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What Lurks Behind the Shell? Kafkaesque Surrealism Revisited by Jackie Kay

Abstract

This essay seeks to analyse Jackie Kay's short story "Shell" (2002) with reference to a metamorphic tradition, in particular the modernist novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915) by Franz Kafka. Since both texts tackle the subject of the bodily transformation of a solitary character, albeit in two distinctly different manners, the paper will juxtapose them in order to investigate the writer's reassessment of the monstrous body and the conflict it reveals about the social exclusion of otherness. It will also discuss Kay's ingenious treatment of metamorphosis as a powerful source of self-invention.

Keywords: metamorphosis, modernism, obesity, discrimination, subversion

1. Introduction

What lies at the heart of the literary oeuvre of Jackie Kay is, undoubtedly, her belief in inclusivity as an underlying principle of a healthy society. While her initial interests revolved primarily around the issues of marginalisation ensuing from racial, ethnical, and sexual otherness characteristic of a largely homogeneous Scottish society, her later works give voice to a range of social misfits, who vainly struggle to conceal their sense of inadequacy. The Scottish Makar – National Poet of Scotland – since 2016, Kay is valued as an ambassador of heterogeneity that encompasses the disadvantaged: the elderly, the overweight, the abandoned, the obsessed, and the disenchanting. As a poet, a novelist, and a short story writer, she expresses her "overabundance of empathy" (Korzeniowska 138) with remarkable inventiveness. This paper aims to analyse Kay's ingenious strategy of exploring the modernist novella *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka as an intertext for the story "Shell" published in 2002 in Kay's first short story collection *Why Don't You Stop Talking*. It will investigate Kay's concept of forming an analogy between the monstrous body of Gregor Samsa and the morbidly obese protagonist of "Shell," and its subversion through a revised outlook of a metamorphic process.

Kay juxtaposes the horrifying transmutation of Kafka's protagonist, which initiates the process of his long and painful agony in alienation, by a metamorphic act seen as an antidote for exclusion, and leading to the liberation from social constraints. The transformation in "Shell" bears the quality of self-invention, it opens the space for self-fulfilment, and simultaneously protects the protagonist from a societal bias towards otherness. Although the story exposes discrimination against overweight people, obesity may be interpreted here in broader terms, as a representation of a diversity which does not adhere to the collective norms and expectations, and the protagonist could stand for all those who vainly seek social acceptance.¹ Hence, the metamorphosis is depicted as an attractive break from a social prejudice.

2. Metamorphic Tradition

Ovid's magnum opus *Metamorphoses*, and the subsequent literary works which it inspired over the centuries, placed the phenomenon of corporeal transformation within an explicable context. Most frequently it has been accounted for as a punitive or revengeful act of divine or malicious powers; however, it has also been employed in order to infuse a text with comic connotations or provide a powerful vehicle for plot development. Once positive, the outlook on vitality and dynamism governing Ovidian fluid universe came to evoke negative connotations, when shape-shifting became explicitly associated with evil forces in the Christian tradition (Warner 2). Such a devilish property characterises for instance the mysterious figure of Gil-Martin in the Scottish masterpiece *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) by James Hogg, where the diabolic character assumes the shape of the protagonist in order to perpetrate crimes in his name. Kafka's story holds a particular position among the literature of bodily transformation. According to David Gallagher, it marks "a clear demonstrable shift in the representation of metamorphosis in modernism and postmodernism with writers representing metamorphic states as psychological or mental phenomena" (13). The external reasons for the very act of transformation remain inexplicable in the text, leaving the protagonist and the reader at a loss. Causality is replaced by arbitrariness, and Ovidian vivacity gives way to misery and despair. Trapped in a monstrous body, the main character experiences double alienation, from his family and his self, and becomes his own other. The transmutation deprives him of human dignity and dooms him to a tragic end. Interestingly, Kay's text provides an altogether different outlook on a metamorphic act, endowing it with a variety of positive connotations.

