



RE-VIEWING 'BARICH' IN "THE HUNGRY STONES": A TALE OF SPECTRAL MYSTERIES

MANTU GHOSH

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University

Darbhanga, Bihar, India

Email : mantughosh.deb2@gmail.com



Article Received:19/11/2020

Article Accepted: 28/12/2020

Published online:31/12/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.239](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.239)

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's famous short story "The Hungry Stones" with its supernatural overtones and by-gone Persian setting, reiterates the type of oriental ambience. The supernatural implications lend the short story added excitement making them doubly interesting. Waving continually between reality and supernaturalism, the theme of the story is rooted in psychological dilemma or torment. The relation of the story is in a decaying palace by the banks of the river 'Shusta' at Barich. In this short story, readers do not come across any ghost but the description of eerie atmosphere shows a magnificent craftsmanship of the author. A relation of the present and the past is noticed in this story as past becomes an inseparable part of the present living. There is a combination of the dream and the reality throughout the story. With the beginning of evening, the supernatural powers take a complete control over the reality. But to return to the real world from world of the supernatural is a natural rule. Setting of romantic appeal, Tagore underlines the medieval artistic style through imaginative activity in a wonderful way. This paper intends to revisit the luxurious medieval palace at Barich, in which, a bold, young and rational cotton collector undergoes gothic experiences expressed with romantic suggestiveness in such a way that readers down the generations are mesmerized by the appeal of the story. The causal beginning and abrupt ending of the short story not only reaffirm the ghostliness of the narrative but also spectralize the literary term itself.

Key words: Supernaturalism, Psychological Dilemma, Craftsmanship, Medieval Artistic Style, Romantic Suggestiveness, Spectrality.

Introduction

One of the most familiar short stories of Rabindranath Tagore is 'The Hungry Stones' where romance has breathed the spell of a past crowded with apparitions and half realizable memories. During his living in the Shahibag mansion in Ahmedabad, Tagore coined the plot of 'The Hungry Stones' in order to make it credible and realistic frame. The theme discusses with the narrator and

his relative's meeting with a strange fellow on their way back home. The unnatural story is told by this fellow, they meet in a rail junction. The supernatural incidents are enacted in the world of imagination and dream. Rabindranath Tagore does not create Coleridgean sense of 'willing suspension of disbelief'¹ to make ensure believability. He imaginatively traverses the splendid era of Mughal Empire or visualizes the majestic courtly pageants.

The incidents in the story begin in the Mughal palace at Barich supernaturally. The narrator starts his story with a description of Barich. The depiction of the Barich is a kind of archetype view point by Tagore. It is described as a picturesque place where there is a majestic historical palace familiar for its scenic beauty. According to Tagore Barich is depicted as 'most romantic place' where a 'pleasure – dome' was built by Shah Mahmud about 250 years ago. His interpretation of the palace as a 'pleasure – dome' brings to our mind 'the pleasure – dome' of Coleridge's famous poem Kubla Khan: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree."² His connection of the 'pleasure – dome' at Barich with that of Kubla Khan in Xanadu seems to lend an exotic aura to the palace in the story. At the time of representation of the meandering course of the Shusta river like a skilful dancer, the narrator employs the 'snake' image that helps the readers to visualize the zig-zag course of the river. Tagore's coining of young Persian concubines throws light on the status of the resident woman and the immoral sexual revelry perpetrated in the 'pleasure – dome'. The cotton tax collector in Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Hungry Stones' has his first experience of the invisible pageant from a world of 250 years ago. A pageant that comes alive in his lively imagination.

"I was about to mount my horse and ride away when I heard footsteps on the stairway. I turned round – but there was no one there. Thinking that my senses were deceiving me, I settled in my chair again; but now lots of footsteps could be heard – as if a crowd of people were rushing down the steps together."³

Through his magnificent imagination and feelings Tagore re-captures different images like the music of the dead, spectral world of the scent of age, old shampoo and atar, the gush of fountains, the sound of a sitar, the tinkle of gold ornaments, the jungle of anklets, the song of a caged nightingale of a by gone age. The description of the lonely pleasure resort of the Emperor II and the solitary marble palace are in tune with the state of the narrator who is oppressed with solitude. The deserted palace weighs upon the narrator like a nightmare and exerts weird fascination upon him. In

fact he feels as if the whole house is like a living organism which is slowly digesting him. The wind around is laden with an oppressive scent. The rays of the setting sun are falling upon the stage. The reverie like parade of figures continuously torments the narrator to maddening confusion. Tagore's narrative becomes spectral because it provokes us to strive for a spectrogenic understanding of the present by opening up the ontological truthfulness of reality to the possibility of a ghostly past. As Derrida reflects in *Specters of Marx*, the spectre, the ghost, the apparition is the erasure of the limit between life and death.

