relationship also shows the boundary between the human world and the natural world. It reflects on the condition of human within and outside of the natural world. The tales serve as an important tool of examining the human condition through aesthetic measures. Through the interaction of human with nature, the tales reveal man's innermost fears, hopes, beliefs and ideals that frame the collective sense of morality and social functions.

The study incorporates the modern grotesque theory of aesthetic to select folk characters. The tales contain diverse folk characters that exhibit a wide range of purpose and meaning. These tales are created without any form of censure because they are the genuine expression of Mizo people living in a time that necessitated their narrative to be intuitive of their natural environs. The tales combine realism and fantasy to reveal about

various social issues. The themes and subject matter of these folk tales are framed with the intentions of educating the community about human vices that could harm the system of their social functioning.

Chapter 2: The Terrible-Grotesque Identities

In grotesque aesthetic, the terrible grotesque is an interpretation of symbolism that focuses on the dark and bizarre elements in a work of art. It is an attempt to make meaning out of the extremely exaggerated portrayal of life in art. John Ruskin describes the terrible grotesque as “Art arising from irregular and accidental contemplation of terrible things; or evil in general” (1709). He traces the presence of grotesque in art to bring out its implication on ideology pertaining to art and thus he connects the terrible grotesque to the sensualist ideals (1709). Geoffrey Harpham has aligned Ruskin’s terrible grotesque to Wolfgang Kayser’s concept of the “fantastic grotesque” (464).

The select tales under this chapter are based on their dramatic structure that falls within the tragic. The human mind has the capacity to invoke or recall certain traits that are deemed atrocious, evil, base and morbid. The terrible in grotesque aesthetic entails the dangerous terrain of uncertainty, horror and fear. The select characters and the interpretation of their identities serve symbolic reflection of that part of our reality that we often relegated. Grotesque aesthetic holds a mirror to reflect on the reality of human conditions on different scales implicating both society and individual. Human traits like greed, excessive indulgence, struggle for power, sexual perversion, and other abominable acts are given attention in the select texts to reflect on the reality of human condition.

Tales like “The tale of Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia”, “The tale of Hlawndawhthanga”, “The tale of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga”, “The tale of

Zawltlingi and Ngambawma” and “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” contain characters reflecting on the terrible grotesque. The power struggle between Hrangkhupa and Hawnglaia demonstrates grotesque ambiguity that reflects deeper implication about human survival and domination from the titular characters’ war of revenge. The complexity of the instinct-intellect dynamic in the story of Hlawndawhthanga provokes anxiety especially from the symbolism of Hlawndawhthanga’s hybridity as a *keimi*. The subversive love story of Lianchhiari and Chawngfianga exposes social discrimination by exercising acts outside the social norm. The tale reveals the ambiguity of extramarital affair especially from Lianchhiari’s bold assertion of her feelings. The morbid love story of Zawltlingi and Ngambawma explores the transition of a familiar theme of love affair to the fantastic grotesque through the dramatic turn of affair after the death of the heroine. “The tale of Liandova and Tuaisiala” reveals an imperfect society that consciously alienates two orphan brothers and the tale evokes the image of the terrible grotesque amidst serious themes in the tale.

The characters under this category show varying degrees of the terrible grotesque identities through the intrusion from supernatural world and through their actions. Sudden physical transformation into monstrous form, murder, vengeance, extreme deprivation, and obsessive behaviour set the tone of their tales which makes the characters fall into different categories within the grotesque framework.

Chapter 3: The Comic-Grotesque Identities

The interplay of horror and humour is a very important feature in grotesque concept. Comedy is employed to modulate the horror and fear provoked by grotesque features. The fear and anxiety aroused by grotesque elements are subdued and moderated by laughter. Michael Steig has given his analysis on Lee Byron Jennings’

concept of laughter as “disarming mechanism”. He states “the disarming mechanism of humour is applied directly to the fearsome forces, which are thus ostensibly defeated” (255). However, there is always a threat to the humour in grotesque and so he directly quotes Jennings “the playfulness is constantly on the verge of collapsing and giving way to the concealed horror” (255).

Grotesque humour is derisive, provocative and ridiculing. The intensity of horror-humour dynamics may vary in different grotesque themes. Some grotesque figures commit humorous actions but the laughter is not entirely on the actions but more focused on the characters themselves. In other instances, the laughter may be focused on the extreme distortion of the character’s physical features or about social satire on certain issues. Thus, comic-grotesque is an umbrella term to describe laughter that is coloured with anxiety and uncertainty. It is usually about laughter restricted by social norms. Grotesque comic creates a superior-inferior hierarchy in its textual form. The site of laughter in comic grotesque is put in inferior position. So it could be a form of humiliation and pain. Certain grotesque themes provoke intense fear and anxiety and so there is a necessity to make certain form of detachment and separation from the object of laughter that these grotesque figures impose.

