

**THE ORIENTALIST GAZE OF THE HAUNTED BABU IN TAGORE'S "THE HUNGRY STONES"**

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**Abstract**

*Spectres inaugurate the coming of the other. It summons the sensible and the rational to question the very logic of sense and reason that presses on us an urgency of thought, immediacy to act, and a responsibility to perform. Haunting is generative and equally traumatic. I read Tagore's "The Hungry Stones", a tale that engages with the spectral feminine, who haunts the Orientalist gaze of the babu. In the tale, the spectral displaces the middle-class babu from being a dutiful servant in a Western-clad outfit to self-styling as a mighty nawab by night, dreaming of the fantastic world of the harem. The spectral figure performs a dual task in the tale; it opens a new way of re-fashioning as a 'statement' of resistance to the colonial order and its equally disturbing phallogocentric gaze, and in doing so devours his sanity. Hence, the paper articulates that the haunting of the spectral feminine is traumatic, leading to his displacement of certitude and equally generative that enables him to forge a newer 'look'.*

**Keywords:** feminine; spectre; ethics; gaze; haunting

**Invoking Spectres**

The way of the spectre is haunting. But what is haunting? Haunting, from the French term *hauntise*, implies a sense of "obsession, a constant fear, a fixed fear, or a nagging memory" (Derrida 224). Haunting as the spectral effect is "predicated upon the return" or "the act of coming back", and it suggests a deforming of linear temporality that disrupts boundaries (Shaw 7). Peggy Kamuf writes ghost or spectre is a common term to denote the French word 'revenant', which literally means whatever comes back resulting in terror and horror (224). To put it differently, if anything foreign or alien to sameness and identity returns, it does so to reveal the deceptiveness of the seeming solidity of things to affectively and effectively put us across other structures of feeling and of reality. This reality that we are made to experience does not appear as cold knowledge, "but as a transformative recognition" (Gordon 8). Thus, being haunted is to be possessed by the ability to see through the 'lacunae' and the disjointedness of things, and to perceive the seeming continuity and linearity of the temporal and spatial categories as fractured. Julian Wolfreys posits haunting as a 'powerful force', or a

force of displacement', shifting us in time and space "as the trace of non-identity within identity, and through signs of alterity, otherness, abjection" it displaces 'origin', 'eschatology' (1). Thus, as Avery Gordon rightfully remarks, "The way of the ghost is haunting" (8). Spectres disrupt time and a line of thought, withering continuities, saturated with symptoms of excess, law, sublime and alterity.

The paper undertakes a critical thematic reading of Rabindranath Tagore's "The Hungry Stones" to trace the spectral as figuration of transgressions and displacement that perforates subjectivities and prolongs anxiety. I read Tagore's "The Hungry Stones", a tale that engages with the spectral feminine, who haunts the Orientalist gaze of the *babu*. In the tale, the spectral displaces the middle-class *babu* from being a dutiful servant in a Western-clad outfit to self-styling as a mighty *nawab* by night, dreaming of the fantastic world of the harem. The spectral performs a dual task in the tale; the spectral opens a newer way of re-fashioning as a 'statement' of resistance to the colonial order and its equally disturbing phallogocentric gaze, and in doing so, she displaces and devours his sanity. Hence, the paper articulates that the haunting of the spectral feminine is traumatic, leading to his displacement of certitude and equally generative that enable him to forge a newer 'look'.

### **The Hungry Stones**

Ghosts animate the line between reason and its perversion. Ghost stories enumerate this tussle between reason and its other as categories that embody values in conflict; reason and madness, real and virtual, man and woman, West and the East, among others. "The Hungry Stones" (1895) is a frame narrative that opens in a railway waiting room at night, before the characters make a sudden departure for different classes of train carriages, marking a sudden end to the embedded tales. It begins with the unknown narrator and his kinsman in their homeward journey after *Puja* vacation, where they come across an extraordinary gentleman, a *babu* with a riveting personality. The spectral encounter belongs to his frenzied days of youth, of being 'possessed' by a djinn or a revenant in a decadent palace. The tale narrates the *babu's*- an upcountry Mohamedan- encounter with the spectre of an enslaved "Persian beauty" (Tagore 17) in a dilapidated palace, that forces him "to confront the contradictions fissuring his artefactual identity" as "a Western-educated upper-class Indian man" (Bhattacharya). This encounter at a two-fifty-year-old pleasure dome built by Shah Mahmud II by the Susta river, known to devour sanity whilst a revenue-collector in the Barich province, is an erstwhile testimony to his "split persona as a western dressing customs officer by day and, by night, a would-be *badshah* among ghostly dream visions of harem girls and eunuchs" (Blaine 15). In tandem with Blaine, Dipankar Roy writes, the conflict between his "'fantasy," encoded in an Oriental life-style, full of exotic pleasures, and the harsh "reality" of a subjugated self, caught in the drudgery of colonial clock-time, full of never-ending duties of *chakri*" (173), encapsulates his schism.