Pheng Cheah notably uses Derrida's idea of spectrality to argue that the postcolonial people ensures its existence in the age of uneven globalization by its spectral location between the living people and dead global capital. Cheah suggests about the postcolonial spectre which disrupts the teleological time of national narrative by challenging the idea of nation-form as organismic vitalism. Challenging the discursive magnitude, Derrida's spectral provocation delineates a 'radical contamination'⁴ of reality and time. The spectre is not declaration of life's end; rather, it signifies a puzzling overlap of life and beyond. Derrida further cautions us:

"If I am getting ready to speak... about ghosts...who are to say about certain others who are not present...it is in the name of justice. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer present, and where it will never be, no more than a law, reducible to laws or rights."⁵

In the Eastern and Western states, there are a number of tales which have been scripted on the topic of paranormals and it has nearly turned into consonant with the heartbeats since the paranormal's faith has gone into male's blood. The motivation through which the sights can be knocked down instantly. Furthermore "There happen more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are reported in your newspapers."⁶ To Virginia Woolf, supernaturalism is an odd and strange human passion for feeling afraid. 'Skeleton', 'In the Middle

of the Night', 'The Hungry Stones' and 'Manihara', are the four short stories on the mystic topic. 'The Hungry Stones' is the English depiction of 'Kshudita Pashan' and the short narrative was decoded by C.F. Andrews and Tagore himself with the change. In London 1916 this short narrative beside other short stories was first in print by Macmillan. William Radice also translated the story as 'The Hungry Stones' from the Bengali 'Kshudita Pashan.'

By the banks of the river Shusta, the rotting fort is a place and site of the small narrative. In 'The Hungry Stones' the fort had been viewed not only a lot of glad instances but also the bitter troubles and distresses of failed lovers for approximately two hundred and fifty years back. Inside this fort the collector of cotton duties comes to reside. Century aged young woman who had been enforced to lead the life of a slave and he (cotton tax collector) senses the existence of her and he might sense her colourful life also. In 'The Hungry Stones' the readers do not come across any spirit in the lines of the narrative. 'The Hungry Stones' is a narrative about the feeling. An amalgamation of the current and precedent is observed in this narrative where past turns into an indivisible element of the current livelihood. Throughout a superb ingredient of realism and thoughts, the strange history of the Mughal Empire is depicted orally in prose as there is no injure in text which is based on history. Prose is not all about history as literature is not bound to be based on information but history does. The plea of journalism is endless while the plea of history is time bound. So the performer fills up the unidentified gaps by his or her thoughts. Human society has separated undying era to sequential era into small blocks like seconds, minutes, hours, days, years etc. Philosophy of Vedanta tells that the earth is fake and the only fact is 'Brahman.' During the clash of Kurukshetra Sri Krishna says to Arjuna, whatever happens in this world – happiness and unhappiness, love, affection, disloyalty, pain – all are as temporary and short-lived as a dream. Likewise, this existence on soil ends with demise as the nightmare ends with arousing from nap. Soul is never born, nor does it die. The body is destroyed, the soul is not. Demise in reality places an end to the body, the body gets

spoiled but the spirit is not as it is eternal. In The Gita it has been stated that:

“Na jayate mriyate ba kadachit

Nayang bhutwa bhabita ba na bhuyo

Ajo nitya saswato hayang purano

Na hanyate hanyamane sorire”⁷

With the monthly wages of rupees four hundred and fifty, the collector of cotton duties came at Barich under such a magical attraction. “Barich is a most romantic place. The Shusta river thereflows through large forests with desolate mountains above, snaking its pebbly way over rocks like skilful dancer picking her feet. A white marble palace stands alone on high rocks beneath the mountains, with 150 steep stone steps leading up from the river.”⁸

All the way through the narration there is a amalgamation of the vision and the fact. The magnificent actions that outspread themselves since night gets deeper. The collector of cotton duties loses the strength to explain it. The mystical command takes a whole control over the actual while evening arrives. The ordinary law is to come back to the real from the earth of the paranormal. The nervous weep of Meher Ali: “Keep away, keep away! All is false! All is false!”⁹ Actually this is a warning. But who is being warned? Is Meher Ali himself free from this supernatural web? Has he been able to move away from the unseen threads of the palace? He repeats this caution each day when the sun sets. Meher Ali stands in between the border line of the world of faith and doubt. What he believes that night slowly moved towards the world of doubt after the sun sets. The guardsman, in between the world of practicality and paranormalism, is Meher Ali. Meher Ali can be taken as the figure like strength which tries to break the vague, dreamlike and mystic world.

While night ends, the fact of the dark turns to be fake as caution given by Meher Ali. This can be a well example of exciting release of mystical theme. 'The Hungry Stones' is dissimilar from the other mystic tales of author since in this narration it is seen that there are two listeners, while in the other

tales the writer alone is the listener. In-between of faith and doubt Tagore brings in one more listener to create a link as the author is the listener who does not consider in the tale but the other listener considers in the story. Nishikanto Chattopadhyay, a scholar of status, may be unknown story teller and he was working by the Nizam of Hyderabad. The first narrator may be the author himself and the other listener may be Mohini Mohan Chattopadhyay, a listener.

