

## Becoming Legend in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: The Semiotic Last Resort for Survival

Hossein Mohseni<sup>1</sup>

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Beheshti University,  
Tehran, Iran

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.34785/J014.2021.802>

Article Type: Original Article

Page Numbers: 5-20

Received: 30 November 2020

Accepted: 17 June 2021

### Abstract

In Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), vampires and the protagonist are regarded as the incumbents of legend-based subject positions respectively. This full circle and chiasmatic changeability in the incumbency of legend-based subject positions have been read through several postcolonial and racial critical paradigms. The present study, while acknowledging the merit of these readings, puts the changeable incumbencies of legend-based subject positions of this novel within Julia Kristeva's critical conceptualization of chora. Such a reading acknowledges the repressive features of becoming a legend in symbolic order of signification, and at the same time, bespeaks the eruptive and threatening inklings of the semiotic and irrepresentable aspects of becoming a legend for such orders. The reading also manages to distance itself from those studies and analyses which see in legends some transcendental or holy teleology. This study argues that it is the very irrepresentable but materialistic and heterogeneous developments in the process of legend formation which make the incumbencies of legends motile, semiotically enabling and eruptive, and overall choric. In the novel's post-apocalyptic, always-changing and chaotic world, becoming a legend can ensure one's symbolically irrepresentable but semiotically perpetual survival.

### Keywords

Legend; Matheson; Vampire; Kristeva; Chora; Semiotic.

### 1. Introduction

Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is the story of Robert Neville, the sole survivor of humanity as we know it, in a world filled with vampires. In this post-apocalyptic world, a race of vampires has emerged due to the spread of a mysterious bacterium. Although Neville has a pretty good idea about the scientific reason why this race of vampires has emerged in his world, he finds it more convenient to regard them as the stuff of superstitions and legends of the past. Eventually, the vampires of the novel's new brave world come to regard

---

<sup>1</sup>h\_mohseni@sbu.ac.ir

Robert as the abnormal and as a result the mysterious entity; the entity which would be referred to as legend.

While the subject positions of Robert and vampires have their different and unique configurations, both of them are put in the subject position of superstitious legends which would not be functioning upon facts necessarily and involve lots of symbolic and semiotic convolutions. The present study reads legend in this novel as the symbolic and semiotic rendition of chora. Conceptualized by Plato first, and then revisited by Martin Heidegger Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, chora – and things with choric features – is the site which could include the uneasy coexistence of signifiable and irrepresentable elements next to each other. The coexistence of signifiable facts and irrepresentable superstitions is the exact thing that transpires in the respective formation of the legend of vampires and Robert in the novel.

Through Kristeva's conceptualization of chora, the study identifies three key semiotic features of a legend in this novel. In the first part called "Semiotically Materialistic: The First Feature of Choric Legend", it would be discussed that neither vampires' legend-based subject position nor Robert's legend connotes enigmatic essentialism or originality. Both of them are the results of the materialistic and broadly speaking discursive developments in the novel's post-apocalyptic world. In "Semiotically Motile: The Second Feature of Choric Legend" as the study's second part, it will be argued that due to the motile and constructed nature of chora, the legend-based subject position of neither vampires nor Robert is fixed. As Kristeva believes the incumbents of choric subject positions are always in the semiotically-formed "rhythmic space" of signification (460), and therefore, cannot solidify the position in their favor forever. The final section of the study, "Semiotically Transformative: The Third Feature of Choric Legend", will discuss the third choric feature of a legend in the novel, which is its role in transforming the status quo in favor of the development of new orders in human and later vampirist civilizations. Vampires' legend helped Robert and his kind form their civilized order of living, but at the end, being transformed into a legend, Robert would be the legend that is going to help the new symbolic order of vampires flourish and at the same time threaten it through its semiotic presence.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many critics tend to read the interchangeable incumbency of Robert and vampires as a legend in light of postcolonial and racial critical mindsets. Nicola Bowring's "Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: Colonization and Adaptation" and Kathy Patterson's "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of

Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* are two of the prominent studies with purely colonial and racial emphasis on the relationship between Neville as the symbolic representative of European white colonizers and vampires as the representatives of people of color and colonized nations in general. For instance, in Bowring's article, it is mentioned that "[Neville] displays many classic attributes of the dominant self over the foreign other, such as an inability to understand the vampires, they were strange, the facts about them" (Bowring 132). This critical mindset is also present in Amy Ransom's studies of the cinematic adaptations of the novel in *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. Ransom believes that "the novel's implementation of vampirist disease is a rational and yet handy explanation for the horror trope against vampires and later zombies as others and offers a radical variation on both the nuclear holocaust and traditional vampire narratives" (20). Even in "Attributing minds to vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*", while Louise Nuttall is discussing the aspects of focalization in the novel's third-person narratological perspective, he justifies the usage of this narratological technique based on Robert's central and colonial subject; the kind of Orientalist position which is also mentioned in Bowring's article.