The narrator, an administrative official caught in the mundanity of existence during the day, finds respite in the expansive horizon of the dilapidating architecture, where he can assume roles as *nawab* and a hero by night, both subversive and anachronistic to his present station. He shares kinship with the stones- seemingly indifferent, dumb and abandoned in an isolated fashion which was once full of life and desire- both are now bereft of womanly presence or maternal touch. This is the uncanny metonymic shift of his hunger. If bureaucracy demands unfaltering compliance to the credo of reason, logic, pragmatism, upheld by the imperial power with its austere political telos “aiming at the preservation of state” (Blaine 22), then as a middle-class babu or *bhadralok*, he is in a contradictory state of belonging- utilitarian, rational and equally critical of the dehumanizing principles of the Western logos. His imitating the employer, and its criticism, albeit suppressed, progress hand in hand. However, as Blaine argues, the alternative to this hollowness and critique lies in the narrative of a fictional Oriental past, which is equally empty. Hence, to playact as Badshah is as naive as performing the role as a Saheb in sola hat, breeches and coat. The story enacts the ramifications of “becoming a caricature of the East” beyond the “falseness of Victorian self-styling” (23). However, as Prasanta Bhattacharyya writes, the “Islamist Mughal autocrat, otherwise his communal Other” is distant and yet nearer to him in space and time, and the only “historically validated and naturalised source of authority superseded by the technocratic British” (77). Thus, it is a tale that dwells on the ‘others’ of his Hindu self, the vibrant Oriental past and the drudgery of a monochromatic colonial present, listless- framed as a hopeless romantic desire to be united with the bereaved women; both of which are equally apparitional and unassimilable. Dipankar Roy writes that the tale is not just a fantastic lore but an allegory of the “silences” in the project of “narrating the nation”, wherein the Muslim past makes an uncanny resurgence (Roy 172). The decaying architectural presence is embodied in the form of a lack of an irrevocable style, which makes a resurgence with a sense of familiarity or homeliness, albeit as an anachronism. However, this resurgence is not a means to suggest simple nostalgia, but rather to enumerate the past as operating through equally coercive and oppressive mechanisms for subjects such as the harem girls and the eunuch, whose cry for freedom and justice still rings through the walls. If the palace is fetishised from an Orientalist gaze, then it possesses the power to devour his sanity and rationality. The gaze is a consequence of his learned aspirations, and as “a bilingual, western-educated, Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*, the cultural bind of the coloniser remains indelible” (Roy 175). It ricochets, as Said remarks, the pre-technical spaces that explode with “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy” (Blaine 118) in contrast to a seemingly genteel and unperturbed landscape of colonial office-towns. In tune with Blaine, I thus argue that the female spectre leads to “the displacement of his agency” and his “harem fantasy” (22) by disorienting him. By posing as a companion, the

apparition (djinn) deconstructs his fantasy of enacting as a saviour for the distressed other. The spectral here is foreign. Blaine writes, “the spectral female as a means of shattering the complacency of the bhadralok and of revealing the fissures in his identity” (19), engenders momentary relief and is equally haunting. The return signals the lack of proper “burial, commemoration, and mourning” to reveal, redress and make secrets known (Davis 3). If the business of the ghost is to perform unfinished tasks that arrive as signs “of disturbance in the symbolic, moral or epistemic order” (2), then this traffic erupts to perform justice, to make known the suffering of the enslaved victims in the harem, in particular, the Persian beauty. She is imagined as a damsel in distress, apparently ‘waiting’ for an active agent to rescue her. The hauntology of the spectral other is a subversive disruption causing momentary displacement. It displaces the collector from sense to madness. The fantasy lures him to madness and impairs his sense of belonging. The spectre can dissociate him from the immediate and the urgent to the latent and the invisible, by frustrating him and deceiving his sense of self. Thus, Blaine argues, the East, with its otherness as appropriated by the Western male discourse as effeminate and licentious, is a “wrong place”; it turns back on his “colonial gaze” (26). It is the hunger of curses and the mourning of hopeless desires that devours his sanity like hungry ghouls.

