

## **INTERFACE BETWEEN SOCIETY AND FREUDIAN “UNCANNY”: A READING OF PATRICK SUSKIND’S *PERFUME*: *THE STORY OF A MURDERER***

**Neha Chatterjee,**  
M.Phil. Scholar (English)  
Burdwan, India.

### **Abstract**

*This paper invokes to probe the inflating fluidity and mutability between the two contradictory words “heimlich” and “unheimlich” in the societal, ethical and cultural contexts mainly from the perspective of Freudian “uncanny” applied on the novel of Patrick Suskind’s Perfume: The Story of a Murderer. “Uncanny”, as an experience, always shudders at our mind and irks our senses but we can hardly gauge the depth of its politics of being hidden familiarity. “Unheimlich” dimensions created and perpetuated by society are not unfamiliar to us but the matter of fact is society has formulated the notion of “uncanny” to suppress the dark sides of humanity. This paper extensively deals with this interface between society and “uncanny” through the journey of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille towards an unattainable identity and recognition. It is an indirect critique of human society which denounces certain parts of society declaring “uncanny” and menacing. The correspondence between “uncanny” and society often blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy thereby evoking intolerance and hatred.*

**Keywords:** “Uncanny”; Society; Identity; “Heimlich”; “Unheimlich”

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### I

The decadent dissipating domain of eighteenth century Paris, objective correlative of the universe, exposed by Patrick Suskind through his thrilling novel *Perfume* which summons a sense of “unheimlich” vis-à-vis “uncanny” or unfamiliarity, that the normative society either desires to conceal or to get disposed of. This paper intends to surface this latent relation between the idea of “uncanny” and society where social standards repress familiar experiences enkindling “uncanny” when discovered. The existential journey undertaken by Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the wretched protagonist of the novel, for acquiring human identity in the different realms of society not only critiques the familiar unfamiliarity formulated by society, but also elicit the integral connection between uncanny, that hardly gets acceptance in society.

### II

“Uncanny”, a sense of menacing fierce, perturb, distress and repulsion, is first explored by Ernst Jentsch in 1906 essay, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”, where she elucidates that psychological uncanny is a product of “intellectual uncertainty.” This idea elaborates that:

the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better oriented he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny. (Freud 125)

The iterant happenings of any particular incident transform an unhomely thing into something homely and congenial.

The concept of “uncanny” illustrated by Jentsch is further researched by Freud in his 1919 celebrated essay, “The Uncanny.” He analyses two varied contents of the word—semantic content and “uncanny” content evoked by a person’s or thing’s “sense impressions, experiences and situations” (Freud 124). Semantically, uncanny is

something that arouses eerie feelings. But in the second context of human experiencing uncanny explicates the fact that, “unheimlich” is applied to everything that is intended to remain secret, hidden away, but comes into the open. Therefore, Freud unequivocally concludes that, “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (124).

Freud enigmatically contrasts the antonym “unheimlich” with the base word “heimlich” and proposes that social taboo not only yields an aura of pious reverence, but more so of horror and disgust, where taboo is veiled from public eyes and is abominable especially if the dissembled items are presumably sexual in nature. “Uncanny”, unconsciously remind us of our suppressed id, the forbidden impulses, which is perceived to be threatened by our superego ridden with oedipal guilt symbolizing castration complex or punishment for diverging from societal norms. “Unheimlich” or “uncanny”, especially in social and cultural context, “applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (Freud 132). “Heimlich”, socially and psychologically, becomes an ambivalent issue that finally merges with its contradictory and complementary and complementary word “unheimlich.”

The covert correspondence of uncanny with societal repression is further problematized by the idea of social acceptance and identity formation. Amartya Sen in his seminal book, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, emphatically declares and demonstrates that “One’s sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride, and joy, but also of strength and confidence” (1). Identity of an individual contributes to the strength of warmth among members of one community, and excludes many people from their multiple affiliations. One’s existence of personal identity and recognition depends on the physical fact whether they have everything perfect or not. A single disparity or disability is marked by a special identity imposed by society on any particular individual. One’s identity is obligatory and indispensable for recognition, and simultaneously universalization of one identity effaces the others of an individual thereby accelerating existential crisis.