Next to such racial and postcolonial readings, there are valid class-based interpretations from the novel as well. In critical readings such as in Simchi Cohen's "The Legend of Disorder: The Living Dead, Disorder and Autoimmunity in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*", the author plays with class-based readings of the differences between more advanced, and humanlike vampires and zombie-like vampires, and how both of these groups have little to do with the aristocratic and gothic solitude of the figure of Stoker's *Dracula* as the forefather novel of vampirism. Cohen argues that "while the vampire is furnished with a distinct personality and voice, the zombie is often (though not always) monotonous: in its one-note moan, its uneven totter, its base, ghoulish instincts and soporific rotting flesh" (48). This reading is coupled with some class-based hints in *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. In this book, Ransom believes that although regarding Neville and vampires as respective representatives of aristocracy and bourgeoisie (or vice-versa) cannot be fully supported – especially due to Neville's working-class history and background – such an interpretation has merits especially after reviewing the class-based concerns in the formation of Stoker's *Dracula* as the literary origin of vampirism in literature.

Apart from the two interpretive readings mentioned earlier, critics such as Laura Diehl, and Amy Ransom in their respective works – “American Germ Culture: Richard Matheson, Octavia Butler, and The (Political) Science of Individuality”, and *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*, and *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations* – are proven to be the representatives of many other commentators and critics who acknowledge the depiction of the militarized anxieties of a nation about the repercussions of a nuclear holocaust; a holocaust which they considered to be one of the possible outcomes of the Cold War. In this sense, the worldwide death and people’s mutation into vampires in the novel can be read as having symbolic significance regarding such anxiety. Diehl addresses the symbolic depiction of this anxiety by emphasizing that Neville is the representative of “the military conquest by a superior people; [the kind of conquest which] would be highly preferable to a conquest of foreigners and immigrants [vampires in the novel] with inferior stock endowments” (88). He also reads a militaristic anxiety in Neville’s “ruthless militaristic individuality” (103). Diehl thinks that it is this individuality which “prevents [him] to contact with alterity, and it kills him in the end” (103).

The present study sees the merit of these readings, but it believes that one needs to acknowledge the semiotic power of legend in this novel as the power that could transform the incumbencies of subject positions of the colonizer and the colonized, and expose their slippery nature. The scopes of these very good readings have not discussed the transformative power of legend regarding the-always-shifting subject positions in this post-apocalyptic world. Even the rhizomatic reading in Chris Koenig-Woodyard’s “The Mathematics of Monstrosity: Vampire Demography in Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*”, although very insightful, has not discussed the power of legend as the key driver of making and destroying dominant and abject subject positions in Matheson’s novel. Espousing such a discussion would distance the study from a one-sided reading of abjection as an exclusive feature of either the novel’s vampires or the protagonist, and would put an emphasis on abjection’s motile nature as a subject position.

### **3. Research Approach and Methodology**

The study uses Julia Kristeva’s conceptualization of chora since some key features of this conceptualization can truly show the semiotic, irrepresentable, and eruptive nature of the concept/the term legend in Matheson’s novel.

According to Margaroni, Kristeva's chora is "the site of the crisis" in signification (79). For her, signification is rendered through both symbolic and semiotic features of events and things, and things with choric features magnify the irresolvable clash between signifiable and un-signifiable (irrepresentable) features of signification. The involved elements in neither side of this clash are holy or theological. In contrast to a holy telos, "the material self-ordering of chora opens up a thought of multiplicity in which changes in a field are attributed to changes in the arrangement of its immanent elements" (Margaroni 85). So appointing an essential and recondite status to chora is to deny that chora is "formed by a series of materialistic drives and their stasis" forming "the principle of the chora's constant self-ordering" (Kristeva 463). This principle in turn bespeaks of "a materialist economy of all beginnings that permits Kristeva to displace all transcendental forms of origin, at the same time, forcing us to rethink our assumptions concerning the passivity and chaotic nature of matter" (Margaroni 85). In *I Am Legend*, one needs to acknowledge the developmental role of materialistic and discursive changes in forming the legend-based positions of vampires and then Robert. None of these changes have anything to do with a divine, original, or transcendental reason/telos.