The predicament of a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, is revealed to himself and to the reader in the opening sentence of Kafka's novella: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed

in his bed into a horrible vermin.” The discovery is followed by a matter-of-fact statement: “It wasn’t a dream” (Kafka n.p.). From the very beginning, Kafka excludes the possibility of interpreting Gregor’s nightmarish position in oneiric terms, providing instead a surrealistic treatment of the concept of metamorphosis (cf. Gallagher 141). The transformation occurs in a realistic setting, portrayed with great attention to detail, which, combined with the understated and emotionless narrative mode, contributes to creating an acute sense of the absurd. Likewise, Jackie Kay situates the protagonist of “Shell” in a recognizable, contemporary household. Doreen – a single mother of a black teenage son, barely copes with everyday life and her son Louis’s scornful attitude. Extremely overweight, she finds it more and more challenging to bear her loneliness and exhaustion and begins to observe a gradual change in her eating habits and painful physical sensations. One day, she develops scales on her limbs, and her back hardens into a mosaic shell. Transformed into a tortoise, she leaves home and seeks refuge in the garden.

Similarly to Kafka’s novella, the reader of “Shell” is confronted with an act of metamorphosis. However, the events they witness happen at opposite times in the two stories. While Gregor Samsa’s atrocious change occurs in the first sentence of the tale, Doreen’s transformation constitutes a concluding act. Yet, on closer inspection, it is the opening scene of “Shell” that, in fact, corresponds to the emergence of Gregor’s hideous shape and immediately forms a connection between the monstrous body of the transmuted Samsa and the morbidly obese woman. The reader witnesses Doreen’s struggle to get out of bed, when she “throw[s] her duvet right back so that it doesn’t get in her way” and then “rocks back and forth, back and forth, until she gathers enough steam to rise” (Kay 137). Doreen’s awkward horizontal position and her clumsiness combined with determination are clearly reminiscent of Gregor’s efforts to bring his unruly insectile body under control and safely leave his bed: “He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections [...] [h]is many legs waved about helplessly [...] continuously moving in different directions [...]. If he wanted to bend one of them, then that was the first one that would stretch itself out [...]. Gregor was already sticking half way out of bed [...] all he had to do was rock back and forth” (Kafka n.p.).

3. The Stigma of Obesity

The transformation of Gregor Samsa has been subject to a variety of interpretations throughout the century: from a psychoanalytical analysis linking Samsa’s downfall to a self-imposed punishment for usurping the position of his father, through a Marxist reading of Samsa as a representative of the exploited proletariat to a feminist treatment of the evolution of Gregor’s sister.² Regardless of the diversity of outlooks, what always remains central and intact is the disfigured, hideous

body and the horror it arouses. Jackie Kay endeavours to juxtapose the repulsive image of the deformed Gregor Samsa and her monstrously overweight protagonist in order to subversively expose the predicament of obese people. With just a few images, the reader gains an insight into the burden of fatness, which transforms everyday routines into a series of challenges. Taking a shower becomes almost a strategic operation, cutting toe nails requires securing a whole afternoon, and picking up dropped keys turns out to be a sheer impossibility. However, life in slow motion is particularly bothersome when confronted with the outside world. Doreen, for example, finds it extremely difficult to cross the road: "There never seems to be enough time. The green is always over too quickly [...]. Small steps, one at a time, are all she can manage" (Kay 141). Driving does not seem much better. It exposes Doreen to the risk of being ridiculed, since her seat is adjusted "at an angle, almost in the sleeping position" (Kay 140), and her slow pace infuriates impatient drivers, who flash their lights or gesture obscenely at her. Doreen's lack of confidence has grown since she lost her job. Unable to meet the financial needs of her son, she also feels his resentment towards her.

Through her protagonist's story, Kay portrays the plight of overweight individuals who suffer social stigma and the resulting exclusion and loneliness. Obesity is sometimes referred to as the last socially acceptable form of discrimination as it is generally considered to be self-inflicted and a manifestation of destructive behaviour. Commonly viewed as a consequence of a lack of control, a fat body is stereotypically "equated with the ugly, moral failure, inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed, and self-indulgence" (Backstrom 692). The condition is rarely perceived as a medical problem and therefore individual indulgence tends to be blamed rather than "binge-eating disorder as a condition beyond one's control like anorexia and bulimia" (Backstrom 691). Pejorative perceptions of obesity, particularly acute in the case of women, imposes a harsh, preemptory social judgement on them: "in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know [...] the prestige of a privileged understanding of her *will* (she's addicted), her *history* (she's frustrated), her *perception* (she can't see herself as she really looks), her *prognosis* (she's killing herself)" (Moon and Sedgwick 305; original emphasis).