### III

In telling a story one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effect is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human

being or an automaton and to do it in such a way that his uncertainty so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately. (Freud 135)

Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the monstrous inhuman, orphaned protagonist of Patrick Suskind's novel, *Perfume*, is one who lacks any body odor of his own, but has a hypersensitive olfactory sense, which can smell any scent, no matter how infinitesimal it is. From his very birth, Grenouille has an uncanny eerie power to sicken and terrify people. His wet nurse says that, "I only know one thing... this baby makes my flesh creep because it doesn't smell the way children ought to smell" (Suskind 10). The piercing sensitive nose of the child perceives the world through its fragrance which somewhat paradoxically and eventually shows a deep capacity for the sublime experience of speechless awe. Without the scent markers that might weave him into the social fabric, he groups up free of manners, morals, or compunctions about hunting others to get what he wants. He is an olfactory blank slate who tries to discover his personal identity by robbing others of their odors. He even successfully frightens Father Terrier by his scrutinizing bizarre suction of smells. Father Terrier repulsively feels that:

The child with no smell smelled at him shamelessly .... He felt naked and ugly, as if someone were gaping at him while revealing ... his most tender emotions, his filthiest thoughts lay exposed to that greedy little nose ..., a tiny perforated organ for ever crinkling and puffing and quivering. (Suskind 8)

Father Terrier quivers, and found Grenouille as a strange hostile animal, and if he were not a man by nature who is god fearing and given to reason then he would have thrown the child away from his knees. The child almost seems to him a monster or "devil." He wants to leave the "screaming brat" far away from his parish from where he cannot be dropped on his doorstep again by any other wet nurse. In a hurry, he ran to Madame Gaillard to get rid of the child. Grenouille ultimately become an uncanny figure detested by everybody. They were even uncertain about the fact that whether he is a child of a human or a monster.

Grenouille's corporeal physiological existence lacks the spiritual aesthetic essence and cultural humanity where he is only left out and disposed of by his mother, society and the very religious system. A newly borne child Grenouille, abandoned by his own mother in the stinky fish market of Paris, yearns for those compassion and affection accepting him in the very way he is born. He epitomizes those murderers, devils or orphans who are created by the cruelty of normative society. His unique gift of olfactory sense is never comprehended as normal by society. Treated as an animalistic existence,

an object of filth and disgust erupting unhomely uncanny feelings, Grenouille emblemizes that “id” which is always suppressed and manipulated by “superego” or controlled by so called societal norms. Orphans, as a whole, are those portions of society about whom all are familiar but they are kept hidden as “id”, a source of unfamiliarity and “unheimlich.” Grenouille like “id” of human mind is recurrently rejected and ousted by society in the unfathomable depths of filth and stink from where neither he can search for his social and cultural identity, nor can establish and churn his latent talent. A human with a difference is always exploited and taken as a source of “unheimlich” or “uncanny.” Society ostracizes disparity.

Grenouille’s excruciating and traumatic circumstances are perennially intensified by those people who in the name of sheltering and growing up are only utilizing his quality and deep silence. Madame Galliard has brought him up in lieu of money. When she noticed that he has certain secretive abilities highly unusual or supernatural she sells him to a tanner. The moment Grenouille becomes eight and the cloister of Saint Merri stopped providing her money, she did not think for once before selling that child to Grimal, the tanner. He was never loved by any person living around him. His obedient calm nature and his surviving the deadly anthrax made him a further victim of exploitation. His life was more of an animal than human where he hardly gets any time to contemplate his situation. Grenouille lacks scent and his identity is of an unusual orphan only a creature repulsed through ostracism and isolation. This generates a fear of not truly existing in the paradigms of society. Hunting of an orphan by miserable fear emanates a lack of sense of self, the essential beauty.

Grenouille’s immense obsession for smell and fragrance can be traced from his very childhood.

At age six he had completely grasped his surrounding olfactory. There was not an object in Madame Galliard’s house, no place ..., no person, no stone, tree, bush, or picket fence, no spot be it even so small, that he did not know by smell.... It was as he were an autodidact possessed of a huge vocabulary of odors that enabled him to form at will great numbers of smelled sentences—and at an age when other children stammer words so painfully drummed into them to formulate their first very inadequate sentences describing the world. (Suskind 12)

His mysterious, uncanny quality is further traced and exploited by Baldini, a failed perfumer. He purchased Grenouille from Grimal and orders him to prepare “a large demijohn full of Nuit Napolitaine.” He benefits from his talent by alluring him that he will teach the knowledge of capturing or extracting scent from any object. His identity

as a perfumer is repeatedly sabotaged by others for acquiring money. High culture aristocratic or bureaucratic society or the domain of Baldini has kept his identity aloof as the manufacturer of the perfume sold in his shop. His sensitivity towards smell is both “uncanny” and “unheimlich” for them they are kept undiscovered.