Kristeva believes that the aforementioned materialistic nature of chora shows that various forces and stakeholders – whose nature can be either symbolic or semiotic – are involved in forming the very volatile or what she calls "motile" configuration of chora. This motility gives chora a transformative power, but this power is heterogeneous. The heterogeneity of this power makes it "open (or, if you like, vulnerable) to difference as precisely what frustrates any passage. At the same time, it is a kind of power of difference that prevents the positing of a subject, an origin, or a thesis and dissolves the One" (Margaroni 92). 'Dissolving the One' is the key feature of the volatile nature of legend in the novel. Robert finally realizes the motile nature of the incumbency of the legend-based subject position, and how this position can truly threaten the dominant orders or what Kristeva calls 'dissolving the One'. That is why he accepts his legend-based position at the end.

#### **4. Semiotically Materialistic: The First Feature of Choric Legend**

Robert's regard toward the legend-based and superstitious position of vampires and later vampires' understanding of Robert turning into a legend is not otherworldly and recondite and is reflective of the materialistic developments in their formation. The only thing that makes these developments into prone elements of a legend – a legend as a choric entity – is the failure of the symbolic orders of signification in explaining them. This in turn attests to the semiotic –

but yet materialistic – features of chora, and in the case of the novel, the legend-based positions of both the vampires and Robert.

Robert attempts to understand the origins of vampires' legend-based subject position through science. By doing this, he regards a series of biological and materialistic features as the constitutive elements of the vampirist legend. That is why he starts doing his experiments, and while doing one of them says, "There, on the slide, was the source of the vampire. All the centuries of fearful superstition had been felled at the moment he had seen the germ" (Matheson 80). A series of bacteriological investigations confirm his speculations that the "bacteria [is] the strength of the true vampire" and "can mutate" (Matheson 71). Moreover, Neville's realization about the genetic role of the vampires bacillus, as Neville calls it, in the exponential spread of vampirism. He reasons that "only if you accepted bacteria, could you explain the fantastic rapidity of the plague, the geometrical mounting of victims" (Matheson 75). Although he fails to understand the new symbiosis between vampires and the bacteria, he correctly identifies vampires' materialistic and biological aspects as one of the key components of the formation of their legend. It is only his failure to understand the newly-emerged unexplainable symbiosis between the bacteria and vampires – which is again something biological and materialistic – which gives the legend of vampires its semiotic irrepresentable nature in symbolic orders of conventional science. Even this irrepresentable nature has no essentialist and recondite origin, and can be summarized as follows:

Ruth and her kind have mutated into a new species of the human that has learned to live in precarious partnership with the vampiris bacterium. When inside the system and properly fed, the germ "is anaerobic and sets up a symbiosis with the system. The vampire feeds it fresh blood, the bacteria provides the energy so the vampire can get more fresh blood." But when air enters the system (when Neville stakes his victims), or when the germ is starved of blood, "the situation changes instantaneously. (Diehl 105)

The conventional science at Robert's disposal failed to explain the details of this symbiosis. This failure to be signified within the conventional order of signification in science gives it its irrepresentable and semiotic nature, but this nature comes from the materialistic and biological configuration of vampires and their legend-based subject position. Due to the identification of this irrepresentable materiality, the novel avoids giving its readers a merely superstitious, transcendental, and even romantic picture of vampires and their legend-based subject position, and emphasize their choric nature. According to Kristeva, choric elements should "draw attention, instead, to the immanent material process which they are part of" (Margaroni 96). The beauty of this novel's rendition of vampirist legend is that no essentialist, otherworldly, or

transcendental twists were used while developing the most incomprehensible aspects of the legend of vampires.

