

# **Decentring the Gothic: Fear, Supernaturalism, and Social Order in Indigenous Folklore**

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## **Abstract**

This paper challenges the Eurocentric framing of the Gothic by examining its presence and function in indigenous oral traditions, with a focus on the Galo community of Arunachal Pradesh. By analysing narratives featuring supernatural entities such as the Yapom and Dimi, the study argues that Gothic sensibilities, fear, the grotesque, and encounters with the unknown exist independently of European print culture. In these oral traditions, supernatural phenomena serve as instruments of social and ecological regulation, reinforcing moral codes and maintaining cosmic balance. Through a comparative and theoretical lens, this paper demonstrates that fear and supernaturalism are central to communal governance, positioning indigenous folklore as a legitimate site of Gothic expression. By decentring the Gothic, the study expands its conceptual boundaries and foregrounds the universality of the Gothic impulse across cultures.

**Keywords:** Gothic literature, Indigenous folklore, Oral narratives, Supernaturalism, Fear and social order, Decolonising Gothic studies

## **Introduction**

The Gothic has long been situated within a European literary and cultural framework, emerging in the late eighteenth century as a response to Enlightenment rationality, social upheaval, and architectural excess. Traditionally, Gothic studies emphasise European settings,

castles, abbeys, ruins alongside tropes of terror, the supernatural, and the grotesque. While such a focus has yielded rich interpretations, it risks limiting the Gothic to a geographic and historical context, obscuring its conceptual universality. Gothic, understood not as a bounded literary form but as an expressive mode of encountering fear, the unknown, and transgression, can be traced in diverse cultures and narrative forms, including indigenous oral traditions that predate and exist independently of print culture. This paper seeks to decentre the Gothic, proposing that indigenous folklore offers a fertile site for Gothic expression, where fear and the supernatural operate as instruments of social and ecological regulation.

Indigenous oral traditions, particularly those of the Galo community in Arunachal Pradesh, reveal a nuanced Gothic sensibility that is both performative and communal. Narratives featuring supernatural beings such as the Yapom and Dimi exemplify a distinct Gothic logic, wherein the grotesque and the uncanny are not merely literary ornamentation but function as mechanisms to reinforce societal boundaries. The Yapom, often represented as spirit entities who abduct humans, are not inherently malevolent; rather, their interventions enforce natural and social laws, punishing those who violate ecological or moral norms. Similarly, the Dimi, distinguished by their physical deformities and extraordinary abilities, embody the tension between fear and fascination, serving as agents of moral and cosmic balance. These stories, performed orally across generations, convey moral codes and social expectations through encounters with the supernatural, demonstrating the centrality of Gothic elements in regulating communal life.

By situating the Gothic within oral traditions, this study engages with the broader theoretical discourse on Gothic universality. Scholars such as Fred Botting (1963) and David Punter (1949) have emphasised the Gothic as a literature of transgression and the unspeakable, yet analyses remain largely Eurocentric, privileging written forms and ignoring the rich Gothic potential embedded in non-European oral cultures. Indigenous folklore, through its

performative and communal modalities, embodies many of the characteristics central to Gothic literature: liminal spaces, grotesque bodies, supernatural intervention, and the elicitation of awe or terror. Unlike European Gothic, which often situates fear within architectural or textual spaces, the Gothic in oral traditions emerges in natural and social environments, embedding moral instruction and ecological consciousness within narrative.

The decentring of the Gothic also necessitates an examination of its functional role within indigenous societies. In Galo narratives, the supernatural is inseparable from the enforcement of social order and ecological respect. Fear, rather than serving as an aesthetic or literary device alone, becomes a practical tool, shaping behaviour and reinforcing communal values. Encounters with spirits and other supernatural entities mark the boundaries between permissible and prohibited actions, delineating the moral and cosmic framework within which the community operates. Such a perspective aligns with theories of negative sublimity, wherein the experience of fear and awe underscores human limitations and the presence of forces beyond comprehension. In these oral narratives, Gothic tropes are not incidental; they are integral to the lived and ethical dimensions of society.

This paper therefore situates the Gothic as a transhistorical and transcultural mode, arguing for its recognition beyond European print traditions. By examining the Galo community's narratives through a theoretical lens attentive to fear, supernaturalism, and social regulation, it foregrounds the universality of the Gothic impulse and highlights the capacity of oral traditions to articulate complex moral and cosmic orders. In doing so, it expands the conceptual boundaries of Gothic studies, challenging scholars to consider folklore and indigenous narratives as sites of serious theoretical engagement. The Gothic, when decentered from its Eurocentric frame, reveals itself not merely as a literary artefact but as a global discourse on human apprehension, morality, and the unknown.

