



Zombies in the Posthuman Era: *Hamlet, the Zombie Killer of Denmark*

Zümre Gizem Yılmaz Karahan

*Social Sciences University of Ankara
zgizemyz@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The zombie figure has recently been one of the most dominant monsters in the literature of the contemporary century, especially in popular culture. In addition to hinting at the current advanced capitalist society, the zombie is also significant in uncovering certain layers about the human embodiment as well as in promoting the dominant anthropocentric discourse in Western philosophy. In its folkloric and colonial meaning in Haitian history, the zombie is enslaved by Voodoo priests for its manual power and sold as cheap slaves to land owners who, consequently, take advantage of the unconscious zombie. However, in today's perception, the zombie is a symbol for a dystopic and apocalyptic future for human beings. The aim of this study is, thus, to investigate the zombie figure from its folkloric usage to the contemporary one as the zombie, at the present time, offers alternative modifications for the dystopic future of the humanity. In order to exemplify these modifications, as a comic parody of the classic tragedy, *Hamlet, the Zombie Killer of Denmark* (2010) by Chris Stiles will be compared to *Hamlet* (1600) by William Shakespeare.

Keywords: zombie, slave trade, apocalypse, dystopia, Chris Stiles, *Hamlet: the Zombie Killer of Denmark*, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the living dead. (Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* 7)

HAMLET: A zombie, a zombie take the crown of Denmark.

A zombie king! And he will turn the land

Into a swarm of zombie rogues and fiends...

Mine uncle, mine own flesh and undead blood

Zombified my father, doomed him to

Eternal life of eating flesh and brains. (Chris Stiles 13)

The zombie figure has been one of the most popular icons that has swept both the literature of the present century and the popular fiction. Furthermore, zombie, as an exemplum of horror, has been reproduced in the capitalist markets such as in the film and series industries, video games, and the capitalist production market of the horror goods; thereupon, “the living dead have lurched from marginal to mainstream” (Drezner, p. 12). The zombie figure has become so popular that a new zombie sub-culture has emerged especially in North America and Europe, where zombie fans develop public zombie walks, which is inevitably linked to the rise of the capitalist consumer culture especially in these regions. These popular zombie walks, “in which there is a dressing-up as the dead, are a development of the transgressions of the recent flash mob phenomena” (Conrich, p. 15), and this flash mob understanding is illustrated in the zombie figure itself, which can easily be defeated alone; yet spreading terror in mobs. In addition to the birth of zombie sub-culture, the popularity of the zombie figure can be clearly seen in the invasion of even the music marketplace by this figure. There have been songs written on behalf of zombies such as Jonathan Coulton’s “Re: Your Brains,” propagandising the zombie lifestyle:

All we want to do is eat your brains
We’re not unreasonable; I mean, no one’s gonna eat your eyes
All we want to do is eat your brains
We’re at an impasse here; maybe we should compromise:
If you open up the doors
We’ll all come inside and eat your brains. (*Youtube*)

Apart from being used in the capitalist discourse as a figure that can be re-reproduced in different contexts, such as the re-reproductions of a number of literary canons including *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) and *Alice in Zombieland* (2012), the zombie is also significant in directing the human psyche towards new apocalyptic and dystopic fears since, with the living dead scenarios, human beings have started to tremble with the possibility of a contagious epidemic triggering a zombie apocalypse all around the world. This dystopic drive in the combination of the zombie figure underlines the fact that “[i]n recent fiction, many post-apocalyptic portrayals depict the undead as a key component of dystopian society” (Cook, p. 73). The zombie figure unfolds rotten flesh (body) and mind along with the lack of rationality, which confronts humans with the fear of losing their privileged status as intellectual beings in the world. Within this framework, the undead becomes an allegorical symbol for both individual and societal corruption, triggered by an anthropocentric chauvinism caused by the scientific misuse of medicine. Likewise, folkloric real-life examples of zombies also indicate the use of a certain chemical to take the human body and mind under the control of the ‘owner.’ In this context, this study aims to compare real-life and literary zombies highlighting the anthropocentric ideology in the zombie figure. This study further encompasses literary references to *Hamlet, the Zombie Killer of Denmark: A Comedy in One Act* (2010) by Chris Stiles, which is a parody of Shakespeare’s classical tragedy *Hamlet* (1600).