The spectral opens up newer domains of self-styling; it/she propels him to desire to look different. Hence, a colonial bureaucrat performing his duties in a *sola* hat and a coat like a Saheb takes to dressing up as a *nawab* by night. Styling himself in the red velvet cap, embroidered vest and lavish silk gown bursting forth with colours and rich smell of attar, transposed him into a land that invited a past brimming forth with gurgling fountains, instrumental melody echoing through the corridors, swift jingling of ornaments and the soft movement of the splendid chandeliers. It is a fantastic world that stands in stark contrast to his quotidian life, which he lived half-heartedly. It is false and yet intoxicating, a pre-colonial past realised through “Orientalist harem fantasy” (Blaine 22). In an attempt to blend the present with the past, his fashioning of himself as a *nawab*, he compensates his present for the virtual that is more agentic. The intangible, inaccessible, and unreal world appears as the only truth, a hyperreality, while the real seems distant, elusive, and equally trivial as well as laughable. His sudden outburst of laughter while recalling the present state of affairs- his routine-bound life as a revenue collector in a foreign land that fetches him a monthly salary- is scorned as petty and outright mercenary in the face of an overwhelming force, both majestic and uncannily at home.

Whatever, in his beleaguered days of youth as a salaried clerk, was deemed fitting is now being revoked as queer. He now looks as a synthesiser of East and West, the ancient and modern; spatially and temporally unifying them. He is well-versed in the *Vedas* and Persian poetry, equipped to comment on the geo-political turmoil, fluent in the modern discourses of

science and seems equally competent in realising the fissures of the Enlightened West. His present demeanour at the platform is that of a reformed persona, exorcised of the past haunting. However, Marlin Blaine succinctly enumerates the idea that the story is a culmination of a “split identity of a colonial subject” and the art of storytelling, that of tales embedded within tales. This conflict is laced with other contradictions as well. The train and the station are a symbolic space signifying “Enlightenment technology, western imperialism, and class stratification” in contrast to the setting of the story in a “precolonial setting of the palace” (Blaine 16). The class division between the storyteller as he leaves for the first-class while the narrator and his cousin for the second-class refers to the internal societal rift. Consequently, it is a tale within the Gothic framework that has historically been a product of counter-Enlightenment rationality, and the folkloric quality of the tale in its lucidity and fractured narrative, orally passed down, stands in stark contrast with the short story as a form. Finally, it ends with the rift between the sceptical narrator who interrogates the veracity of his tale and his theosophist kinsman stupefied by it. Roy comments that the abrupt end and the consequent act of the babu signify the impossibility of assimilation with the Oriental past, against the sway held by the Occidental, a lure too fantastic to grasp.

One may be tempted to read the spectralising of the suffering woman in Tagore as a discreet criticism of patriarchy that otherises and marginalises the deviant and unruly women. Mary M. Lago laments that Tagore often depicts women “trapped in negative social situations, but none deal with a woman's positive struggles to become, in addition to a domestic being, an independent intellectual being” (104). Moreover, Tagore channelising the agency of women, through the discreet frame of gothic literature, as phantasmatic figures, ensues an ambivalence that is both political and conforms to the *bhadralok* culture (Bhattacharya). Nevertheless, it haunts our apparent silences and inhibitions regarding the question of women. Tagore is critical of the Brahmanical patriarchal norms that demarcate certain experiences as unruly, to make the subjugated others visible in their invisibility. It is Tagore’s humanism that lays bare the vanity of elusive idealisation in the face of more pressing concerns that need our subsequent attention. The nightly tours into the fantastic world of an imaginative past/nation, offering him temporary succour from the instrumentalising forces of a colonial bureaucratic system, propels him towards a desire for release like the harem girl, suggestive of the fact that freedom from captivity in all forms and measures is foundational to human existence.

### **Conclusion**

Ghosts, whether they astound or perplex, remain an ever-fixed leak in our inquiring minds. The spectre is disruptive; the uncanny that unnerves, ousting us from a privileged position to a vulnerable state. The spectre has the possibility, power, and agency to displace and subvert the status quo. It inhibits the continuity of events and intercepts as an insurmountable force.

Hence, the spectre is a form of rupture that cracks open past relics, dark matters and abysmal chaos. It resuscitates a near impossibility of bordering the dead from the undead, that which perforates the presentness, ricocheting history's strange attachment to the supernatural for whatever remained suppressed. 'Absence' or 'otherwise' are the two categories of knowledge that the ghost summons, impossible to realise if not conjured. The "Persian beauty" beckons rupture to unfurl the past atrocities and is equally agentic as a spectral being to contest the 'fetishism' of the native bureaucrat. To attend to the spectral is to be in companionship with the outside of a subject, and whatever has escaped knowledge. It is an absence that summons the absentee, and in the very anxiety of an end, conjures a door that forever moves outside. As such, the paper has stated that spectres embody the anxiety of the threshold, a negation to closure, a medium communicating the left out. It is historically left out and the undocumented, that is potent and agentic enough in its visible invisibility, summoning alternative visions, a responsibility to 'look' and see differently.

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