

The Absent Women in Asian Literature: Reading Francezca C Kwe's 'The Ghost Story' and Intan Paramaditha's 'The Spinner of Darkness' through Feminist Hauntology

Bushra Khan

PhD scholar, Dept of English, University of Delhi

Abstract- Silence, when contemplated in women's lives has long served as a formidable vehicle for articulating what words cannot. Historically, women have been pushed to the margins of the society, their stories are always recounted from the perspective of others, as a result they have been reduced to insignificant figures in their own story but Spectrality and Hauntology provide women with the space to reclaim their agency and to emerge as the narrators, creators, authors, chroniclers of their stories. Drawing on Derrida's notions of spectrality and hauntology the paper will attempt to reinstate hauntology within a feminist framework examining how the patriarchal constraints transform women into lifeless, listless yet visible and invisible spectres, bodies of flesh as spectres that are present in the narrative yet yield little power over the narrative but spectrality confer upon the readers the power to read and understand the silences as a resistance against the dominant narratives. Haunting has become an integral part of literature specially in context of female characters revealing power structures, traumas, process or phenomena that confer a conditioned silence on women. The paper will undertake a comparative analysis of Philippine writer Francezca C. Kwe's 'A Ghost Story' (2008) and Indonesian writer, Intan Paramaditha's 'The Spinner of Darkness' (2020) to study the silences imposed on the female protagonists followed by the gaps that could be scrutinized through the lens of Spectrality and Hauntology.

Keywords: Spectres, Women, Hauntings, Patriarchy, violence

Historically, women have been treated like spectres or ghosts- violently neglected figures whose side of the story remains unheard, metaphorically they have been portrayed as monster, malformed creatures challenging patriarchy's precarious moral and social order. Derrida's notion of Spectrality and Hauntology open a critical space for women to counter demeaning

and oppressive narratives against them. The conceptual use of Spectrality and Hauntology in literature can be traced back to Derrida's influential work *Spectres of Marx* (1993), according to him, Hauntology explores how present is destabilized and disrupted by past and insist a change for the future where the spectre become the symbol of "ultimate disjointedness of ontology, history, inheritance, materiality and ideology" (Del Pilar Blanco & Peeren,7). Hauntology confabulates impermanence and ephemerality of past, where past, present and future coalesce and are experienced concurrently, therefore in this frame work spectres, silences, absences emerge as structures that establish a sense of reality. Intrinsically the Uncanny is also associated with Hauntology and spectral because not only the figure of the spectre is uncanny, as something familiar returning in an unfamiliar appearance, but also because the core idea of Hauntology is concerned with blurring boundaries and rupturing the sense of time and space. Derrida himself associated the notion of the Uncanny with Hauntology and spectral as he affirmed the alternate title of *Spectres of Marx* could have been "Marx das Unheimliche" (Derrida 219). Building on these concepts, Hauntology, can be articulated as a way of understanding different forms of oppression, dispossession and traumatization. According to Avery Gordon "what's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes obliquely" (17). The way the spectres make themselves known rupture the understanding of time, as spectres of the past irrupt into present but not to haunt individuals rather to

remind them of some trauma or felony of the past which continues to influence the present.

Drawing on Derrida's urge to engage with the spectre, this paper will attempt to reinstate hauntology with a feminist context. Employing Nancy J Holland's "The Death of the Other/Father: A Feminist Reading of Derrida's Hauntology" (2001), to understand the process by which patriarchal constructs transform women of flesh into lifeless, listless and desolate spectres. To force the political, Feminist, Colonial critique of the spectres in the light, it is necessary to engage with them, this engagement will be achieved by undertaking a comparative analysis of two short stories; Francezca C. Kwe's 'A Ghost Story' and Intan Paramaditha's 'The Spinner of Darkness'. In both the stories the protagonists' body is devoid of speech, rights and voice, therefore, the process of speaking with the spectres gives them back the power of speech enabling them to reveal their side of their story from their own perspective, consequently exorcising them and curbing the influence of their pasts on their futures. Both the narratives invoke similar imagery and symbolism which portray women as spectres which will help elucidate the profundity of their silences.

Francezca C. Kwe's, 'A Ghost Story' set in a Postcolonial Philippine village, centres around Lola Concha who has been living in the house alone for twenty years. The house that was believed to be haunted by a girl who was "raped and murdered there by drunken Japanese soldiers, her parts cut up and scattered in the many corners of the ancient house" (1). Lola Concha's life was a secluded one as she was accused of killing her husband, she was treated like a spectre bound by various assumptions but none was true until the protagonist Hija, engages with her, this act of speaking with Lola Concha resonates with Derrida's idea of engaging with the spectre to exorcise them and this is the exact moment where it is revealed that the house was not haunted by a demon or a spirit but War, "No, hija, not even a demon can be as powerful as a war" (1), said Lola Concha.