What Zombie is: Popular Perception

Almost all the zombie figures illustrated in a number of films, series, or comics, are identical: similar to human beings in bodily terms with the same outlook. They are as dressy and hairy as their human counterparts; however, they have one striking difference as they are unconsciously wandering creatures, partly rotten since they are half-dead and half-alive. The zombie figure, in fact, can be portrayed as “putatively a being that is exactly like you in every respect – identical behavior, identical speech, identical brain; every atom and quark in *exactly* the same position, moving according to the same causal laws of motion – *except* that your zombie is not conscious” (Yudkowsky, p. 1012). In terms of communication skills and speech

abilities, most zombies groan out a few simple words or utter certain sounds, very much different from the developed speech skills of human beings. Therefore, zombies are “beings which are physical duplicates of us, inhabiting a world which is a physical duplicate of ours, but lacking consciousness” (Frankish, p. 652).

Based on this zombie illustration, zombie fiction also has some standards, as listed by Daniel W. Drezner, who puts forward three rules that have become a fixture of zombie fiction as follows:

1. Zombies desire human flesh; they will not eat other zombies ... because that is just gross.
2. Zombies cannot be killed unless their brain is destroyed.
3. Any human being bitten by a zombie will inevitably become a zombie.

Almost every modern zombie narrative adheres to these rules. (p. 26)

In addition to these standards, the zombie figure is also distinctive in terms of its differentiation from other fictional monsters or paranormal creatures such as vampires, werewolves, and ghosts. First of all, it is striking that unlike the other creatures, zombies do not co-exist with the human species. In other words, zombies and humans cannot inhabit the world together since one's existence means the end of the other because of the constant battle of existence amongst themselves. On the other hand, as Heather Sullivan underlined in her talk in 7th Biennial Conference of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and Environment, the human flesh is the new fuel in a zombie world. Inasmuch as flesh is the new energy source in a dystopic society in which all the natural resources have been consumed, zombies sustain their lives through hunting for food, which turns out to be human flesh.

Furthermore, zombies are not individuals unlike vampires or werewolves, and they “always come in mobs. Individually, they seem easy enough to kill, but in a group their strength can be overwhelming” (Quiggin, p. 35). The lack of individuality in the zombie figure results mainly from the unconscious state of the zombie. Similar to other monsters, “the zombie threatens with its material form. [Nevertheless,] [w]hereas the vampire and even the intangible ghost retain their mental faculties, and the werewolf may become irrational, bestial only part of time, only the zombie has completely lost its mind, becoming a blank – animate, but wholly devoid of consciousness” (Lauro and Embry, p. 89). From another perspective, unlike the vampire or werewolf, the solitary and individual hunters, the zombie becomes powerful only in groups.

What Zombie is: Colonial Perspective

The word zombie appears in American culture shortly after the occupation of Haiti by the United States of America in 1915 as a result of the American soldier's encounter with the zombie ethnographically and metaphorically, meaning resurrected corpses according to the voodoo culture in Haiti (Bishop, p. 12). However, the association of the zombie with violence and brutality go far back from the American occupation of Haiti because the popular modern-day zombie image owes a lot to the anti-racist Jean Zombi, a Haitian fighting brutally against the remaining white Frenchmen in Haiti in the 1800s. During the notorious “Dessalines's massacre of the whites, Jean Zombi, a mulatto of Port-au-Prince, earned a reputation for brutality. Known to be one of the fiercest slaughterers, [...] [h]e would leave his house, wild with fury, stop a white, then strip him naked” (Dayan, p. 36). Thus, although the zombie figure has lately been in fashion due to the transportation and the partly modification of the zombie culture by the American capitalist markets, the dystopic portrayal of the zombie figure has its roots in the battle for the liberation of Haiti from the French oppression.

