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Haunted Histories: Ghosts. Memory, And Supernatural in Indian Literature

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of ghosts, memory, and the supernatural in Indian literature, focusing on how spectral figures become symbols of collective trauma, historical injustice, and suppressed cultural memory. Drawing on select texts from regional and Anglophone Indian literature, including works by Rabindranath Tagore, Ruskin Bond, Amitav Ghosh, and contemporary horror fiction, the study examines how ghost narratives challenge linear historiography and materialist rationality. These stories often recover silenced voices, question dominant historical discourses, and give form to the intangible residues of colonialism, caste oppression, partition, and patriarchy. Such narratives not only evoke fear but also act as cultural interventions that unsettle hegemonic truths and invite critical engagement with the past.

Keywords: Spectrality, Collective Memory, Postcolonial Trauma, Supernatural in Literature, Indian Ghost Narratives

1. Introduction

In the vast and diverse landscape of Indian literature, the ghost figure transcends its folkloric and horror genre confines to emerge as a profound cultural signifier. Far from being relegated to the margins of the fantastic, the spectral in Indian narratives functions as a mnemonic device—one that reactivates suppressed memories, challenges hegemonic histories, and voices the silenced and the subaltern. Indian ghost stories, across languages and periods, often operate within a framework of collective trauma, socio-historical injustice, and unresolved memory, positioning the supernatural not just as eerie entertainment but as a politically and emotionally charged narrative strategy. From classical folktales like the Vetala Panchavimshati (Baital Pachisi) to modern literary texts, ghosts have symbolized the return of the repressed. As scholars like Ananya Jahanara Kabir note, haunting in postcolonial literature is deeply entangled with the aftershocks of colonial violence, partition, and caste discrimination [1]. Rabindranath Tagore's short story The Hungry Stones (1895) stands as an early and iconic example where the supernatural becomes a conduit for historical sedimentation. The haunted palace in the story is not simply a space of spectral presence; it is a memory-scape of Mughal opulence and decline, colonial erasure, and unfulfilled desires [2]. Similarly, Ruskin Bond's ghost stories, such as A Face in the Dark and The Haunted Bungalow, capture the colonial hangover in Indian hill stations. Bond does not treat ghosts merely as threats but as lonely remnants of a vanishing colonial world—haunting reminders of hybridity, displacement, and forgotten lives [3]. In this regard, Bond's specters resemble what Avery Gordon refers to as "ghostly matters"—manifestations of unresolved social violence that haunt the margins of modern consciousness [4].

Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosome (1995) exemplifies a shift towards a metaphysical and epistemological treatment of the supernatural. Ghosh reclaims indigenous knowledge systems through a ghost-inflected narrative that questions Western scientific rationality and colonial epistemic authority [5]. His essay The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi (1995), a non-fictional account of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, also uses the metaphor of ghosts to signify the specter of state violence and collective amnesia [6]. Ghosts in Indian literature are also frequently entangled with questions of caste, gender, and patriarchy. For instance, in Dalit writings, ghost figures often symbolize the unacknowledged pain of caste atrocities. The Tamil Dalit short story Ghost (Pey), translated in No Alphabet in Sight, evokes the suffering of the marginalized through supernatural imagery, where the haunting is both literal and metaphorical [7]. Female ghosts, such as the churel or preta, are often associated with violated women—victims of

domestic violence, dowry deaths, or widowhood—who return to demand justice. Ismat Chughtai's The Quilt (Lihaaf, 1942) and Indira Goswami's The Shadow of Kamakhya (2001) engage with such liminal feminine figures, using the supernatural to critique patriarchal control over female bodies and desires [8][9].

Thus, in contemporary Indian literature, the ghost emerges not as a fixed symbol but as a fluid, multivalent presence that allows writers to negotiate with history, identity, trauma, and resistance. These spectral narratives offer what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"—a mode of accessing and articulating inherited trauma from a generational distance [10]. Ghosts in Indian fiction do not merely scare—they speak, accuse, remember, and testify. They are unsettling agents of cultural reckoning, pushing readers to confront the intangible, often silenced, residues of India's historical and social fabric.