The narrative takes place during The Philippine-American War (1899 – 1902), wherein Philippine was a colony of America and it was under the siege of Japan. Japanese invasion of Philippine began in 1841, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, it was a part

of their expansionist policies. Japanese air force proved its dominance forcing the USAFFE troupes to retreat to Bataan Peninsula. That was the single most excruciating moment in Lola Concha's life as her husband, Nando, was also forced to join USAFFE, although he returned from the war but normalcy, sanity and order never returned into their lives again. While Nando was in battle field, Lola Concha lived through the harrowing moments of her life- her son Norman was born sickly after a difficult birth, soon the Japanese soldiers through her out of her house, living her to earn by selling wild yams and finally Norman died but when Nando came back, Lola Concha wanted to confide in Nando, to wail mournfully the death of her son and those scathing years that she has lived through but the war has turned Nando an a lifeless, listless and desolate spectre, he was lackadaisical "When I saw him I started wailing about Norman, but he pushed past me without a word and lay immobile on the dining room floor. I couldn't even get him to talk about what he had gone through" (kwe 2). Lola Concha resented his silences, her hatred for her husband accumulated in completely abandoning Nando in the other wing of the house, in the care of the maids. But when the truth was revealed to her after Nando's death she becomes deeply religious to repent for the sins she committed unknowingly against her late husband. The truth about Nando's absence for those war years was that he was sent to a concentration camp in Capas, where his soul was butchered mercilessly and whatever was left behind in that body was described by Lola Concha as "almost unrecognizable, the skin so tight on his head he looked like a skull. He had shrunk so much that I was able to dress him up in a pair of my pants. He was so infested with lice that his skin was pitted and almost black" (Kwe 3). He had lost his handsome face, his vision for future and his spirit, war had transformed him into an uncanny figure whose side of the story is revealed by some fellow prisoners. Kwe's story is not haunted by spirits or demons rather it is haunted by war "not even a demon can be as powerful as a war." (Kwe 3) Lola Concha's marital bliss was obliterated by Nando's forceful participation in the war. According to Dominic, Nando was enduring trauma of the survivor, as a war veteran Nando will always be carrying the PTSD from the war in his brain which will continue to haunt him for the rest of his life. His self-inflicted silence after his return is a sign of his inability to

differentiate between the moment of trauma, which is his past and normal moments, which is his present. He never mentions about his traumatic experience because whenever a victim tries to voice his trauma, in his thought, he goes back to the same scene of trauma and gets performatively caught up in the same situation. Hence, Nando had no sense or understanding of past, present or future. He died as a PTSD stuck war veteran forever haunted by the spectre of war. A spectre he was never able to purge due to his inability to engage with it by speaking about it because his brain was no more capable of journeying into the past to experience the traumatic experience gain. If Nando was haunted by the spectre of war, then, Lola Concha was haunted by the spectre of isolation.

After Nando went to war, Lola Concha was left isolated in that big house “Those war years were probably the quietest I’ve had in that house. Not a peep, not a single movement all that time. Suddenly it was like there no longer was anyone or anything watching you all the time, lurking in the shadows. The house was totally, undeniably empty, like my world” (kwe 2). Those scathing war years and Norman’s death had hollowed her out, she became a site of various suspicions, just like that big house that was believed to be the dwelling place of vengeful spirits and monsters. But her story is only revealed when Hija engages in a dialogue with her, thus, providing her a critical space to represent her side of the story from her own perspective, therefore emerging as the narrator, author, chronicler of her story, she breaks the curse of being a spectre but rather becomes a living self with a trajectory of her own. A feminist perspective might throw some light on Lola Concha’s case because she suffered because of the war without even participating in it directly, this is mostly the case with women from prior colonies. She silenced herself by shutting herself inside the house not because she lacked opinion or her own voice but because she was resisting the societal expectations to act and speak in a certain way. Lola Concha’s act of shutting herself inside the house is an act of resistance and not submission, she deliberately repositioned herself on the margins to exist quietly but intensely. She retires into the old mansion, without letting her relatives confiscate it from her depicts how she has rebelled against the patriarchal system silently, making silence her survival mechanism, therefore she accurately responses to Holland’s “The question, then,

is how to learn to live after all, how to survive” (10), by implementing the strategy to exist outside of patriarchal control without losing her sense of self. Her passive resistance transforms her into a spectre that exists outside of the patriarchal control, in her old mansion which she described as, “The house was totally, undeniably empty, like my world” (3), the mansion, therefore, becomes a spectral space where she was exercising her autonomy and a personal space which allows her to reclaim her agency as oppose to the outside world which would strip her off it. Therefore, she deliberately chooses to become a spectre to keep clear of patriarchy’s radar.

