



EXPLORING HAUNTOLOGY IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN NARRATIVES: READING ELIZABETH JOY SERRANO-QUIJANO'S 'THE PREGNANT WOMAN FROM ZAMBOANGA

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Abstract

This paper will explore Feminist Hauntology and Spectrality in Elizabeth Joy Serrano- Quijano's 'The Pregnant Woman from Zamboanga' by analysing the themes of trauma and violence in the context of Southeast Asia. Utilizing Jacques Derrida's concept of Hauntology, Spectrality along with Feminist critical theory of Nancy J Holland, the paper will examine how the story employs 'ghostly figures' to interrogate the gendered traumas, historical amnesia and the silencing of female voices. The spectre in the chosen narrative is not solely a supernatural element but representation of unresolved violence- colonial, patriarchal, sexual that prevails across generations. 'The Pregnant woman of Zamboanga' aligns spectrality with indigenous milieu, where a pregnant woman's ritualistic sacrifice for advancement of modern infrastructure facilities becomes a haunting metaphor for omission of female indigenous agency. By exploring the spectral as a narrative strategy as feminist political device, this paper will argue that this story resists traditional ghost trope to salvage silenced histories and challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial discourses. At last, the spectre in the story lingers on, unresolved and unrested therefore it demands justice, remembrance, and a rethinking of how people reckon with the past. The story interrogates the possibility of fully comprehending the figure of the ghost, a spectre that exists in a liminal state, neither fully present nor absent, neither dead nor alive thereby frames the spectral encounter as contingent upon an acceptance of the unknown.

KEYWORDS: Spectrality, Asian literature, Memory, Trauma, Hauntology

Dying to Tell the Tale: Women as Spectres

Silence forges a presence that is both profound and sagacious, especially in narratives of women negotiating patriarchal constraints. Far from being the absence of voice and agency, silence emerges as a compelling thematic device signifying resilience, endurance, suppression and resistance. It becomes a refuge where forgotten voices prevail revealing the complexities of female existence under systems that work to stifle their voices. The



concept of Hauntology, provides a clear framework for re-examining past events that resists confinement within chronological time. Jacques Derrida in his significant work *Spectres de Marx* (1993), proposed a detailed spectral aspect of historical analysis and historical amnesia where the past not only as lingers as a memory, but as a haunting presence that destabilizes the present. Spectres, in this sense, represent silenced voices, unresolved conflicts, historical traumas and amnesia that resist closure. In 'The Pregnant Woman from Zamboanga', the pregnant woman's spectre unfolds within this hauntological framework: she is neither fully present nor absent, neither remembered nor forgotten. Her identity unacknowledged, unnamed lurks in a liminal space, representative of the suppressed female agency that continues to haunt the socio-political consciousness.

The Present Absence: Women as Characters and Narrators

Set in a remote Philippine village in 1974, the narrative of 'The Pregnant Woman from Zamboanga' centres around a gruesome crime committed in the name of modernity: the sacrificial offering of a pregnant indigenous woman named Fatima to "those-not-like-us" (Quijano 3). Conceptualized as an obligatory act to pave way for progress- roads, electricity, and outside aid, the event transpires as a brutal act of violence against a vulnerable woman whose only fault was being a weaker gender in the eyes of those in power. Subsequently, her spectre still haunts the village, not to initiate fear, but to offer guidance. As witnessed by the narrator named Merlie, the spectre of the frail and marginalized pregnant woman appears by the river, silently clutching a torch, her spectre's presence is not represented a threat but as a quiet demand to be acknowledged, and to have her story commemorate not as folklore but as historical truth that counters historical amnesia. Her haunting becomes a symbol of resistance, a reminder of the violence endured by indigenous women and the consequences of silencing their stories in the name of so-called advancement. Fatima's spectre elucidates that trauma is not a static remnant of the past but a persistent living force that deeply shape the characters lived reality. The fact that Fatima's story was recounted by Lolo Bebe aligns with Hirsch's concept of post-memory, that memory does not emerge as a straight forward recollection but a fragmented project of reconstruction, a cluster of inherited emotions, silences and imperfect narratives that are deeply felt but vaguely apprehended, therefore what Merlie experienced near the river is an obscure transmission of history- what is passed down is an affective residue- echoes of trauma, unspoken griefs and lingering tensions, for her legacy of trauma gets imbibed in silences, omissions, memory and spectral spaces.

Silent women are not a new phenomenon in the literary world; however, the persistent and systemic silence imposed upon them remains a critical concern. The question lies not only in their muteness, but in what forces silence them- and how they are made to internalize and accept that silence as natural. As Nancy J. Holland observes, "the only



possible promise, the only possible teaching, between father and daughter here is not to learn how to live, but how to remain in a state where such knowledge is not necessary” (66). This proposes that daughters are not taught to live freely or autonomously, but rather to exist within imposed restrictions, conditioned to live not for themselves, but for service of others. Their silence, then, is not solely absence of voice, but a profoundly ingrained result of patriarchal inheritance. In the story, the fact that Fatima’s murder was planned and executed by men highlights their disregard for the lives and rights of indigenous women. To them, Fatima was nothing more than an offering- stripped of agency, denied humanity, devoid of autonomy and seen as too disempowered to resist them. Her life held no value beyond its usefulness in serving the men whose vision of modernizing the village came at the cost of her life and as Holland argues women are compelled to make such sacrifices because they are made to believe self-sacrifice is embedded in the submissive role they have been assigned as daughters.