The same materialistic understanding of Robert's legend-based position transpires at the end of the novel. He is a threat to the new order of vampires because of his biology. Vampires regard his biology to be clinically infectious, and since they do not have the symbolic order of signification – both in their scientific and linguistic orders – to explain the details of this infection, they found Robert threatening. This threat – although irrepresentable and as a result semiotic – has clinical and materialistic roots. Vampires see in Robert a threat because his body is incapable of striking symbiosis with the bacteria. Diehl nicely encapsulates vampires' regard toward Robert; the regard which turns him into the new infection:

In contrast to the hygienic or immune bodies valorized in orthodox evolutionary and political discourses, vampirist bodies in this novel are infective and affective, the infiltration of foreign genes triggering mutations that subvert any notion of human nature or the biologically sound. Rather than having "killer" immune systems that overpower "difference," Matheson's science-fiction bodies are crossbreeds open to an alterity that insinuates itself into the body as a disease. (Diehl 84-85)

Due to this biological disparity between vampires' symbiotic abilities and the inability of Robert's body to strike such symbiosis, vampires come to see him as "some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with" (Matheson 169). Becoming a 'scourge' is due to the closeness of Robert's body towards the 'alterity' which makes the vampires' body open to a symbiotic relationship with the bacteria. They found him as a new infection because of his different clinical status, and since they cannot explain this difference, they found the choric position of legend as the best position for signifying semiotically the irrepresentable nature of Robert's bodily difference.

Like vampires, Robert is the legend at the end of the novel, attesting to the choric nature of legend which is "formed by a series of materialistic drives and their stasis" (Kristeva 463). These drives and stasis form "the principle of the chora's constant self-ordering" (Kristeva 463). It is the semiotically un-signifiable but materialistic 'drives and stasis' of the legend as chora which denies its incumbents any fixity or permanence. At the beginning of the novel, vampires were regarded as legends, and at the end, it is Robert who is put in this position. Apart from this volatility (or motility; in our second entry, we will be discussing it as another choric feature of a legend in this novel) the materialistic nature of legend bespeaks "the materialist economy of all beginnings" that could permit us – following Kristeva's conceptualization upon this issue – "to displace all

transcendental forms of origin, at the same time, forcing us to rethink our assumptions concerning the passivity and chaotic nature of matter" (Margaroni 85). Simultaneously considering the semiotic, irrepresentable, chaotic yet materialistic nature of legend and its incumbents takes away the possibility of giving a fixed telos-like inkling to the legend positions of either Robert or vampires. Their "material self-ordering", as the incumbents of the choric legend, opens up "a thought of multiplicity in which changes in a field are attributed to changes in the arrangement of immanent material elements" (Margaroni 85). This is anything but denying the irrepresentable yet materialistic features of a choric, chaotic and semiotic entity such as a legend.

### **5. Semiotically Motile: The Second Feature of Choric Legend**

In *I Am Legend*, it is indicated that the incumbencies of normal and abnormal subject positions are changeable. While at the beginning of the novel, vampires are regarded as being abnormal and the incumbents of a superstitious legend, in the end, it is Robert who assumes this position and becomes the legend. In the novel's conclusion, Robert says, "I'm the abnormal one now. Normalcy was a majority concept, the standard of many and not the standard of just one man" (Matheson 169). As Cohen believes, "[Robert's] familiar world-order is overturned as the human population dwindles into the minority and the vampire population overtakes – devours – the old world" (58). By emphasizing the importance of the number of people and people's 'majority'/minority in constituting the definition of normalcy/abnormalcy, Robert reiterates the importance of material factors in the recognition of the incumbencies of legend-based and seemingly normal subject positions. He also manages to show the changeable nature of the incumbencies of the seemingly superstitious legend-based subject positions.

The changeability or what Kristeva calls motility of some subject positions such as the novel's legend-based subject position gives them some choric features all of which cannot be explained away in convenient symbolic orders of language, science, or other signifying institutions. First, whatever or whichever is situated in such subject positions could not claim to form an ultimate, fixed centrality. In the novel, neither the vampirist nor Robert's ultimate legend-based subject position can assume any centrality. According to Bowring, becoming a legend is anything but assuming centrality. He believes:

The legend here is something which begins with a death—Neville's—through which he takes on a new identity. His identity as symbol can be related to Žižek's concept of the word when, quoting Hegel, he describes the word as a death in a sense: as soon as the reality is symbolized ... the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality. A similar process occurs here, Robert Neville