This function of humour as a form of alleviation from fear and anxiety has been given a psychoanalytic interpretation by Steig. He draws similarity between Jennings’s concept of “disarming mechanism” to Freudian concept of defense mechanisms of human psyche on the ego

Jennings’s concept of a disarming mechanism seems parallel to the kinds of intra-psyche process described by psychoanalytic ego psychology. Theorists in that field would surely call this mechanism a *defense*, functioning to protect the

ego from the guilt or fear-producing fantasies arising from the unconscious, by means of distortion of these fantasies through denial, condensation, splitting, projection, sublimation and so on. (255)

The select tales under comic-grotesque are “The tale of Lalruanga and Keichala”, “The tale of Thlihranthanga and Aithangveli”, “The tale of Kungawrhi” and the adventures of Chhurbura. The characters in these tales showcase human struggles through shocking physical or circumstantial transformation. This transformation reveals the incongruity between the attitudes of the characters and their situations. There is a routine alienation from normative social structure which provokes grotesque laughter. However, such laughter is overshadowed with doubt and uncertainty because the laughter is mixed with the consciousness of the horror within. The combination of the horrible and the comic provides wide range of signification such as trauma, death, deformity, hybridity and other aspects of absurdities in life.

Chapter 4: Contemporary Relevance of Grotesque Identities

Grotesque aesthetic thought has been given wider acceptance because it offers novel mode of reading about various themes on social realism. The evolution of humanity has seen drastic changes as seen from the many changes in the way we view human reality. Grotesque reading provides new understanding about human nature and the dynamics within social functions. It brings to light certain social realities in the form of aesthetic expression that informs our perception regarding morality, human psychology and culture. The terrible and horrific aspect in grotesque aesthetic serves as metaphorical symbols about the vices and degradation in certain human affairs. The select grotesque identities serve such purposes as to transform social perception about human imperfections in an exaggerated and innovative manner. These identities disrupt

the normative way of social functioning to emphasize the significance of various underlying forces that shape the modern prevailing modes of thinking.

The concept of *keimi*¹, as represented by the characters Hlawndawhthanga, Keichala, and Kungawrhi's husband, is interpreted as monstrous form that signify the disruption of the human world. These grotesque figures symbolise the conflict between the psychoanalytical concepts 'id' and 'ego'. They embody both the instinctual appetite of a brute and the consciousness of human being. This contradiction signals the problem of relationship between animal and human. The physical monstrous form in grotesque has direct implication on identity as

Grotesque appearance, particularly when it is presented in an aggressive manner, such as violence, sexuality, or consumption, is never passive, so that which is transcribed on the body functions actively, inspiring the monstrous effect in the audience. In this, grotesque bodies reveal the principal significance of the body's appearance to identity. (Edwards and Graulund 45)

There are other classes of character among the select tales that have direct influence from supernatural beings called *ramhuai*². The relation of human with spirits from the natural world is seen in the formulation of these select characters which resonates with Mizo aesthetic sensibility. The select characters either belong or interact with creatures from the natural world. This dynamic of human-nature relationship also shows the boundary between the human world and the natural world. It reflects on the condition of human within and outside of the natural world. The tales serve as an important tool of examining the human condition through aesthetic measures. Through the interaction of human with nature, the tales reveal man's innermost fears, hopes, beliefs and ideals that frame the collective sense of morality and social functions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Mizo folktales enshrine traditions, customs, beliefs and values of Mizo society. However, Mizo society has undergone few transitional stages throughout its history. The colonization of Mizoram by Britain was completed in the year 1890 which directly affects the customs and traditions of the Mizo society (Lalthangliana 41). The arrogation of power by the colonial rule resulted in gradual changes in the cultural ethos of Mizoram. In addition to the effect of colonization, the introduction of Christianity in 1894 and the subsequent conversion of Mizo people to the new religion have irrevocably changed the cultural climate for the production of such tales.

In modern Mizo society, Mizo folktales symbolise remnants of a closed chapter in Mizo cultural history. The cultural significance of the tales becomes conceptual and theoretical. Various core themes in the tales are approximated based on the need and approval of the present such as social values, morality, relationship with nature and ideology about human nature. There are also discrepancies between the past and present Mizo narrative especially in the field of religion which cannot be bridged by any other means but with aesthetics. Though certain level of nostalgia and romantic representation of the natural landscape of Mizoram still features heavily in aesthetic representation of Mizo cultural experiences; folktales are rarely studied for social criticism of the present.

The aesthetic sensibility of the past Mizo society is much more embracing of the grotesque representation of human reality. This is not, in any way, a reflection of a degenerate society by aesthetic measures. On the contrary, they are indicative of a deeper understanding of humanity in all its forms. The select folk characters are each constructed with the combination of the foreign and the familiar. This has resulted in a feeling of discomfort and anxiety that either implicates the individual or the society.

They showcase the paradox in nature because these characters could be ascribed as abnormal in different degrees. The characters stand out from common reality for their transgression from structured society, institutions and the individual. Their defiance of the concept of 'normal' whether through their physical attributes or actions reveal the delicate balancing of all forms of social order which, in effect, has revealed that the grotesque has always been an inseparable component in the domain of humanity.

Notes

¹ *Keimi* is a “mythical tiger-man, a person possessing the magic power of changing himself or herself at will into a tiger, and back again into a human being” (Lorrain 242).

² *Ramhuai* is “an evil spirit, a demon” (376). K. Zawla explains that *ramhuai* are believed to be those spirits that dwell in the jungle. They are evil spirits that need to be appeased because they can cause physical harm to a person (43). The simplified term *huai* is often suffix to specific natural elements like rivers, rocks, trees, caves, hills, crossroads in a jungle, etc.

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