Protecting her protagonist's privacy against such ruthless claims, Kay leaves the reader in the dark as to the reasons for Doreen's present state. Sparse hints testify to her loneliness as a single mother and her decreasing self-confidence following the loss of her job. Only time indicators in the text such as: "not any more," "unlike before," "it's been a while since" imply that Doreen did once lead a different life, yet her weight-gain is neither determined as a cause nor an effect of her current situation. Her body resists any *ad hoc* interpretations and remains an enigma, resembling, also in this respect, the condition of Kafka's protagonist. Not only are the reasons for Gregor's metamorphosis unexplained but also his insectile form is depicted in extremely vague terms. Portrayed briefly as unusually

broad, covered with a carapace and equipped with big jaws and numerous legs, Gregor can be merely categorised as an unspecified type of beetle. Various interpretative attempts to classify his transformed body within a certain category have been futile. As Harold Bloom points out, Kafka himself “did everything possible to evade interpretation of his work” (4) and his strong objection to placing an illustration of the transformed Gregor on the cover of the book additionally testifies to his resolve. The novella’s open-endedness creates then a fertile ground for revisions, “precluding that closure of discourse that would imprison us in our old histories” (Pelikan Straus 651).

4. The Subversion of Monstrosity

The sense of ambiguity created around both characters is accompanied by yet another property which they share, namely the paradox of their visible invisibility. Both bodies generate morbid interest, being simultaneously looked through and treated with a certain embarrassed indifference. It is the mixture of horror and fascination they raise in the onlookers that brings to mind freak shows, which exposed bodily anomalies for collective inspection. As Elisabeth Grosz observes, the existence of freaks “imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life” (56), introducing an element of threatening ambiguity. They shake “fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from others” (Grosz 57). In this respect, monstrous bodies represent the abject that disturbs social order. Samsa’s transformed body violates the binary opposition of a human/an animal, Doreen embodies the monstrosity of excess. Fat people were common exhibits in freak shows in the 19th and early 20th century and “a few carnivals carried sideshows made up exclusively of extremely heavy people” (Bogdan 32). Apart from being looked at, they were also a target of jokes and mockery. Like other exhibits, they not only entertained the public, but also “confirm[ed] the viewer as bounded, belonging to a ‘proper’ social category” (Grosz 65). While Gregor’s monstrous form becomes a source of self-disgust and debasement for him, Kay’s protagonist seems to accept her fatness, patiently bearing its burden. There is a great deal of sensual fondness in the depiction of Doreen’s generous size, which renders her body pleasant rather than off-putting. A close-up of Doreen in the shower is one such example: “She stands under the water with her eyes closed tight and her tongue hanging out. Turning slowly, so that the water can get on to her back. She sways from side to side, letting her weight be carried first on one foot then the other. The water on her back is deeply pleasurable. Every drop seems to stay for a second before sliding off” (1). When Doreen fantasises about having a lover, she considers it from her body perspective: “The thought of somebody exploring her body, her rolls of fat, her big thighs, her fat dimpled arms, is exciting. Perhaps a new lover could come along and wake

up her rolls of flesh. Maybe a tongue could lick under the folds. A lover could reach the parts of herself she hasn't been able to find" (146). As a consequence, Kay effectively undermines her already established analogy between Doreen's monstrous looks and the deformed shape of Gregor Samsa, thus exposing the bias against "people whose body size does not adhere to society's confining standards" (Braziel and LeBesco 3).

Much as the transformation in Kafka's novella remains inexplicable, it can be inferred that Samsa's alteration occurs as a response to his oppressive working environment, the instrumental treatment of the family, and his growing isolation, and, ultimately, the incarnation reflects his earlier predicament. The new shape is non-negotiable, it is inflicted upon the character in the manner by which mythical gods condemned culprits, turning them into non-human forms. Once transformed, Gregor experiences further degradation living in a junk room and feeding on rotten food, but, most of all, having lost his identity. Marina Warner perceives his transmutation as "a means of communicating a profoundly altered concept of the self, in which the emerging being does not express self-knowledge but destroys the possibility of self-recognition" (116). The final act of Gregor's transformation is his miserable death; his carapace is disposed of by a charlady.