---

will become more real as a concept to the new population, as legend, than in his reality; the stories will overtake the truth. (137)

Robert's new legend-based subject position gives him the semiotic aura of concepts like death. Within symbolic orders of signification, entities like Robert would have no 'subjective existence' according to Bowring since they move from being "active member of society—from subjectivity and the positivist sense of I Am—to a concept, an idea based in legend. This shift is to some extent a shift from a position of power to one of powerlessness" (Bowring 138). Losing his status as an active character, Neville does not say at the end of the novel 'I am a figure of legend' or 'I am a legendary being', but asserts simply that 'I am legend', defining the concept of legend as his new, inhuman, powerless identity, as a mythical figure rather than an individual, narrative rather than narrator.

This powerlessness with the symbolic orders of signification attests that Kristeva's formulation about subject positions with semiotic and choric features is right. She believes that the semiotic features of choric figures cannot assume any centrality in the symbolic orders of signification. They can be regarded choric and can be read by this Kristevan insight, which believes "What is at stake in philosophical understandings of signification "is not to raise the question of their [centers'] origin, but to show that they are producible" (467). In the novel, the incumbencies of legend-based positions are the products of the heterogeneous and materialistic development in the post-apocalyptic world and are always changing.

The second feature of the motile incumbencies of legend-based subject positions is the impossibility of fully comprehending the semiotic nature of the incumbencies within the symbolic orders of signification. The truth of the legend is not seen, it is not truly appreciated as a threat, merely a distant idea of one. As Kristeva argues, "The chora represents endless possibility but no single significance – single significance being what defines the delimiting semantic and patriarchal economy of language itself" (Wolfreys 131). The vampires' victory in the novel is never complete, and in Kristevan manner, results in 'no single significance.'

This lack of significance in their victory could be identified in vampires relegating Robert Neville to the figure of legend. By doing so, vampires are doing with humanity just what humanity had previously done to the vampire, a creature "consigned, fact and figure, to the pages of imaginative literature. How could they truly fight something they didn't even believe in?" (Matheson 23) According to Bowring, "this consignment to legend, then, does not destroy the power of the other, merely the self's—and community's—conception of that power" (Bowring 139). By committing themselves to implement such

consignments – done at first by Robert against vampires and then by vampires against Robert – both Robert and vampires fail to truly understand each other's legend-based subject positions since the semiotic and irrepresentable aspects of such positions cannot be fully comprehended within symbolic orders of significations. According to Kristeva, such positions:

are not yet positions that represent something for someone. Thus, it resists any theoretical reification-even as a fugitive pre-originary origin. At the same time, "though deprived of unity, identity, or deity, it is subject to an objective ordering, dictated as much by natural as by socio-historical constraints. (466-7)

The desperate attempt of vampires and Robert to eliminate each other from the society is due to the 'objective ordering' which only results in a superficial understanding of their choric and motile subject positions. This understanding makes Robert formulate these superficial remarks (out of many superficial remarks), showing the desperate ordering of something which cannot be fully ordered or signified: "All right, she's suffering, he argued with himself, but she's one of them and she'd gladly kill you if she got the chance. You've got to look at it that way, it's the only way" (Matheson 34). Max Payne comments on Robert's such cruel attitude against vampires by commenting that "The hero of *I Am Legend* must resist his urge to be one with the vampires that surround him, and this resistance requires him to do the ontological work of separating himself from what appears to be alive in the world around him but is not truly living in the way that he himself is alive" (16). This 'ontological work of separating', or in a Kristevan manner of speaking 'objective ordering', results in Robert's cruel consignment and elimination of vampires since he thinks it is the only way to remain distinctly human in the novel's post-apocalyptic world. Like most ontological senses of separation, Robert's sense of separation "is incomplete and compromised by longing for someone to share his solitude with him" (Payne 148). This incompleteness sways us readers to regard Robert as the incumbent of a choric subject position whose identity facets cannot be easily comprehended and positioned in the symbolic order of signification.