She decided to sell the mansion on the insistence of pastor Gerry, who believed that the house was the bone of contention for her and for other villagers, she becomes a practicing Christian therefore, she decides to let go of the mansion because she has voiced her side of the story. There was no point in keeping the house that was also associated with unfortunate memories, she was no more a lifeless, listless, isolated spectre but a woman of flesh who has made her miseries public, vindicated herself from various suspicions and accusations, in a way she was letting go off her trauma and the colonial past that house has stood as a symbol of. Philippine is liberated now so as Lola Concha, and it was preferred to let go of the symbol that was the root cause for transformation into a spectre. At the end of the story the mansion was exorcised before it was demolished. Lola Concha died in the sleep not as a spectre but a woman of substance, whose story would be remembered for the years to come. Although the mansion was her personal space/ spectral space but it was also the embodiment of her suffering personified, its exuberant but now rotting structure stood as a symbol of Philippines colonial past, the act of demolishing the mansion signifies the end of colonial rule, Philippines’s severed relationship with colonial powers and devastation inflicted by the colonizers, therefore the mansion will not haunt the villagers anymore.

The narrative of ‘The Spinner of Darkness’, focuses on Nina and her mother, set in Indonesia, this mother-daughter duo lives in a house with an attic, this attic is not just a space in the narrative but a spectral space that is the custodian of the sorrowful tale of Spinner of Darkness. Nina grew up hearing the tales of spinner of

darkness who lives in their attic, thus she was fascinated by the attic, although she had never set foot in there on the behest of her mother. Her mind was unreasonably preoccupied with the world that existed inside that attic “My overactive imagination led me to lose interest in everything else, consumed by the mystery behind that door. When I drew with crayons, my pictures were of a dark attic with a radiant treasure inside. Other times, I drew a coiled serpent, ready to strike its prey. I conjured various versions of the attic’s contents until Mother told me what she believed truly lay within” (10). She had conjured up the distinct version of secrets of the attic but her imagination fell apart when her mother recounted the tale of the spinner of darkness that lives in the attic “The attic’s greatest secret, she said, was a female ghost with long, flowing hair, always seated before a spinning wheel. Her face slashed with reddish-brown scars, as if clawed by a wild beast. Her eyes glowed red like flames. When she opened her mouth, you would see her long fangs” (5), she has been described as an ugly, monster like, otherworldly creature spinning to weave a blanket for her lover, who abandoned her when he discovered her true form. Her lover’s betrayal and abandonment drove her mad, therefore, in a quest to find him, she wreaked havoc “Furious, she roamed from house to house, causing disturbances and unsettling humans” (10). But her love so deep for him that when she realized that her treacherous lover was bereft of warm clothes to keep him warm in the forest, therefore she decides to find herself a hiding place, one that is secluded, isolated and dark, where she could weave him a blanket.

This imagery of attic possesses a distinct literary legacy, tracing back to Gilber and Guber’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), the book polarizes representation of women in two broad categories “Good Other Woman” and “Evil Other Woman” urging forth women’s binding roles and social constructs of Victorian patriarchy. The women of the attic are neither dead or alive, they are perceived as spectres who haunt the castle and surrounding forest while denying the passing of time. The spinner of the darkness is revealed to be Nina’s mother who has been spinning the wheel of darkness that symbolizes here solitude and isolation due to lack of companionship, and when she had any she was condemned by the