5. The Power of Metamorphosis

Remarkably, Jackie Kay reverses the very act of metamorphosis, endowing it with vitality and self-knowledge. The painful process of Doreen's bodily change is preceded by her gradual distancing from her daily chores and waking from apathy and resignation:

Just recently, something has been happening to her body, her lower back is in agony and she feels heavy like a crate full of goods, lethargic and exhausted [...]. Her whole back feels very unstable as if it could crack [...]. If her back cracked, a different Doreen altogether might come out from the inside. For the past couple of months, she can't escape this certain feeling of another woman living inside her, quietly. (142)

The physical symptoms of her inner change are observed by Doreen with a mixture of alarm and fascination. The cracking skin on her hands, her stiffening neck and a growing lump on her back make Doreen

really curious, almost proud about what is happening to her [...]. Part of her doesn't want the whole strange business to stop. Wherever it is she is going to, she is on the journey now [...]. All she wants to do is follow, keep going slowly further and further on, digging deeper and deeper till she might emerge from who knows where. Eventually, she might end up being a different person altogether, with a different life, another past entirely. (147, 149)

Nancy Gray Diaz observes that an act of metamorphosis frequently appears as a response to a moment of crisis and becomes a climactic event (2). Indeed, Doreen can clearly recall the circumstances of the completion of her transformation. Humiliated by her son “standing there, scowling, a look of green poison on his face, a look of hatred [...] making things up as if she was a total imbecile, as if her brain was the size of a pea” (Kay 153), she suddenly feels “an enormous pain burst forth from the middle of her back and then a terrible tightening [...]. Her shoulders curled around themselves as she felt a hot, searing pain shoot out between her shoulder blades and another stab across her lower spine. A heavy weight spread across the huge sweep of her back” (153). Unlike Samsa’s revolting shape, Doreen’s transformed body, which begins to have a life of its own, does not fill her with revulsion; even her peculiar droppings provoke her curiosity rather than disgust. The protruding shell on her back provides Doreen with both security and a sense of beauty:

It was highly domed like the roof of an ancient church. The lines were quite beautiful, delicate. Her back was an olive-grey colour. She could see herself as some small cobbled street in a medieval town. Or as an early map. An intricate pattern on her back forming light circles. Like a view of fields from the air [...]. It is hard [...] it is protective, it is loyal and trustworthy: if she wants to she can hide her whole head inside the musky damp darkness, the forgiving darkness. Simply pull her neck back and hide underneath that capacious carapace. (154, 149)

While Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis is an ordeal in a defamiliarised body for the protagonist, Jackie Kay endeavours to domesticate the overweight body through the subversive act of transforming it into a tortoise. Gregor’s estrangement from the world and himself, aptly defined as “alienation without grace” (Skulsky 171) is contrasted with an achievement of self-invention. The social perception of fatness as a deplorable transgression of boundaries (cf. Braziel and LeBesco 3) is mockingly replaced by Kay with the transgression between a human and an animalistic form. Here the metamorphosis represents an act of liberation from the social persecution of otherness and emphasises the integral property of corporeality as being constantly in transition. In the perspective of Kay’s story, social stigma and the marginalisation attached to obesity are so acute that an escape into an animalistic form seems to provide a long-awaited sense of relief. The transformation appears to be an antidote to the protagonist’s previous vulnerability and a source of empowerment for her. Doreen’s altered self allows her to secure her own borders and leave behind the socially imposed, predictable role. She is finally able to shake off the clichéd gregarious personality, so frequently ascribed to overweight people:

Since she had it [the carapace], the neighbours haven’t bothered her. She is retreated. She has gone from being an outgoing bubbly kind of a woman to a shy, introverted one. Being shy is quite sexy. She enjoys holding herself in, taking things deliciously

slowly. Her own company is quite fulfilling. At last, she has learnt to live in the moment, to let it be, let it hang and swing and rock in the air. A moment has a smell, a taste, a sound. (150–151)

Undoubtedly, what is essential for the interpretative aspect of a metamorphic process is the shape of the newly-acquired body. In the case of Gregor Samsa, the reader is “struck by the symbolic force of the image of the insect” (Diaz 7), which evokes revulsion, disgust, fear or, in the best of cases, indifference. Since the creature appears of no use to anybody, it is not worthy of anybody’s notice. Gregor’s symbolic value is encapsulated in the picture of his dried up and flat carapace, swept up as rubbish. Interestingly, Kay’s transformed protagonist is also equipped with a shell,³ but this one appears to have a value in itself – as a shelter and retreat, a place of one’s own and a space for reflection. Doreen’s physical limitations such as slowness, clumsiness or heaviness correspond to her transformed tortoise shape but they are inborn features of her incarnation and do not bother her the way they used to. Kay revitalises the act of transmutation and infuses it with invigorating power.