Vampires are not exempt from Neville-like shallow and convenient formulations about humans as well: "To them, he was some terrible scourge they had never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with" (Matheson 169). On regarding Neville a scrooge, Payne comments that "Neville will be cemented into the foundation myths of their new society in order to preserve its primitive spirit, group will, and cohesion. Because of his alien blood he becomes a new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever, but it is their culture craft that turns him into a legend." (149) Interestingly, each side on becoming the dominant order "moves

with" the choric and chaotic inklings of the legend-based subject position of the other for its survival, and at the same time, "goes against" them when the irrepresentability of such inklings cannot be used for their survival (Margaroni 84). In this sense, each side "depends upon and refuses chora" since they cannot fathom the semiotic aspects of each other's legend-based subject positions which cannot be signified, and resemble a convenient theoretical supposition justified by the need for description" (Margaroni 84). As long as Robert's phobia of vampires is containable and translatable into his seemingly just violence against vampires, it is regarded a viable survival strategy. However, if this phobia starts to be dissected and probed by him, it and eventually vampires would become serious semiotic threats against his survival and orders of signification. The exact case happens when vampires become dominant in the novel.

The main reason for the impossibility of fathoming the semiotic depth of motile legend-based subject positions is due to the heterogeneity of such positions, bringing the study to identifying their third feature. Commenting on the heterogeneity of vampires, Koenig-Woodyard believes:

The challenge of decoding the rhizomatic vampire is, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it, "that not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status. The preternatural ontology and hybridity of the vampire defies evolutionary schemas; it does not follow models of arborescent descent going from the least to the most differentiated. (84-5)

'Diverse modes of coding' is what makes the constituents of the vampirist legend heterogeneous. Their heterogeneous – or what Woodyard believes to be rhizomatic – nature is one of the reasons for the impossibility of them being signified through symbolic orders or through what Woodyard calls 'models of arborescent descent'.

In the novel, Robert acknowledges the semiotically/chorically irrepresentable nature of vampires' legend. Attesting the impossibility to explain away the true nature of vampirism through science or any of his containment strategies, he turns into a Kristevan subject whose "borders of self are put on trial. [Such subjects] begin to lose the ability to discern between inside and outside, self and other, strange and familiar" (McAfee 53). The loss of his discernment becomes so intense that Neville starts to assert that "The vampire was real. It was only that their true story had never been told" (Matheson 81). He goes so far as to read vampirism into historical events such as the black plague and the fall of Athens, again suggesting a new truth to history. Now he realizes that his liminal subject position cannot give him the right to pass firm and exclusivist 'judgments' about the world of the past. Now he realizes that his symbolic structures of signification

cannot claim that they are capable of signifying everything, including the irrepresentable semiotic aspects of his violence and vampire's liminal nature.

As the heterogeneity of the vampirist legend, Robert is – as Woodyard believes – is “a kind of monstrous text that the vampires decipher just as he deciphers them. In this sense, he is “a ‘chimerical discourse – the mythological creature conglomerated from body parts of several animals” (90). On the one hand he is the hunter who hunts them and looks horrendous while doing that. In the novel, after seeing Robert, Ruth as one of the under-attacked vampires bolts when she sees the seemingly monstrous Neville rushing toward her. At first, he does not “realize how frightening he looked; six foot three in his boots, a gigantic bearded man with an intent look” (Matheson 112). On the other hand, he acts like a naturalist scientist/observer while doing experiments on them. In this excerpt from the novel, Nuttall believes “attentional focusing of body parts, and the reduced mind attribution it invites for both Neville and the vampires” shows Neville as an experimental scientist who takes no pleasure in examining the body of a female vampire (34):

Her hands closed over his wrists and her body began to twist and flop on the rug. Her eyes were still closed, but she gasped and muttered and her body kept trying to writhe out of his grip. Her dark nails dug into his flesh ... Usually he felt a twinge of guilt when he realized that, but for some affliction he didn't understand these people were the same as he. But now an experimental fervor had seized him and he could think of nothing else. (Matheson 34)

Here, through “meronymic references” to his body parts and to vampires' body parts (Nuttall 32), and through the emphasis that he is taking no pleasure in doing such things – and the fact that he has a disinterested attitude towards his objects of investigation – he is acquitted of having any moral responsibilities (Nuttall 32). In the end, vampires yearn so much to eliminate him from their brave new world due to such infectious heterogeneity that cannot be easily explained, tamed, and contained in their orders of signification.