With his fearless fight, Jean Zombi has become a composite that “recall[s] the strange promiscuity between masters and slaves: white, black, and mulatto: old world and new” (Buck-Morss, p. 132). In this framework, as a remnant of Jean Zombi, the zombie figure turns into “a folkloristic [and historical] manifestation of colonial or postcolonial society’s greatest fear: subjugation, marginalization, and enslavement” (Bishop, p. 59). In this way, “[t]he undead zombi, recalled in the name of Jean Zombi, [...] became a terrible composite power: slave turned rebel ancestor, an incongruous, demonic spirit recognized through dreams, divination, or possession” (Dayan, p. 37), whereby the name zombie is attached to the fierce behaviours and the body of the Jean Zombi, a brutal fighter against cultural and material colonisation. Consequently, the image of the zombie created the key anxieties of the Western mind, which are slave rebellion, recognition of human rights, fight for freedom and autonomy. Attending to this background, modern day fictional zombies frame bodily colonisation and objectification of the human body emptied out of mental faculties. The zombie figure faces people with their top fears: becoming a slave of the body and losing intellectual capacity.

As a matter of fact, especially in Haitian voodoo magic, human bodies are intentionally turned into zombies to take advantage of their manual power since zombies “are employed as a cheaper alternative to the human employee base” (Cook, p. 74). In other words, zombies have long been a part of Haitian folklore, and have been defined as reanimated humans, yet emptied of their human substance, to work as ‘living dead’ slaves for local plantation owners. This is a practice that goes back to the French colonisation of Haiti giving birth to “[t]he notion of zombies [...] [as] a product of the slave plantation era in Haiti, a time when the French used Africans as things, exploiting cruelly their labor without payment other than the lash, or worse” (Fournier, p. 14). In relation, Brad Steiger inscribes how voodoo cultures see the zombie as follows:

Some historians of Voodoo suggest that the origin of the word “zombie” may have come from *jumbie*, the West Indian term for a ghost. Other scholars favor the Kongo word *nzambi*, [...] as filtering down through the ages as “zombie.” Although the practice of Voodoo and the creation of zombies was familiar to the residents of Louisiana before 1871, a number of etymologists believe that year is about the time that the word “zombi” entered the English language. The word that was originally used by the Haitian Creole people, these scholars maintain, was *zonbi*, a Bantu term for a corpse returned to life without speech or free will. There are others who argue quite convincingly that *Zombi* is another name for Damballah Wedo, the snake god so important to Voodoo. In other words, a zombie would be a servant of Damballah Wedo. (p. 7)

What Zombie is: Folkloric Perspective

The process of zombification according to the voodoo practices “depends on two very interesting neuropharmacological substances: *tetrodotoxin* and *datura*. Tetrodotoxin is a neurotox in that is produced in many animals, but particularly in the pufferfish” (Verstynen and Voytek, p. 29), and it is particularly effective in acting on the neurons in the muscles in the periphery of the body (Verstynen and Voytek, p. 32). On the other hand, *datura* is “one common name for the plant in Haiti [which] is [called], ironically enough, the *zombi cucumber*” (Verstynen and Voytek, p. 33), known to bear hallucinogenic effects on the victim. Therefore, though the zombie is presented as being dependent on the mysteries of the voodoo magic, the figure is indeed an outcome of the precise administration of selected chemicals such as neurotoxins and pharmacological substances. As these substances are natural found in animals and plants unique to Haiti, the process of zombification is intermingled with anthropology,

pharmacology, folklore, and natural sciences, as well. William Booth, who bases his claims on the findings of the botanist Wade Davis, explains this process in detail:

A victim is administered a powder that contains among other things the dried and pulverized remains of puffer fish, whose livers and reproductive organs may contain tetrodotoxin. At a dosage containing a precise amount of tetrodotoxin, [...] a victim of zombie powder poisoning could lapse into a state of such low metabolic activity that he might appear clinically dead. This [...] [person] would then be buried alive, only to be rescued hours later by a sorcerer who digs up the victim, feeds him an hallucinogenic paste, and then seels his newly minted zombie into slavery, often to sugar plantations. (p. 275)

In such works as *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey Through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures* (2001), the botanist Wade Davis himself, elucidates his experiences in Haiti and talks about how eager he was to take the journey into the heart of the voodoo mystery in order to highlight mystery with science at Nathan Kline's request, the director of the Rockland State Research Institute in New York. The stimulating factor that urged Nathan Kline in the first place to study zombification was the documented instance of a middle-aged Haitian man, Clairvius Narcisse,

who had been pronounced dead at an American-directed hospital that kept impeccable records. The demise of Narcisse had been documented by two physicians, both American trained, one an American, and witnessed by a sister of the deceased. Many years after the burial, to the horror and astonishment of family members, Narcisse had wandered back into his native village, where he presented a chilling tale of having been victimized by a sorcerer and transformed into a zombie. (p. 100)

Zora Neale Hurston, who also spent some time in the Caribbean investigating zombification, gives detailed accounts of another zombie victim, named Felicia Felix-Mentor, who was a native of Ennery, Artibonite, in Haiti. In 1907, she died suddenly as a result of an unidentified sickness, then came back to life and to the neighbourhood she once lived in when she was 'alive' twenty-nine years later in October 1936. Hurston describes this event as follows: "Then one day in October 1936 someone saw a naked woman on the road and reported it to the *Garde d'Haiti*. Then this same woman turned up on a farm and said, 'This is the farm of my father. I used to live here.' The tenants tried to drive her away. Finally the boss was sent for and he came and recognized her as his sister who had died and been buried twenty-nine years before" (p. 196).

From another perspective, these zombie myths and the resurrection of supposedly dead bodies are closely interrelated with different factors including political and social power as well as capitalist discourse. It is capitalist because zombies are made to work on farms. It is related to social power because the zombification process is at the hands of certain gangs, and this process is effectively misused to spread fear and terror for the common people. Davis points to the existence of "the Bizango, a secret society feared by many Haitians that constituted a force, if not an institution" (p. 115). Besides, Davis also highlights that in this secret society, which illegally designates Haitian social rules, sorcery and voodoo are practised so as to intimidate the Haitian by manipulating them to believe in the gang's potential to hold magical, political and social power. The interrelation of zombification with gang relations and societal rules provides a means of force to exert social order and control.

The Transformation of the Zombie

From these folkloric and colonial roots, the zombie figure has significantly transformed into the popular modern-day zombie image, “where, as a more corporeal form, it has become associated with infections and epidemics, and with a rapid contagion that can lead to an apocalyptic conversion of modern cities into forbidden zones of the ravenous flesh-eating dead” (Conrich, p. 16). Although its origins link the term with magical voodoo religion, the slave trade, and colonial practices, “the zombie in the contemporary imagination is synonymous with the end of civilisation and the breakdown of society and its structures” (Hunt, p. 110). This alone illustrates the fact that the zombie figure is a cross-cultural artifact, “a fusion of elements from the ‘civilized’ New World and mystical ancient Africa. Indeed, it is a creature born of slavery, oppression, and capitalist hegemony and in that way a manifestation of collective unconscious fears and taboos” (Bishop, p. 37). Therefore, starting from the 1960s, the attention in the folkloric roots of the zombie has shifted towards the intermeshments of the creation of the dystopic societies with the infestation of the zombie threat, and of how this threat creates human apocalypse all throughout the world as the epidemic allegedly turns into a global pandemic overnight. This dystopic representation of the zombie apocalypse is generally portrayed as initiating from a human-made laboratory virus that instantly turns first the test subject, then the team of the scientists in the laboratory, into the undead. Analysed within the framework of dystopia, the zombie fiction can be interpreted as a critique of the anthropocentric chauvinism as the zombie threat mainly starts as a result of an erroneous leak in a scientific or medical (human) discourse.