Much of Kafka’s novella appears quite bleak in its existential overtones, as what is, frequently overlooked is its humorous aspects. Kafka uses subtle irony or gallows humour which enhances the mood of absurdity of the story. At the discovery of turning into a giant bug, Gregor resolves to “sleep a little longer and forget all this nonsense” (n.p.). His concerns as to whether his affliction will make an apt excuse for missing a day of work or his diagnosis of the transformation as “vertigo” or “silliness” caused by insufficient sleep, take away much of the initial horror. A matter-of-fact narration, devoid of any emotional impact, seems hardly adequate to the nightmarish incident. The character of a charwoman, who treats the huge insect as if it were a family pet, is another example of Kafka’s predilection for the absurd: “At first she would call to him as she did so with words that she probably considered friendly, such as ‘come on then, you old dung-beetle!’ or ‘look at the old dung-beetle there!’” (n.p.). A similar effect is achieved by the use of understatements in “Shell,” where the protagonist blames her back sensations on excessive gardening or refers to her transformed shape as an encumbrance. Kay also injects her story with subtly ironic comments: “Louis [...] put his arm around a bit of her. He didn’t comment on her shell. Whether he noticed it and was being polite, or whether he hadn’t yet noticed, she couldn’t tell” (154). There is also a lot of situational humour in Doreen’s struggle to reconcile her newly-acquired identity with her chores. Having grazed on buttercups, “she finds some shade and lies down to sleep. The alarm clock is with her; she places it at her side in the middle of the grass and sets it for half an hour before Louis will come home” (151). Since both stories are narrated in free indirect speech, the reader has access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and subjective experience; yet, both narratives reflect a slightly distorted perception on the side

of the protagonists. Their new incarnations also alter their field of vision, which becomes, by necessity, fragmented. The reader is then kept at bay, and should be wary of any simplistic interpretations with regard to the protagonists' choices and decisions.

6. Conclusion

As Nancy Diaz notices, “metamorphosis represents the conjunction of self and the world, and it plays out the individual’s conflict with [...] the values of that world” (10). Franz Kafka’s troubled story was his response to the anxieties of the modern era: an oppressive institutional system, dehumanised family relations, and an enduring sense of estrangement. Almost a century later, Jackie Kay revisits Kafka’s concept in order to expose contemporary social ailments, among which persecution of otherness is in her view particularly acute. Her protagonist’s voice represents the excluded ones, whose size, looks, colour, and gender are at odds with social uniformity. Her rewriting of *The Metamorphosis* skilfully plays with the characteristic style of Kafka’s masterpiece: a sober, factual and understated account of extraordinary incidents, highly subjective focalisation, gallows humour and fragmented narration, which reflects the protagonist’s distress and impaired vision. Kay’s subversive revision, which provides an insight into the plight of a marginalised individual, provokes a reflection upon the ruthless treatment of differences in society. In a subversively light-hearted way, it re-directs the notion of monstrosity from the persecuted individual upon the judgemental community.

Notes

- 1 Kay also explores the figure of metamorphosis in her novel *Trumpet* (1998), where the protagonist, a black Scottish musician, posthumously turns out to be a woman. In an extremely inventive way, Kay challenges the rigid preconceptions about sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, making the reader wonder about the essentialist approach to social categorisations.
- 2 In the vast body of Kafka criticism, the interpretative works on *The Metamorphosis* focus primarily on the above critical approaches. The particularly insightful Marxist outlook on the novella appears in Walter Sokel’s text “From Marx to Myth: The Structure and Function of Self-Alienation in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*” (1983), where the author refers to Gregor Samsa’s plight as breadwinner as an example of self-alienation, resulting from his exploitation by both his employers and his family. Sokel also situates Gregor in the broader context of the Marxist myth, drawing a parallel between his sacrifice for the family and the proletariat’s position as the scapegoat of humanity. In her

article “Transforming Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*” (1989), Nina Pelikan Straus departs from a psychoanalytical reading of a father-son conflict towards a feminist outlook, perceptively noticing the reversal of gender roles triggered by Gregor’s transmutation and the exchange of female/male prerogatives between Grete and her brother.

- 3 Interestingly, Laura Backstrom’s paper (2012) quotes a severely overweight woman who refers to her condition as “living in a shell.”

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