The heterogeneous motility of vampirist and Robert's legend-based subject positions and their lack of centrality and full symbolic comprehensibility attest to what Kristeva calls to be the “playful permutation” of chora (Margaroni 87). This permutation should unfold within “plural and heterogeneous universes” and encompasses two different yet interdependent movements. One movement shows choric subjects' desire (in our case vampires and then Robert) to desperately reach a convenient and signifiable fixity regarding their supremely volatile set of circumstances through denying the semiotic motility of their positions and circumstances. The other movement is that of “practice, which Kristeva believes to be the supra-subjective activity oriented toward “externality,

objectivity, and the real" (Margaroni 87). In other words, this other movement is the practical/objective manifest of the first movement, and in the novel, this was presented through both sides' attempts to erect several seemingly fixed orders of signification and containment; the attempts whose motility, heterogeneity, and overall semiotic nature would make them into transient desperate attempts. In the next part, we will be discussing the semiotic eruptive power of legend informing and destroying new forms of signification.

### **6. Semiotically Transformative: The Third Feature of Choric Legend**

The legend-based subject positions of both Robert and vampires help each party erect their distinctive orders of signification, or what each calls civilization. Robert needs vampires to maintain his orders of signification, and vampires need Robert to build their brave new vampirist world. In the end, Robert is the one who realizes the transformative power of legend in the abject but perpetual survival of his name in the new world order of vampires. He manages to understand the non-violent but redemptive power of his legend-based position and therefore accepts it with dignity at the end. Referring to Derrida, Cohen believes that at first, Robert was a believer in immunity. According to him, in the beginning, Robert believes that "immunity protects an organism by introducing into its system the very pathogen that threatens the organism" (59). As a result of his belief, Robert rendered his scientific experimentations on vampires so that he could devise a pathogenic defense mechanism against them, and protects his so-called pure human body.

Robert's acceptance of the monotony of his fixed position in doing such experiments and perpetuating his containment strategies sway him to adhere to a particular kind of obstinate fixity. This adherence to the uncertain landscape of a post-apocalyptic world results in one of his first miscalculations. In one part of the novel, even when Ruth – one of the vampires in the story – warns him of danger well in advance, he refuses to leave his containing habits and house, stating, "I ... couldn't ... I almost went several times. Once I even packed and ... started out. But I couldn't, I couldn't ... go. I was too used to the ... the house. It was a habit, just ... just like the habit of living. I got ... used to it" (165). As Kathy Patterson puts it, "In this unstable post-apocalyptic landscape, it is Neville who has become stagnant, 'passé', a persistent stereotype" (26). In the end, he realizes his miscalculation and fault and sees redemption and perpetuation in the utter annihilation and loss of agency of the choric legend-based position. In this regard, at the end of the novel, Robert as the abject figure commits to what Cohen – by borrowing heavily from Derrida – calls as autoimmunity:

Autoimmunity protects an organism by destroying the organism altogether. It should be privileged [over the category of immunity] since without autoimmunity, there can

be no expectation, without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive. In its destruction of the self, in its exposure to the destructive other within the self, autoimmunity allows for the possibility of expectation. (Cohen 59)

In his movement from normal immunity containment responses to choric autoimmunity, Neville “relinquishes violence in favor of non-violence, and order in favor of disorder” (Cohen 61). His legend partially exposes the semiotic violence which is hidden in any form of symbolic orders of signification ranging from language, violent physical containment strategies, or even immunity attempts against the threat of the other. Matheson’s rendition of legend-based subject positions – especially that of Robert – “reveals the implicitly violent order in the disorderly infection, encouraging the surrender of lists and partitions. It also draws attention not only to the relationship between the plague and the order it induces but to the self-negating violence attendant in that order” (Cohen 61). In the novel’s post-apocalyptic world, “autoimmunity is the preferred paradigm to immunity”, that in the face of the plague, of the ‘black terror’, of the ‘full circle’, of the abnormal, of the vampire, the non-violent disorder is the ultimate legend (Cohen 61).