2. Theoretical Framework: Spectrality and Memory

The ghost, as a recurring figure in Indian literature, gains its critical depth and interpretive power through the theoretical lens of hauntology, a concept introduced by Jacques Derrida in Specters of Marx (1994). Derrida challenges the traditional notion of being by introducing the ghost as a being that is both present and absent—a "trace" of something that once was or could have been, and which now returns to disturb the illusions of closure, finality, and linear historical progression [11]. Hauntology thus displaces the chronological model of time with a layered temporality, where the past constantly interrupts the present. The specter, for Derrida, is not merely an ethereal entity; it is the embodiment of all that has been violently excluded—political injustice, silenced voices, failed revolutions, and forgotten lives [11]. Within Indian literature, this conceptualization becomes crucial, as the ghost often emerges not to terrify but to remind—to unsettle the comfort of nationalist narratives, modern rationalism, or socio-religious conformity.

Building on Derrida's framework, Avery F. Gordon in Ghostly Matters (1997) expands the concept of haunting from philosophical speculation to lived sociopolitical reality. She views haunting as a "social phenomenon," which arises when repressed structures of violence, injustice, and inequality return as persistent, ghostly reminders of what society has attempted to forget or disown [12]. For Gordon, haunting signifies a mode of knowledge—a way of knowing what has been systematically disavowed. She argues that the ghost is not merely a symptom but a signal: a "something-to-be-done", an unresolved task tied to historical and moral accountability [12]. In Indian literary contexts, especially those dealing with Partition, caste atrocities, gender violence, or communalism, ghosts signify the materialization of submerged trauma. They force characters and readers alike to confront the absences embedded in their cultural memory. These ghosts are often not exorcised but are deliberately allowed to linger—as reminders of betrayal, loss, or injustice that remain unaddressed by the state or society.

Achille Mbembe, in On the Postcolony (2001), furthers this conversation by theorizing power in postcolonial societies as inherently spectral. He proposes that postcolonial states are haunted by colonial formations—administrative, epistemic, and symbolic—that persist even after formal independence [13]. These formations are not always visible but operate like ghosts: invisibly shaping the contours of governance, public memory, and subjectivity. In the Indian context, one sees this spectrality in literature that revisits colonial trauma, such as narratives set in haunted cantonments, ruined palaces, or decaying bungalows—all spaces where empire once resided and from where it was never entirely exorcised. The ghost in these texts functions as a critique of unfinished decolonization and the failures of post-independence regimes to rupture the deep structures of oppression, such as caste, patriarchy, and communal hatred. The literary specter thus acts as a cipher for political critique, bearing witness to "that which refuses to die" in the nation's psyche.

Moreover, spectrality also provides an interpretive framework for understanding

intergenerational trauma, particularly through **Marianne Hirsch's** theory of postmemory. Hirsch explains how descendants of trauma survivors—such as children or grandchildren of Partition refugees—inherit the emotional and psychological residues of events they did not directly experience [14]. In Indian literature, this becomes apparent in second-generation narratives where authors reconstruct the unspeakable through fragmented memories, photographs, silences, and ghost stories. The ghost, here, becomes a bridge between generations—a haunting presence that connects the "unsaid" of the older generation with the inherited grief of the younger. These spectral encounters often highlight the gaps in memory transmission, pointing to the inadequacy of language and history in capturing the full affective weight of trauma. Literature, through its imaginative capacity, allows for the creation of such ghostly mediations.