## **Indigenous Folk Gothic: Case Studies from Galo Narratives**

The Galo oral tradition offers compelling evidence of Gothic sensibilities operating outside European literary frameworks. Key supernatural entities, including the Yapom and the Dimi, serve as both narrative catalysts and ethical regulators, embodying elements traditionally associated with the Gothic: fear, the grotesque, and encounters with the unknown. Unlike European Gothic, which frequently situates horror within the confines of architectural ruins or domestic interiors, these narratives unfold within the natural and social landscape, where forests, rivers, and mountains become liminal spaces fraught with uncertainty and awe. Such spaces are simultaneously physical and moral terrains, where violations of ecological or societal norms provoke supernatural intervention, revealing a uniquely functional Gothic aesthetic embedded in oral culture.

### **The *Yapom*: Enforcers of Moral and Natural Law**

*Yapom*, often depicted as spirit beings capable of abducting humans, exemplify a Gothic logic that merges terror with social instruction. While their actions might initially appear malevolent, ethnographic accounts indicate that the Yapom intervene primarily when humans transgress boundaries whether ecological, moral, or ritualistic. Such interventions, communicated through dreams, omens, or encounters with the *Yapom Hiko Hilo* (praying mantis), serve as warnings before punitive measures are taken. This mechanism aligns with Gothic conventions of transgression and punishment, yet it diverges from the European model by embedding morality within the natural world rather than the domestic or architectural.

The Gothic in the figure of the *Yapom* is evident in several dimensions. First, there is the uncanny, a central feature of Gothic theory, which manifests through their ambiguous presence, neither fully human nor fully otherworldly, and their ability to operate invisibly or in unexpected forms. Second, the liminality of space amplifies fear: forests, rivers, and remote mountainous regions, where the *Yapom* are said to dwell, function as thresholds between human

order and supernatural agency. Lastly, the didactic function of terror underscores the social utility of Gothic fear. Abduction, while horrifying, enforces respect for natural and social boundaries, demonstrating how Gothic elements in oral culture can simultaneously evoke dread and guide communal behaviour.

### **The *Dimi*: Grotesque Bodies and Sublime Fear**

The *Dimi*, a minor spirit race distinguished by deformities such as malformed feet and indistinct fingers, further illustrate the intersection of Gothic grotesqueness and oral narrative. Their physical otherness evokes a simultaneous fascination and horror, a hallmark of Gothic literature, yet their supernatural abilities—rapid movement, invisibility, and the possession of artifacts such as the *Chekko* position them as active agents within the moral and cosmic framework of Galo society. Encounters with the *Dimi*, as narrated in tales like *The Blow of Dimi*, generate fear not merely for aesthetic effect but to reinforce behavioural norms.

The Gothic experience of the *Dimi* extends beyond corporeal horror into the realm of the sublime, where humans confront forces vastly superior to their comprehension or control. The mother's courage in confronting the *Dimi*, despite their formidable powers, exemplifies a Gothic engagement with the sublime: the coexistence of awe, terror, and moral action. Such narratives illustrate a distinct form of negative sublimity, where fear functions as both a psychological experience and a social instrument. Unlike European Gothic, which often privileges the internalization of fear, the *Dimi* narratives situate terror in the interaction between human and other, highlighting the communal and performative dimensions of the Gothic in oral traditions.

### **Liminal Spaces: Nature as Gothic Architecture**

Forests, rivers, and remote mountains serve as liminal Gothic spaces in Galo folklore. In these narratives, geography is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the moral and supernatural economy. Liminal spaces are simultaneously threatening and sacred, hosting

entities like the *Yapom* and *Dimi* while marking thresholds of human knowledge and behaviour. These natural Gothic architectures blur the boundaries between environment, morality, and the supernatural, demonstrating that Gothic sensibilities are not inherently tied to European castles, abbeys, or urban ruins.

Furthermore, these spaces function as ethical laboratories, where the consequences of transgression are enacted, observed, and internalized by the community. By positioning the supernatural within ecological and social landscapes, Galo narratives enforce compliance with moral and environmental norms, revealing a Gothic logic deeply intertwined with everyday life. Here, the Gothic is not solely aesthetic but ethical, bridging fear, social order, and the supernatural in a manner uniquely suited to oral culture.

### **Fear as Social Regulation**

Across these case studies, the centrality of fear emerges as both a literary and societal mechanism. Encounters with supernatural entities are not arbitrary; they are structured to reinforce communal values, delineate human limitations, and sustain cosmic balance. In this respect, Galo folklore operationalizes Gothic terror functionally, blending horror with pedagogy. This convergence of Gothic aesthetics and social regulation underscores the universality of the Gothic impulse, suggesting that the sensibilities identified in European literature, fear, the uncanny, the grotesque, and encounters with the unknown, find expression in diverse cultural contexts.