By choosing the subject position of legend, Robert attempts to tackle the “problem” of the relation (or unrelation) between incommensurable entities” (Margaroni). In other words, he tries to embrace and understand the semiotic non-violence of the legend-based subject position whose prior incumbent was vampires. In doing this, he becomes representative of chora. In his choric and symbolically eliminated legend-based subject position, he manages to find the ultimate means of survival in the new brave world of vampires. In a Kristevan manner and as a choric entity, at the end, he “turns the problem and the aporia of legend – which was occupied by the vampirist incumbency and abhorred by Neville at the beginning – into an enabling passage, tracing in it the possibility of a transformative practice that opens up the speaking subject” (Margaroni 92). Being remembered even as an infectious abject entity in the vampires’ brave new world is the result of Robert’s commitment to the ‘transformative practice’ of accepting his legend-based position; the practice which turns him into an abject, seemingly repressed, but semiotically ‘speaking subject’. Such a subject can maintain his semiotic threat and presence in the new orders of the signification of the vampirist world by simultaneously enabling and threatening them. As Diehl believes, in Matheson’s post-apocalyptic world, “bodies in transition and contamination are the new posthuman norm against which all other bodies are measured, and found sick. Individuality is pathology, invulnerability fatal, and immunity sick” (116). Robert realizes this ‘posthuman’ truth about the new

world of vampires and opts to become a legend. Becoming a legend is anything but 'individuality' and contained 'immunity', and has the transitional power of becoming transformative. As Kristeva believes, the choric elements of the subject position of entities such as Robert can form an 'enabling passage' for giving voice to the formerly abject vampirist entities, and always threatening them through his symbolically repressed but semiotically irrepressible subject position.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study managed to show the necessity not to take the recondite heterogeneity of both the legend-based subject positions of Robert and vampires as something completely immaterialistic and otherworldly. In almost all the exemplified parts of the novel, the heterogeneity of legend-based subject positions is semiotically irrepresentable but is formed out of their materialistic development and features.

It also depicted that the materialistic, motile, and transformative aspects of legend prevent it from being regarded as a holy or transcendental point of origin or teleology. All these aspects attest to the eruptive and choric nature of a subject position rife with semiotic and irrepresentable inklings. It was these inklings that make the convenient containment of first vampires and then Robert within symbolic orders of signification difficult. Although irrepresentable, these inklings were not all immaterialistic, and are the resultants of very materialistic and heterogeneous developments in the choric subject positions of vampires and Robert. This heterogeneity in turn gives the incumbencies of these positions no centrality or fixity and sways them to become transitional and changeable. That is why neither vampires nor Robert can expect to remain the incumbents of their legend-based positions for good.

The motile and materialistic nature of legend-based subject positions in the novel, although not holy or transcendental, should not be regarded as utterly without agency. In the novel, when vampires and Robert become the respective incumbents of legend-based subject positions, they simultaneously become the semiotically enabling and threatening elements for the orders of signification. Understanding this semiotic and transformative power of the most abject and abnormal subject positions (legend incumbencies in the case of the novel) and the vulnerability of the most normal and seemingly in command subject positions (Robert and then vampires) would show the semiotic/choric nature of these positions. Such an understanding prevents the materialization of purely postcolonial and racial readings out of the volatile and motile relationship between the key actors and agents of a volatile post-apocalyptic world, and acknowledges the in-process/in-practice – as Kristeva believes – and transitional nature of subject positions within 'the full circle'.

## References

- Bowring, Nicola. "Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: Colonization and Adaptation." *Adaptation*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2015, pp. 130-144.
- Cohen, Simchi. "The Legend of Disorder: The Living Dead, Disorder and Autoimmunity in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Horror Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2014, pp. 47-63.
- Diehl, Laura. "American Germ Culture: Richard Matheson, Octavia Butler, and The (Political) Science of Individuality." *Cultural Critique*, Vol. 85, 2013, pp. 84-121.
- Koenig-Woodyard, Chris. "The Mathematics of Monstrosity: Vampire Demography in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 87, No. 1, 2018, pp. 81-109.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Revolution in Poetic Language." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin, and Michael Ryan, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 451-463.
- Margaroni, Maria. "The Lost Foundation: Kristeva's Semiotic Chora and Its Ambiguous Legacy." *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2005, pp. 78-98.
- Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. Tom Doherty, 1954.
- McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. Routledge, 2004.
- Nuttall, Louise. "Attributing minds to vampires in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Language and Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2015, pp. 23-39.
- Patterson, Kathy Davis. "Echoes of *Dracula*: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*." *Journal of Dracula Studies*, Vol. 7, 2005, pp. 19-27.
- Payne, Max. *Flowers of Time: On Post-Apocalyptic Fiction*. Princeton UP, 2020.
- Ransom, Amy J. *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations*. McFarland, 2018.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.