Importantly, hauntology and spectrality also question the **hegemony of reason, modernity, and positivist history**. By privileging the spectral, literature opens a space for non-linear, affective, and pluralist modes of knowing—modes often dismissed by colonial modernity as irrational or superstitious. In this sense, the Indian ghost story does not only invoke Derrida or Gordon but resonates with pre-modern Indian epistemologies that accept the cyclical nature of time, karmic retribution, and ancestral return. These cultural logics further enrich the ghost's symbolic significance, offering alternatives to Western secularism and modernist history. In Dalit narratives, for instance, the ghost may embody the persistence of untouchability; in feminist writings, it may express the return of the violated woman, a churel or preta, demanding justice in death that she was denied in life. Across these texts, the spectral becomes an agent of rupture—disrupting sanitized versions of the past, opening space for marginalized voices, and exposing the ideological work of forgetting.

3. Ghosts and Colonial Memory in Rabindranath Tagore and Ruskin Bond

The colonial past of India is not merely documented in historical records—it lingers spectrally in literary texts, particularly through ghost narratives that embody the cultural, psychological, and spatial remnants of empire. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Ruskin Bond, though writing in different time periods and styles, engage with the supernatural to evoke colonial memory and interrogate the layered relationship between space, history, and identity. Their ghost stories are not rooted in horror alone but serve as meditative reflections on India's encounter with imperial rule, the disintegration of indigenous sovereignty, and the long shadows of colonial modernity.

3.1 Tagore's "The Hungry Stones" (1895)

Rabindranath Tagore's The Hungry Stones (Kshudhita Pashan, 1895) is a masterful interplay of memory, colonial critique, and the supernatural, framed within a richly atmospheric tale set along the banks of the Narmada River. The protagonist—a colonial-era tax collector—encounters a decrepit Mughal palace that appears abandoned but teems with spectral life, drawing him into a world of ghostly enchantment. These phantoms, remnants of a bygone Islamic courtly culture, do not terrify in the conventional Gothic sense; rather, they seduce with traces of beauty, ritual, music, and sensuality that once animated the structure. Tagore, in this sense, transforms the ghost story into a philosophical meditation on the persistence of cultural memory and the melancholia of civilizational decline. The haunted palace is not merely a setting—it becomes a mnemonic archive, where the echoes of a pre-colonial Indo-Islamic world challenge the rational, linear temporality imposed by colonial governance. By employing the supernatural, Tagore subtly critiques the dominant imperial historiography that depicted the Islamic past as decadent and stagnant, legitimizing the British Raj as a force of enlightened modernity. In contrast, the story complicates this narrative of decline by suggesting that the past is not dead but continues to live in architectural ruins and emotional residues. The protagonist's gradual psychological unraveling under the palace's spell reflects his inner conflict—a crisis of identity and belonging in the sterile logic of colonial bureaucracy. This

alienation is exacerbated by his exposure to the aesthetic and spiritual depths of the spectral world, which offers an experience far richer than the disenchanted colonial present. In doing so, Tagore anticipates what later theorists like Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida would articulate—the idea that history is not a forward-moving continuum but a palimpsest of ruptures, losses, and returns. The supernatural here serves as a counter-historical force: it disrupts, disturbs, and ultimately resists colonial amnesia by animating what official narratives seek to suppress. Furthermore, the palace functions as what Pierre Nora might call a lieu de mémoire—a site of memory where history and imagination converge. Tagore's prose, laden with opulent imagery and lyrical cadence, does not merely tell a ghost story; it compels the reader to reckon with the unresolved hauntings of empire, lost civilizations, and the violence of erasure. In this way, The Hungry Stones is not only an early example of supernatural fiction in Indian literature, but also a politically charged narrative that reclaims the spectral as a site of cultural resistance and historical re-imagination.

3.2 Ruskin Bond's Ghost Stories

Unlike the lush philosophical and historical texture found in Tagore's supernatural fiction, Ruskin Bond's ghost stories are deceptively simple, written in a tone of childlike clarity and gentle suspense. Yet beneath this surface lies a deep engagement with the afterlives of colonialism and the spectral remains of empire. Set in the misty colonial hill stations of Mussoorie, Shimla, and Dehradun—spaces that once served as summer retreats and administrative enclaves for the British elite—Bond's stories evoke a geography already layered with historical displacement. These landscapes, saturated with fog, silence, and shadow, become haunted not only by ghosts but by the memory of empire itself. Bond's ghosts, often more sad than frightening, are symbolic of people and places dislodged by the passage of history: Anglo-Indians grappling with identity, former colonials unmoored from purpose, and forgotten women suspended in emotional limbo. In many ways, these spectral figures embody what Homi Bhabha might term the "unhomely"—a condition of cultural dislocation that arises when private and public histories collapse into one another.