Gothic is unbalanced and has many-sides which go through fast changes and short-lived and all the way through the next semi of the 18th Century. The writers and reviewers to re-evaluate and redefine moral emotion and imaginary worth. The term gothic is very popular from the 1760s onwards until the 1820. It has had a considerable influence on fiction, short story since (still apparent in the 1990s) and is of much important in the evolution of the ghost story and the horror theme like 'Marmion' written by Scott, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Coleridge and 'Hubert de Sevrac' written by Mary Robinson. Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' reframed the collection of the Gothic and public up the vision of current middle ages, at one time demanding and impressive the view of creative gorgeous burnish vivid dismay may be slowly replaced by fear. The short story 'The Hungry Stones' can be compared with Jung's idea of 'archetypes'¹⁰ was based on Immanuel Kant's categories, Plato's Ideas, and Arthur Schopenhauer prototypes. To Jung all the most powerful ideas in history go back in archetypes.

The tale of an upset man clearly has an amusing result on the two spectators having supernatural power – some attractive or heavenly force or an astronomical body or something of the kind. Approximately two hundred fifty years ago the storyteller was posted at Barich as cotton-revenue collector under the Nizam of Hyderabad and prefers to have his house in a vast marble-fort which was built by Shah Mahmud II. His youthful vigour scorns all forewarnings and he restarts his duties with confidence. The attractive prettiness of the fort with Aravally Mountain and river Shusta dispelled all second-hand information. Within a week the self-belief of the storyteller gets something shaky: "As if

of its own accord it took me to the palace, arriving as dusk fell."¹¹ A sequence of odd activities intensified the gothic result. One evening through the burning climate he saw a dream of 'a group of high-spirited young women' dipping in the river Shusta, however he feels "shallow stream was being ruffled by jingling, braceleted arms, that friends were splashing each other and shrieking with laughter, that kicking swimmers were scattering spray like fistful of pearls."¹²

Edmund Burke in 1757 sees that when danger or pain press too nearly they are incapable of giving any delight and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience in a thoughtful review into the base of our ideas, the inspiring and beautiful. The idea of Aristotelian catharsis, out of sensation of dishonor and terror, finds newly made diagram. According to Burke's theory, pain and fear are able to produce enjoyment. To Burke this joy is unpleasant as it produces reason of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror. The pleasure-palace of Barich is vast. Author is amazingly victorious in romanticizing the gothic to lift it to the summit of idealistic sublimity. In the Shahibag fort in Ahmadabad there is minor experience of the author that gives the middle mark. The subjective internal runs of the mind as by this method found objectification through distancing and defamiliarization and the last result is that of a charming, inspiring tale of the usual which is spoken through the paranormal.

The prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature that optimistic writers reformulated the normal relative of God to his formation in conditions in Natural Supernaturalism as M.H. Abrams monitors. In 'The Hungry Stones' the author did the similar thing. Magnificent setting of the tale is ended by an oddly delightful gentleman. The objective authenticity of the story keeps us in steady touch with the truth. Even the quiet clarification of the fort and its background as well as to make the highest feeling both sexual and phobic that becomes charming for the anxiety. In a most energetic method, the

objective authenticity pulling him back and performs the story. 'The Hungry Stones' "appears as a strategy through which Tagore circumvents the possibility for conjuring away the spirits of the past"¹³

Conclusion

Tagore had to be cautious so that the readers never think the storyteller to be mad like Meher Ali. Meher Ali's remark about all is false and his denial are the narrator's repeated questions, what is false? It is a proclamation of Tagore's strict move towards the inhibited spectral past and reaching another historical consciousness. Thus 'The Hungry Stones' is not only a supernatural story but also a story around the impression and its place Barich sets the proper atmosphere for the story to reach its zenith.

Notes and References

1. Abrams, M.H. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1971. Pp. 65-70.
2. Biswas, Sarbojit. *Topper's File*, Kolkata: Books Way, 2009. p. 66.
3. Radice, William. trans. *Rabindranath Tagore Selected Short Stories*, Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 2000. p. 235.
4. Cheah, Pheng *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003 p. 386.
5. Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, [1994] 2006 p. XVIII.
6. Radice, William, trans. Op. cit. p. 233.
7. Goendka, Joydayal. Ed. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, Gorakhpur: Gita press, 2005. Book-II, Verse-20.
8. Radice, William, trans. Op. cit. p. 234.
9. Ibid. p. 242.
10. Jung, C.G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, New York: 1969. Pp. 151 – 159.

11. Radice, William, trans. Op. cit. p. 241.
12. Ibid. p. 235.
13. Suvadip Sinha (2015) Ghostly Predicament, *Interventions*, 17:5, 728-743, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2014.984615](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.984615)