The main reason why the zombie figure has become the epitome of terror is basically its power to illustrate how enslaved humans are to their own bodies; “[t]he zombie shows us what we are: irrevocably bound to our bodies and already married to the grave. But the zombie also shows us what we are not: man, as we know him, as a cognizant, living creature, does not outlive the death of his body” (Lauro and Embry, p. 90). Moreover, the zombie figure presupposes the fact that “consciousness is extra-physical” (Yudkowsky, p. 1012), “something over and above mere atoms” (Yudkowsky, p. 1014), which, automatically, contributes to Cartesian Dualism. Furthermore, the zombies, as mere unconscious bodies, are easily defeated by living humans with the intentional agency of the ‘alive’ authorising their rational faculty in terms of developing strategies in the face of a zombie apocalypse. This also furthers the dichotomy between body and mind (matter and discourse), as a result of which mind is accepted to be superior to body, and the substanceless materiality of human body is defeated by the rational potential and agency of human mind. Becoming a zombie and wandering around unconsciously hints at becoming a non-subject since the agency of mind lacks in the body of the zombie. This representation of the zombie figure not only objectifies the physical body but also legitimates a number of discriminations and exploitations of beings based on their level of rationality. The promotion of this zombie figure especially in the Western markets also hints at the birth of dichotomies and dualisms so as to exploit the marginalised other in the Western philosophy itself. Starting with the Renaissance re-discovery of man and continuing with the Enlightenment empowerment of the human being, Western philosophies underlines the significance of mind in the human body, and the insignificance of body as mind is the distinctive feature of human beings. Therefore, unveiling human fear for the loss of rational faculty, the zombie figure “emphasizes that humanity is defined by its cognizance. The lumbering, decaying specter of the zombie also affirms the inherent disability of human embodiment—our mortality” (Lauro and Embry, p. 90). Hence, the zombie becomes the ensign of and pretext for the powerless and the powerful, the terrorised and the terroriser, analogous to the colonial history of the zombie figure as embodying slavery and slave rebellion, racism and anti-racism, colonised and coloniser, all at the same time, as a result of which this figure is carried to a posthuman liberation.

Embodying 21st century's worst fear, the zombie has occupied popular literature and culture. One instance of this occupation is the re-reproductions of literary canons with slight differences in terms of zombifying characters. *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare was also transformed from a classical tragedy into a dystopic script with a zombie twist. The portrayal of the cruel uncle as the zombie manager, who zombified Hamlet's father with the aim of converting people of Denmark and the courtiers in the Elsinore Castle into his zombie subjects, is analogous to the original depiction of the tyrant uncle who killed his own brother to possess both the crown and the queen. In the play, the metaphorical and literal correlation between zombification and the throne, in this sense, unveils the corrupted way of life in the court. Hamlet as the zombie killer realises this relationship, and acknowledges that "[t]he king be a zombie! And I, Hamlet, Zombie Killer of Denmark, must take action! Or not. No, I will take action! Of course, maybe it's too soon. Man, I've got commitment issues" (p. 19). This extricates the psychological trauma Hamlet going through as a result of iniquitousness of his uncle (usurpation of both the throne and his mother) after the murder of his father.

Similar to the Shakespearean classic portrayal of Denmark as decaying morally in the hands of Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, Chris Stiles also frames Denmark and the Elsinore Castle rotting with the malady of zombification portrayed as a profitable business run by Hamlet's uncle. Zombification is pictured as an unhealthy state un-excisable to society and the state, and the threat of a zombie apocalypse potentially effaces the entire nation, or nations worldwide since the virus can easily transgress the borders of countries. Furthermore, Stiles not only uses the zombie figures to make an analogy between the moral corruption and the physical decay but also depicts a dystopic story since the fear of becoming zombies sweeps all the country:

GRAVEDIGGER: I bury the dead, but they don't stay dead, they become undead, rising from the earth.