In "A Face in the Dark" (Bond, Collected Short Stories, 2006, pp. 57–60), the ghost of a faceless child encountered by a British schoolteacher on a fog-laden path becomes a potent symbol of the erasure of personal identity in postcolonial India. The facelessness itself can be read as a metaphor for a lost or denied narrative—perhaps of the colonial subject, the forgotten student, or even of the teacher himself, a symbol of colonial authority rendered helpless by the unknowable. The inability of the teacher to make sense of the event reflects the broader epistemological crisis faced by the imperial mindset when confronted with the irrational, the indigenous, and the spectral. Similarly, in "The Haunted Bungalow" (Bond, Ghost Stories from the Raj, 1997, pp. 92–97), the spirits that linger in an abandoned colonial residence represent the enduring emotional imprints of empire—British officers who once lived there, their domestic rituals, their fears and longings, now echoing in empty halls. These ghosts do not scream or threaten; they drift, murmur, and remember, caught between time periods and unclaimed legacies. Bond's brilliance lies in his ability to present colonial memory as lived, intimate, and unresolved. The colonial past in his work is not relegated to history books; it continues to flicker in half-seen shadows and forgotten paths, in vacant rooms and unspoken names. His stories also express the cultural alienation of the Anglo-Indian community, positioned ambiguously between colonizer and colonized. Figures such as Miss Fairchild or Colonel Browning reappear as gentle hauntings of a world that once was but no longer knows its place. In doing so, Bond's fiction critiques the silence of postcolonial India around the emotional and psychological remnants of colonialism. His ghost stories remind readers that while the British may have physically departed, the structures of feeling they left behind—melancholy, nostalgia, confusion—continue to dwell in the margins. Thus, Bond's supernatural is not merely a device of horror, but a quiet, persistent commentary on history's refusal to be

forgotten.

4. Partition and the Specter of National Trauma

The Partition of India in 1947 was not just a political event—it was a moment of deep human suffering. Along with the drawing of new borders between India and Pakistan, came violence, fear, the loss of loved ones, and the uprooting of millions of people. People were forced to leave their homes, communities were broken apart, and many carried this pain for the rest of their lives. Even decades later, this trauma has not been forgotten. It lives on in stories, memories, and silence—almost like a **ghost that never went away**. Literature about Partition often deals with this lingering pain through **ghost-like figures or feelings**, even if no actual ghost appears. Writers like **Bhisham Sahni** and **Saadat Hasan Manto** show that Partition still "haunts" the minds and emotions of those who lived through it, and even their children and grandchildren.