society for having illicit relationships “The neighbourhood gossip grew louder. People accused my mother of exploiting her boyfriends, draining their wallets. Others doubted whether she was even really dating them. Some spread rumours that she was embezzling money from her job. The essence of all these accusations was that as a widow my mother occupied a precarious position” (11). Therefore, the attic became a spectral space, a sanctum which evokes mystery and fear. For Nina’s mother the attic was a sanctum to contain maligned, stigmatized, darker, demonic self, intoxicated by forbidden hunger to wreak a havoc if unleashed. Her mother’s life was shrouded in obscurity, Nina, as a child used to hear screams of anguish and sobbing from her room but her mother always dismissed such claims, therefore, attic, for her, was a spectral space where she could express her grief and woe without making Nina aware of her anguish. In spectral studies, liminality is embodied by physical thresholds like gates, windows, dimly lit rooms, archways, attics that mediate between known and unknown, they are symbolics portals of the Uncanny where reality, identity and stability can be altered, when the door of the attic is closed, it is considered a safety measure but it is also an obstacle for Nina that separated the liminal space of spectre from the worldly. Therefore, the attic is the liminal space that separates two different spheres but at the same time is the point of contact between them- the reality is revealed by her mother inside the attic. The attic as an enclosed space invokes the paradox which links the safe sphere of home inextricably to its dark opposite- the spectral space. The reflection of mother in the mirror is described as “Her flowing hair, her face etched with painful lines, her eyes blazing like fiery orbs consuming everyone who dared to gaze” (12), emphasizes the oppression of women under patriarchy, indeed the Spectre’s liminal status as a figure suspended between life and death, presence and absence, visibility and invisibility illustrate an optimal metaphor for depicting the plight of women who have been marginalized, silenced, disempowered and swallowed by obscurity in patriarchal culture.

Spectrality and Hauntology have opened up a critical space wherein the spectres of women can address the unredressed wrongs women have suffered due to their alignment as “the second sex” in the societal paradigm. Through the figure of Spinner of darkness,

Paramaditha explores the deep-rooted fears about women's imprisonment and powerlessness within the patriarchy. Her Spectre wanted to liberate herself from the expectations of the society, therefore she chooses to confide her-self in the attic- her sanctum.

The mother and daughter who are self and the other needs to be separated, because the Spectre does not want to make Nina's selfhood difficult. To put in simple words, there is possibility that their strong relationship might make Nina her double. Nina needs to confront the image of her mother to rebuild her identity thoroughly antithetical to her mother. The struggle for identity was reflected in the image of the attic which functions as a space for longing for companionship and protection but also as an entrapment. The figure of the spinner of darkness is the immaculate spectre that represents the plight of the woman who has never soared without fetters, echoes Nancy Holland's "if the daughter's ghost carries within him the ghost of an Other who never lived, then he is neither one nor many, nor a couple, since what once lived cannot be coupled with an Imaginary that cannot live" (7).

Accordingly, the stories narrate the trajectory of women who consciously repositioned themselves beyond patriarchy's authority by taking refuge in spectral spaces- the mansion and the attic. The mansion and the attic serve as a sanctuary where Lola Concha and Spinner of Darkness were able to reclaim their agency to externalize their emotions as well to articulate the misery they have gone through because of their positioning as "second sex" in the apparatus of the society. Female spectres are relatively common figures in South Asian Literature, they have been predominantly examined as symbols of horror but when they are studied from a gendered perspective, they tend to expose patriarchal constraints that induce trauma in women, therefore, the spectre of female ghosts is employed to reveal their sense of resistance- aiming to liberate themselves from patriarchal constructs of space and time. Spectres and Hauntings are key motifs in Indian, Nepalese, Burmese, Sri Lankan Literatures because they are a compatible metaphor to address women's insubstantiality, invisibility, and absence in Phallogocentric cultures. The spectres of women reveal those horrors which reside at the heart of patriarchy as well as they highlight the ways in which women are denied subjectivity, self-

expression, identity and agency to recount their story from their own perspective. The two stories are rooted in the way society has treated woman for generations- women whose pain was refuted, women who suffered silently, women who were expected to endure without complaining and when they refuse to no longer endure, they became spectres. They became a mirror for the life women have lived from antiquity, recounting the tales of betrayal, loneliness and violence. A haunting, therefore, is the refusal against forgetting. They have been called churel in North India, mohini devva in South India, Nu Gui in China, Pontianak in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, Gwisin in Korea, Boksi in Nepal, the names might be different but they all have one thing similar- they all have been wronged by patriarchy, forced to live as marginalised beings devoid of any kind of agency, therefore they transform into spectres to subvert against patriarchy.

REFERENCE

- [1] Blanco, María del Pilar, and Esther Peeren. "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities." *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, edited by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 1–27.
- [2] Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1994.
- [3] Holland, Nancy J. "The Death of the Other/Father: A Feminist Reading of Derrida's Hauntology." *Hypatia*, vol. 16, no. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 64-71
- [4] Kwe, Francezca C. "A Ghost Story." *A Different Voice: The PEN Anthology of Fiction by Young Filipino Writers*, UST Publishing House, 2008.
- [5] Paramaditha, Intan. "The Spinner of Darkness." Translated by Stephen J. Epstein, *Lontar*, 5 Mar. 2020
- [6] Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 2000.
- [7] Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second, University of Minnesota Press, 1997. JSTOR.