Patrick Suskind blurs the periphery between reality and fantasy, earthy and ethereal, natural and surreal where Grenouille after seven years of complete isolation recognizes that he does not smell, and wants to acquire human odor because his inferior existence does not possess himself. Early in Grenouille’s apprenticeship, Baldini has informed him about the knowledge of distilling essence, and also informed regarding the three superior ways of extraction of the finest enchanting of all scents, which he can learn in the land of Grasse. This journey to attain the “essence absolue” of human perfume perpetrated through forty nine murders and multiple sinister instances reduce the difference between reality and fantasy. Freud declares:

an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth. (150)

The fluidity of boundary between reality and fantasy is repeatedly traversed by his intense longing for identity and personal essence.

For Grenouille embracing and enduring the fact that he does not have his own scent is as “unheimlich” or “uncanny” for him as it is for normative society. Society, at large, coerces him to find that “essence absolue” which can bestow him with human odor and emotional recognition. The wall between fantasy and actuality is hammered frequently by Grenouille through his incessant forty nine murders for collecting that human fragrance which he lacks. Paradoxically, he is familiar with other’s scents, but not with his own odor resulting in societal denouncement. An orphan is always an “uncanny”, unfamiliar object that society looks down upon and oppresses fully but this “unheimlich” (the unhomely) was once “heimlich” (the homely). The negative prefix un- is the indicator of repression and subjugation.

Grenouille, who fails to believe what he is, motivates to acquire the “essence absolue” to gain human status, but no matter how hard he strives, ironically, the essence elevates him as an angel and not as an enlightened social man. His very consciousness is undetectable and obscure. His calculative designed plans to kill the preys that prevented him from being caught testify the fact that body odor of a person is concomitant with personal identity, subjectivity and self consciousness in the gamut

of the novel. After long seven years of pining in isolated cave he emerges as a person who realizes that his soul does not dwell in the heart or emotion but in his calculative consciousness and olfactory senses.

Grenouille, in his occult of “uncanny” acts of creating “essence absolue” for himself, has achieved the goal of producing something miraculous that can control the carnality and aesthetic sublimity of human around him. The novel portrays the moment on his execution day, when Grenouille with an aura of miracle presents “something so incomprehensible, so unprecedented, and so unbelievable” (Suskind 91) that nobody can later discern their repressed unfamiliar carnal desire getting on the fore due to the fragrance of “essence absolue.” The topsy-turvy of largest orgy never ever evidenced by the world dispenses the scheduled execution of a vile criminal, Grenouille. This act manifests that the repressed, the “uncanny” can be discovered only by a person who is “uncanny” and beyond normal for human.

This triumph of Grenouille, at the end, only carries a deep seated discontent and contempt in him. He is a boy or creature born without an odor in the most stinking spot, raised without love and warmth of human soul, surviving solely on loathing impudence and abomination, knew the fact that he has never found gratification in affection. He contemplates, “what he had always longed for—that other people should love him—became at the moment of its achievement unbearable, because he did not love them himself, he hated them” (Suskind 94).

He can captivate other’s scent but cannot enjoy any pleasure for a second because he can only hate these people. The essence of love, the importance of affection is unknown to him, unfamiliar to his existence.

The more he hated them at this moment, the more they worshipped him . . . . And he wanted them to realize how much he hated them and for them, realizing that it was the only emotion that he had ever truly felt, to return that hate and exterminate him just as they had originally intended. (Suskind 94)

Hatred is the only latent feelings he has always nourished and cherished. He is an object of “uncanny” and hatred for society but, contradictorily, his only emotion for society is also hatred of not being accepted.

Grenouille, ultimately, found the elixir of life from which a single drop can enslave the whole world as it did in Grasse. He has possessed the strongest of all powers that is “the invincible power to command the love of mankind” but there is one that it could not do, “it could not make him able to smell himself” (Suskind 97) and furthermore it can never give him the answer that who he is. It is meaningless for an orphan like him

who fails to fulfill his purpose of acquiring personal identity. “Uncanny” is familiar though its mystery is remained undesirable. The futility of his life, identity, and the puzzle which he failed to unravel compelled him to self annihilate his own existence. In search of love, recognition and identity he pours the scent on himself. In his own birth place, the stinky fish market Jean-Baptiste Grenouille disappears for ever among the people who torn the “angel” into thirty pieces.

## IV

Thus, the “unheimlich”, or the “uncanny” formed, and repressed by society is quite familiar and when these mysteries get fore grounded they create a sense of fright not for the unveiled object but for the very feelings that their familiarity with it is surfaced. Society abhors those “heimlich” or familiarly unfamiliar objects which they want to keep hidden. Grenouille craves to achieve his place, his personal identity, his humanistic existence but he was never taken more than an animal or an “unheimlich” devilish being. He manifests his greatest triumph of life by preparing “essence absolue” though as every child finds uncanny in the mother’s womb or genital where everyone once lived. He wanted to enjoy the moment of being loved but he failed. Society creates the uncanny to form the fright and aversion in the mind.

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