4.1 "Tamas" by Bhisham Sahni: Bhisham Sahni's Tamas (1974) stands as one of the most evocative literary responses to the trauma of Partition, and though it does not contain literal ghosts, the novel is profoundly haunted—by violence, memory, and loss. The title itself, meaning "darkness," symbolizes not only the blackout of electricity that occurs in the novel's opening, but also the metaphorical darkness that descends upon society when reason is eclipsed by hatred and fear. The story begins with an act that seems simple but is steeped in sinister manipulation: Nathu, a Dalit sweeper, is asked to kill a pig by a man claiming it's for veterinary purposes. Unbeknownst to him, the pig's carcass is used to desecrate a mosque, triggering a series of violent Hindu-Muslim riots. Nathu's ignorance of the larger political motives behind his action symbolizes the helplessness of common people caught in the web of communal politics. What makes Tamas so compelling is the way it presents trauma not as a historical event confined to the past, but as something that lingers, infecting both individuals and the collective conscience. The real ghost in Tamas is not a specter but the inescapable memory of what happened—of betrayals, killings, and moments of silence when words failed. These memories haunt the characters long after the violence subsides. For instance, Richard, the British deputy commissioner, is tormented by his inability to understand or control the chaos. Lalaji, an elderly Congress worker, breaks down not because of personal loss, but because of the overwhelming grief of witnessing his country's moral collapse. The silence of women in the novel—some of whom are raped, abducted, or forced to flee—also becomes a ghostly presence, a haunting absence in the narrative that points to the erasure of female suffering in official histories. When Tamas was adapted into a television series in 1988 by Govind Nihalani, the haunting quality of the narrative was accentuated through visual aesthetics. Dim lighting, long pauses, and ambient silence created a spectral atmosphere, where trauma was suggested not through screams or gore, but through stillness, hesitation, and unspeakable grief. Survivors of Partition, as documented in oral histories and memoirs, have often spoken of phantom trains filled with corpses, cries heard in abandoned neighborhoods, and dreams that never fade. Tamas captures this psychic residue—the idea that some experiences are so painful they resist closure. They continue to exist as "specters" within families, towns, and even national identity. Through its emotionally charged narrative, Tamas shows that the aftermath of Partition is not just a political reality but a psychological haunting. It reflects how memory, especially of violence that remains unresolved or unacknowledged, can function like a ghost—silent, pervasive, and deeply unsettling. Thus, while Tamas may not be a ghost story in the conventional sense, it is arguably one of the most powerful examples of spectral trauma in Indian literature.

4.2 Short Stories by Saadat Hasan Manto: Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the most fearless and compassionate chroniclers of Partition, did not often rely on supernatural ghosts in his stories—because, as his narratives suggest, the people who lived through Partition often became ghost-like themselves. His characters are frequently alive yet hollow, breathing yet detached,

shadows of who they once were. In Toba Tek Singh (1955), perhaps his most iconic tale, the story is set in a mental asylum where India and Pakistan decide to exchange even the mentally ill across the new borders. The protagonist, Bishan Singh, is a Sikh patient who cannot understand the logic of this division. He repeats the name of his hometown—Toba Tek Singh—unable to comprehend whether it now belongs to India or Pakistan. In the haunting final image, Bishan Singh collapses and dies in "no man's land"—between the two nations. His lifeless body becomes a metaphorical ghost, representing the people displaced by politics and cut off from their homes, identities, and histories. His is a spectral presence that demands recognition in both nations' memories yet fits into neither.

Another devastating story by Manto, Khol Do (Open It), presents an even more chilling form of haunting. A desperate father searches for his daughter Sakina, lost in the chaos of communal violence. When he finally finds her in a hospital bed, alive but unresponsive, the doctor casually orders "Khol do" to open a window, and Sakina—without emotion—loosens her clothes. This moment reveals that she has been raped so many times that her body responds mechanically to male command. While there is no ghost in the traditional sense, Sakina has become a living phantom: psychologically shattered, emotionally numbed, and no longer fully present in her own body. Her silence and detachment echo Avery Gordon's concept of the ghost as a figure representing unresolved social violence and those erased from dominant historical narratives [12]. Manto's characters, whether institutionalized, silenced, or emotionally destroyed, are all caught in a liminal space. They exist between sanity and madness, life and death, speech and silence. Through them, Manto critiques the political absurdity and moral collapse of Partition. These are not ghosts with white shrouds or eerie whispers, but survivors whose lives have been fractured so violently that they seem to live in the shadow of themselves. Manto's writing insists that the violence of Partition did not end with physical deaths; it lingered on in haunted minds and grieving bodies. His stories serve as ghost stories of a different kind—where memory, trauma, and injustice haunt not only individuals but entire societies. In this way, Manto's work offers a haunting ethical reminder: until these silenced voices are heard and mourned, history remains incomplete.