[...]

HAMLET: Who is this?

GRAVEDIGGER: Who was this. Be now he a zombie, and a zombie isn't is – a zombie was. They be undead, so he isn't – he was.

HAMLET: Okay. Who was he?

GRAVEDIGGER: This zombie, sir, was Yorick, the king's jester.

HAMLET: This one? Let me see. (*grabs YORICK*) Alas, Yorick! I knew him! A fellow of infinite jest; and now, how abhorrent he is!

(*to YORICK*) Where are your gibes now?

YORICK: Nnnnnnnnnnn.

HAMLET: Your songs?

YORICK: Nnnnnnnnnnn. (p. 26-27)

The famous gravedigger scene, quoted above, reveals how the terror of zombification is spread among the commoners and how the human psyche is canalised into intimidation. The mixture of the old English language and the form of iambic pentameter with the zombified dialogues provides the play with parody and a comic atmosphere. Zombie's groaning speechless sounds out and Hamlet's reply in speech add another dimension to the comic situation pictured in the play. Furthermore, the meaningless communication between the zombie and Hamlet sets the latter as the rightful zombie killer of Denmark as well as the rightful heir to the throne.

This juxtaposition of the contagion – both moral and physical – and the zombie threat further serves the belligerence of Hamlet's questions. Seeking onto-epistemological meaning

for his essence, Hamlet's dreams of immortality in aethereal¹ sense "erodes into bad reams of politic bodies of worms, and humanity itself as, at best, a quintessence of dust" (Mitchell, p. 128). Hamlet is anthropocentric, and he locates the quintessence of the dust, which he takes ether, into a celestial sphere closer to the divine ideal. For him, ether "is free from alteration and decay; exempt from changes in size and quantity; and singular in nature" (Macauley, p. 227), and his existence is a meaningful aethereal one. Nevertheless, especially after the gravedigger scene, Hamlet arrives at the conclusion that his existence is composed of both an immaterial perception and a material decaying and aging body. He comprehends the "deepness of geologic time, where the human body joins directly with the particulate matter of the planet itself and where he, Ophelia, Yorick, and all of us, as slowly fossilizing matter, will spend long ages of decay" (Mitchell, p. 128). Stiles correlates this material decay Hamlet harshly realises to the zombie figure, using it as a metaphor for the overwhelming defeat of the mind by the body:

HAMLET: Zombie, or not zombie. That is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of zombies
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep
No more – and by a sleep we mean to say
We walk around with flesh so green and eat
The brains of those who still breathe full of life?
Thus zombies do make cowards of us all... (p. 16-17)

Conclusion

The zombie figure has been modified from the folkloric and magical slaves sold in the capitalist market specifically for the benefit of the white into a monster threatening to end humanity and societal orders in the literature of the white. This ironic twist has emerged when Jean Zombi, the brutal fighter against colonialism started to spread terror in Haiti for the remaining white inhabitants. The magical roots of the zombification process in the Voodoo religion and its link to capitalist profits have added other dimensions to the mystery of the charm for the zombie figure. Eventually, zombies have been framed as unconscious shades of humans, whereby a body without mind has been implied being hollow of agency. These nonhuman bodies have been used to produce dystopia and apocalypse in fiction. Hence, as every age produces its own totemic monster (Dery, p. 13) in compliance with the impositions of the trending philosophical ideologies, the totemic monster of our age is undeniably the zombie figure, reinforcing the Western privileging of mind over body.

¹ It is accepted to be the fifth element that belongs to extra-terrestrial beings. Human bodies also inhabit this element, which makes human beings distinctive. That is to say, celestial and heavenly bodies and the soul belong to aether.

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