The spectre is only seen by the female narrator, signalling a moment of solidarity between women especially among daughters who are frequently denied recognition as autonomous individuals with their own histories, voices, and identities. Instead, they are often reduced to projections-mirroring what others, especially patriarchal figures, anticipate or need them to be. When Fatima's spectre looks upon a daughter, it may not see her in her full complexity, but rather as a reiteration of the past- a vessel for unresolved desires, unfulfilled ideals, or inherited guilt. This resonates deeply with what Holland says of recognition and representation, “But what if the ghostly apparition that looks at us sees not, we ourselves, we daughters as we are, but only its own ghost, the spectral image of what it wants to see, desires to see, must see when it looks at a female form”(7). This moment of spectral recognition between Merlie and Fatima’s spectre ruptures that pattern because Merlie witnesses the spectre not as myth or projection, but as a woman insisting to be seen and remembered on her own terms.

Quijano disrupts the linear perception of time by contrasting the past and the present, enabling them to coexist within the narrative. In this framework, the past- embodied by the spectre of the sacrificed woman, Fatima, yearns to engage with the present embodied by the Narrator. Originally, the present responds with confusion and fear, yet by the story’s end, the spectre has accomplished her purpose: she has been seen, and her story has been acknowledged. This acknowledgment becomes an act of resistance against historical amnesia. The author thereby entices a radical re-imagining of how spectrality and time are understood. This rhetorical gesture corresponds with Derrida’s notion of “one who can imagine the possibility of the spectre and engage with it meaningfully, without privileging the present over the absent” (13). Unlike traditional narratives that seek to enclose or explain the spectre through rationality and closure, the narrator in this story holds onto the spectre’s inherent ambiguity- its resistance to categorization,



fixation or resolution. In doing so, the spectre emerges not only as a remnant of the past, but as a site of epistemological rupture, breaking linear time and crossing temporal and conceptual boundaries.

Flow of Time: The Spectrality of Space

In 'The Pregnant Woman from Zamboanga', the river functions not merely as a geographical feature or a sacrificial site but as a spectral space, Christina Lee in her book *Spectral Spaces and Haunting* explains "how the past has a palpable presence and impact upon the present in a range of spectral spaces: the memory sites of a terrorist attack, a vacated house, a decommissioned mining township, a graveyard of ships, roadside memorials, an abandoned airport futilely waiting for arrivals, a post-apocalyptic landscape dominated by undead architecture, photographs and screens where ghosts materialise, the haunted cityscape in art, and the body as a site for re-corporealizing the disappeared and dead" (38), therefore the river becomes a landscape that carried the memory of violence, becoming the custodian of Fatima's story. The river is symbolic of heterogeneous time- a malleable space where the past mingles into the present, and where the trauma of colonial and gendered violence is conserved as a haunting presence. It is traversed and re-traversed by memory, loss, and silence- its currents redrawing the boundaries of space and time. The river, in this context, holds slices of time that refutes silence and enclosure, bearing witness to what larger narratives often seek to forget. Much like Foucault's heterotopias, this river accumulates both temporal fragments and symbolic weight, becoming a living archive of Fatima's violated body and, more importantly, of the nation's unresolved colonial and patriarchal past. Therefore, the engineer's order, "whatever you see, leave it here" (Quijano 7), however goes in vain because the river, as a spectral space has particularly responded to evolving ethnic, social, colonial and cultural circumstances of the village, it has done so by privileging tormented and silent spectre of Fatima who is emblematic of fractured and disjointed local history.

Fatima can also be seen as a reminiscent of Philippines's colonial past, therefore a formidable symbol of resistance, especially because she is a native of Zamboanga- an indigenous land deeply rooted in Moro identity's culture and history. This region, once culturally rich and proud, fiercely resisted both Spanish and American colonial rule. However, it was eventually infringed by foreign powers that imposed forced conversion to Christianity and violently suppressed those who refused. The killing of an indigenous woman under the guise of ushering in modernity, symbolizes the erasure of entire cultures that stood in opposition to colonial forces. Her death reflects not only personal loss but also the systematic destruction of native identities and histories. Her pregnancy symbolized the hope for a brighter tomorrow rooted in cultural survival and stripped off of colonial rule but her kidnapping shatters the hope for a better tomorrow and her



murder transmogrifies her into a haunting presence- a spectre persistent to address the historical amnesia. Fatima's spectre operates as a peculiar and particular kind of social memory, another form of history-making in which things usually forgotten, repressed, retarded or refuted becomes prominent, whether as a site of regret, explanation, desire or fear.

Conclusion

The spectre as a figure of plurality that has returned as a haunting force keeps returning in indeterminate ways setting in motion an alternative logic of identity and logic in turn as something not so revolutionary and definitive in the sense it is not anything radically new but a figment of an existed reality, a past that keeps haunting the present because it claims to shape and reshape the present through its presence-absence, as seen in the case of Fatima and the Narrator, who were both fractions of two different realities lived but not a parallel one as their gender, their colonial past brings them face to face to address historical amnesia, therefore the narrative of the story was claimed by Fatima was has finally made herself heard and made her presence felt to another daughter with whom she empathies and sees her a bearer of culture and makes who will carry forward her story.

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