5. Caste, Gender, and the Subaltern Ghost

Ghosts in Indian literature often symbolize suppressed lives—those silenced by caste discrimination or patriarchal violence. In many **Dalit and feminist narratives**, such specters are not meant to terrify but to **bear witness**, **demand justice**, and preserve memory. Below are powerful examples from contemporary Indian literature.

5.1 Dalit Ghost Narratives

Dalit literature often tells the stories of those who have been **systematically excluded from power, education, justice, and dignity**. These narratives speak from the margins and often use **ghostly images or absences** to convey what cannot be said directly. The ghost in Dalit writing does not always appear as a supernatural figure—it can also be a **symbol of how Dalit lives have been ignored, erased, or forgotten** by dominant society. The haunting in these texts is deeply **social and political**, revealing truths that have been buried by caste structures. Below are three examples where **ghosts or ghost-like presences** emerge from trauma, silence, and injustice.

a) *The Exercise Book* **(translated from Tamil)**

In this story, the death of a young Dalit schoolboy is treated with cold indifference by his upper-caste teachers. His absence is never officially acknowledged. There is no ceremony, no mourning, and no memory in the official school record. But something changes after his death: at night, the **school library becomes a haunted space**. The sound of pages turning, despite the room being empty, hints at the boy's **invisible return**. It's as though his spirit has come back to claim what he was denied—a place among books, knowledge, and learning. The ghost here is a **powerful metaphor** for the denied dreams of Dalit children—those who wanted to read

and write but were never given the chance. He doesn't scare or harm, but his presence makes people uncomfortable. It reminds the school authorities of **their silence, their complicity**, and the life that was erased without a name. The story asks a painful question: *If society does not see your life, does your ghost still count? "Pages of Silence"* (pp. 45–48)

The library, once a place of knowledge, becomes a **site of haunting and guilt**. It reflects the idea that even when Dalits are denied visibility in life, **they return through memory and resistance** to demand justice in death.

b) Bama's *Karukku* (1992)

Bama's *Karukku* is not a ghost story in the traditional sense, but it is filled with moments where she describes feeling **invisible, silenced, and disconnected** from her environment—as if she were a ghost in her own life. In school, she writes about being treated with disdain by her teachers and classmates simply because she was Dalit. One striking sentence reads:

"I felt that I was invisible, as if I had no right to exist."

This is not merely an emotional statement—it is a reflection of how **caste violence removes Dalit people from social recognition**. To feel invisible is to feel **like a ghost while still alive**. Bama uses this language of disappearance and silence to express what many Dalits experience daily: being spoken about, but not spoken to; being seen, but never acknowledged as fully human. The haunting in *Karukku* is not about spirits of the dead, but about the **haunting of memory and experience**. Bama, as a Dalit woman, is haunted by the wounds of discrimination, by the betrayal of institutions that were supposed to protect and educate her, and by the silent pain carried across generations. Her narrative shows how **the social structure itself becomes a ghost-producing machine**, constantly creating people who are made to feel invisible. (P 30–31) (Tamil original)

c) Imayam's *Pethavan* (*The Begetter*), 2010

In *Pethavan*, Imayam tells the story of a Dalit girl who falls in love with an upper-caste boy. Their relationship, though based on mutual affection, is never accepted by society. The boy eventually abandons her under pressure from his family and community. The girl, heartbroken and humiliated, **dies by suicide**. Her body is physically buried, but **her presence never leaves the story**. Throughout the novel, people in the village continue to talk about her. Her **absence is louder than her life ever was**. Every conversation about caste, marriage, and honour brings her memory back—making her a **symbolic ghost** who keeps returning. She does not walk through walls or whisper in dreams, but her **silence becomes a loud accusation**. The reader feels her pain in every dialogue and is forced to ask: *Why was she abandoned? Why was her love considered shameful?* Her "ghost" is not one of revenge, but of **social shame**. The haunting in *Pethavan* reflects how caste not only divides lovers, but also destroys futures, and how the burden of that violence **stays in the community's memory**—even when people try to move on. Her death becomes a mirror in which the village sees its own guilt and cowardice. (P 78–80)