By examining these narratives through the lens of Gothic theory, it becomes evident that the Gothic is not a static or geographically bounded phenomenon. Rather, it is a flexible, performative mode, adaptable to oral traditions, communal memory, and local cosmologies. The *Yapom* and *Dimi*, alongside the landscapes they inhabit, demonstrate that Gothic elements can simultaneously evoke terror, articulate moral order, and preserve ecological consciousness. This multifaceted functionality positions indigenous folklore as a legitimate and critical site of

Gothic inquiry, challenging Eurocentric assumptions and expanding the boundaries of the Gothic canon.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The analysis of Galo narratives featuring the *Yapom* and *Dimi* demonstrates that Gothic sensibilities are neither exclusive to European literary culture nor dependent on print. By foregrounding fear, supernaturalism, and encounters with the grotesque, these oral traditions reveal a universality of Gothic expression that transcends geography, medium, and temporality. In Galo folklore, Gothic elements are not merely ornamental or aesthetic; they function as mechanisms of social, moral, and ecological regulation. Supernatural entities enforce boundaries, instil caution, and maintain cosmic balance, illustrating the intertwined nature of fear, ethics, and communal order.

The decentring of the Gothic, as exemplified in these narratives, challenges several assumptions of traditional Gothic studies. First, it contests the perception of Gothic as inherently Eurocentric. While Gothic literature emerged historically in eighteenth-century Europe, the sensibilities it embodies, an engagement with fear, the uncanny, and the limits of human comprehension, are not bounded by place or time. The Gothic impulse manifests wherever human beings grapple with the unknown, encounter the other, and confront forces that exceed their control. Galo oral narratives demonstrate this universality, revealing that Gothic expression is a human response to the uncertainties of existence, mediated through culturally specific forms of storytelling.

Second, the analysis highlights the performative and communal dimensions of the Gothic in oral traditions. In European Gothic, terror is often experienced privately, internalized through reading. In contrast, the Galo narratives function in a collective context, transmitted across generations and enacted in performance. Fear is both shared and instructive, reinforcing social norms and ethical behaviour. The Gothic, in this context, is inherently pragmatic: it does

not merely evoke emotion but guides conduct, establishing moral and ecological parameters within the community. Such a perspective extends Gothic theory by demonstrating that fear, far from being solely a literary device, can operate as a regulatory and educational force in oral societies.

Third, the Galo case studies illustrate the Gothic potential of natural landscapes as liminal spaces. Forests, rivers, and mountain sites of supernatural activity perform functions analogous to European Gothic architecture. They define thresholds between human and supernatural, order and chaos, and permissible and transgressive action. The landscapes themselves are active participants in the Gothic economy, shaping encounters with the other and mediating the experience of fear. By situating Gothic horror within the environment rather than enclosed buildings, Galo narratives expand the conceptual boundaries of Gothic space, suggesting that the Gothic is less about specific settings and more about the interaction between humans and forces that challenge comprehension, power, and morality.

The figures of the *Yapom* and *Dimi* further complicate traditional Gothic notions of villainy and monstrosity. These entities are neither wholly evil nor morally indifferent; they are regulatory forces, their interventions contingent on human transgression. This moral nuance contrasts with European Gothic's frequent reliance on unambiguously malevolent characters and suggests that Gothic terror can be ethically calibrated. The grotesque deformities and uncanny abilities of the *Dimi*, combined with their function as moral enforcers, highlight the interplay of fear, fascination, and social instruction, illustrating a Gothic mode that is simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and functional.

By integrating these insights, this study contributes to a growing discourse on the global and transcultural nature of the Gothic. It underscores that the Gothic is not a historical artifact confined to European print culture but a dynamic mode of human engagement with fear, morality, and the unknown. Indigenous oral traditions, often overlooked in canonical Gothic

studies, possess sophisticated mechanisms for producing Gothic effects and regulating social order. Recognising these traditions as legitimate sites of Gothic expression not only decentres the canon but also encourages a more inclusive and comparative approach to Gothic scholarship, one attentive to cross-cultural parallels, ethical function, and performative enactment.

In conclusion, Galo folklore exemplifies the capacity of indigenous oral traditions to articulate Gothic sensibilities. Fear, supernaturalism, grotesque corporeality, and liminal spaces operate as instruments of social, moral, and ecological regulation, revealing a Gothic logic that is both universal and culturally specific. The decentring of the Gothic challenges Eurocentric assumptions, foregrounds oral and performative modes of narrative, and demonstrates that encounters with the unknown are central to human experience across cultures. By highlighting the Gothic in indigenous contexts, this study expands the theoretical and geographical horizons of Gothic scholarship, affirming that the Gothic impulse, fear, awe, and moral engagement with the unknown, resonates far beyond castles, abbeys, and European print traditions, inhabiting forests, rivers, and communal memory.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the Gothic is not merely literature but a mode of perception and ethical engagement, arising wherever humans confront uncertainty, transgression, and the supernatural. By locating this mode within Galo oral narratives, it is possible to reimagine Gothic studies as inclusive, global, and attentive to the ethical and performative dimensions of fear. In doing so, the study not only decentres the Gothic from Europe but also affirms the universality of the Gothic impulse, positioning indigenous oral traditions as central to the ongoing evolution of Gothic theory.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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