5.2 Female Specters in Folk and Modern Fiction

In Indian culture, the image of the female ghost has long occupied a central role in folklore, oral tradition, and contemporary literature. From the vengeful churel to the repressed, spectral figures in modern feminist writing, female ghosts represent the unheard cries of women, especially those subjected to violence, abandonment, or forced silence. Unlike male ghosts, who are often portrayed as protectors or wanderers, female ghosts frequently appear as victims-turned-avengers. In modern literary interpretations, these ghosts are not just supernatural beings but symbols of protest—figures who refuse to accept the injustice done to them in life and return to demand recognition and voice. Below are three examples that demonstrate the evolution of this ghostly figure—from folklore to feminist fiction.

a) Churel in North Indian Folklore

The churel, also known in some regions as daayan, is one of the most recognizable female

ghosts in Indian folklore. Traditionally, she is portrayed as a woman who dies during childbirth, menstruation, or due to sexual violence, particularly if she was wronged by her husband or family. Her most distinct features are her backward-facing feet, disheveled hair, and white or green sari. She is said to wait outside homes at night, especially those of men who have mistreated women. In earlier stories, the churel was often feared and demonized. However, modern feminist readings have reinterpreted her as a figure of resistance. Her haunting is not random; she targets those who were responsible for her suffering. In this reading, the churel's ghost becomes a metaphor for female rage—the anger of generations of women who died unheard, unprotected, and shamed. For instance, in urban legend adaptations told in modern cities and villages alike, lime-green saris and anklets at midnight symbolize the return of the churel. She is no longer a monster, but a silent force demanding justice. Feminist critics have observed that her haunting is often gendered protest against patriarchy—the ghostly voice of women excluded from rituals, religion, and inheritance. Cultural Note: In some oral stories, women are told, "Be careful what you say while pregnant, or you'll become a churel." This reflects how even folklore disciplines female bodies and behavior—and how the churel resists that control, reclaiming power in death.

b) Ismat Chughtai's Lihaaf (The Quilt, 1942)

Ismat Chughtai's groundbreaking short story Lihaaf is not a ghost story in the traditional sense, but it is full of spectral tension and haunting silence. Set in an upper-class Muslim household, the story is told from the perspective of a young girl observing her Begum Jaan, who is trapped in a loveless marriage. In the absence of affection from her husband, Begum finds intimacy with her female servant, Rabbu. The quilt (lihaaf) becomes a site of haunting—the narrator describes it moving strangely at night, casting shadows and whispering sighs. She hears "silent footsteps" and senses a presence in the room, though she sees nothing directly. These descriptions create a ghostly atmosphere, but the real haunting lies in social repression: female desire, queer love, and loneliness—all hidden beneath the metaphorical and literal quilt. Chughtai's use of gothic elements—a dimly lit room, unexplained movements, fearful whispers—mirrors the techniques of ghost storytelling. Yet the "ghost" is the specter of repressed sexuality, the forbidden love that society refuses to acknowledge. What is "haunting" in Lihaaf is not a spirit but the absence of freedom—the psychological burden of women forced into silence about their bodies and desires. (Lifting the Veil, pp. 14–18)

As Chughtai wrote in her defense during an obscenity trial in 1944:

"The story is not about sex. It is about the loneliness of a woman, locked in the golden cage of patriarchy."

Thus, Lihaaf becomes a powerful feminist ghost story—where what haunts the room is everything society refuses to see.

c) Indira Goswami's The Shadow of Kamakhya (2001)

(Shadow of Kamakhya, pp. 95–104)

In this collection of stories set in Assam, Indira Goswami (also known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami) explores spiritual possession, temple rituals, and the suffering of women—especially those marginalized by society. The title story, The Shadow of Kamakhya, revolves around women believed to be possessed by spirits, especially near the famous Kamakhya temple, known for its worship of the mother goddess and female energy. In the story, a young woman is labeled as "possessed," and exorcists are called to remove the spirit from her body. However, Goswami carefully suggests that what is seen as spiritual possession may actually be a cover for real, unspoken trauma—most likely sexual abuse, mental health issues, or emotional repression. When the spirit is exorcised, the woman does not get better—she becomes more silent. The exorcism, in fact, erases her story. Here, the "ghost" is symbolic—it represents the trauma that cannot be spoken in religious or social settings. Goswami critiques how society deals with such pain: not by listening, but by silencing. The haunting voice in the woman is not

demonic—it is a cry for help that no one wants to hear. This story challenges the reader to ask: What if possession is not spiritual, but social? What if the ghost is just a woman society refuses to understand?

Through this lens, Goswami turns haunting into resistance—the woman's cry becomes a political voice, and the act of haunting becomes a refusal to be erased.

6. The Postcolonial Supernatural: Amitav Ghosh's "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" and Beyond

Amitav Ghosh, one of India's most celebrated postcolonial writers, uses ghosts not merely as supernatural entities, but as symbols of memory, trauma, and resistance. In his works, haunting is not about mysterious shadows or frightening specters—it is about the unresolved past returning to the present. His writing brings together the real and the imagined, history and memory, science and myth, showing how the postcolonial world is filled with invisible wounds that refuse to disappear. Whether in the form of literal ghosts, cultural myths, or suppressed voices, Ghosh uses the supernatural as a literary strategy to confront historical violence and colonial erasure.

6.1 "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi" (1995)

In this powerful nonfiction essay, first published in The New Yorker in 1995 and later included in The Imam and the Indian, Amitav Ghosh recounts his experience of witnessing the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. What makes the essay remarkable is that Ghosh does not focus on graphic violence alone; instead, he focuses on the moral failure of society, particularly the silence of educated, liberal middle-class citizens who watched the violence unfold and did nothing.

Ghosh writes:

"The city had been possessed… It was as though something had passed over us, like a shadow or a ghost."

Here, the "ghosts" are not only the dead—they are the collective shame and guilt of a society that failed to protect its own people. These ghosts continue to haunt the author, not in dreams, but in moments of everyday life when he is reminded of his inaction. The haunting is deeply ethical and psychological. It raises uncomfortable questions: What does it mean to be a bystander to violence? Can silence be as dangerous as action? Through this narrative, Ghosh blurs the line between metaphorical haunting and emotional reality. The essay becomes a meditation on memory and responsibility, showing how trauma does not belong only to the victims, but also to the witnesses, who carry the burden of inaction. In a broader postcolonial sense, the essay suggests that modern India is haunted by its own failures—its history of communalism, its betrayal of secular values, and its continued silencing of minority voices.

6.2 The Calcutta Chromosome (1995)

In this postmodern novel, Ghosh shifts from personal memoir to speculative fiction. The Calcutta Chromosome blends elements of science, colonial history, myth, and ghostly presences to explore the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems during the British Raj. The novel follows Antar, a future-dwelling researcher in New York, who uncovers the mysterious disappearance of Murugan, a man obsessed with Ronald Ross—the British scientist who won the Nobel Prize for discovering the malaria parasite. But Ghosh turns this historical narrative on its head. He introduces a secret, alternative version of events, where Indian subalterns (low-status people, particularly women and servants) actually held the key to malaria's secrets through mystical and intuitive methods—but allowed the British to take credit for it. The ghostly presence in the novel lies in the way history has been manipulated, and how the real contributors have been erased. One of the most haunting characters is Mangala, a low-caste woman and healer, who may have possessed knowledge of genetic transmission long before Western science. She is almost mythic—sometimes appearing, sometimes vanishing—like a spectral figure who resists being recorded or explained. She is the ghost of a forgotten history,

a symbol of erased female agency and indigenous wisdom. Here, Ghosh uses the supernatural not to escape reality, but to challenge the colonial version of truth. The novel suggests that colonial science did not just bring modern knowledge—it also silenced traditional knowledge and voices. Through haunting, Ghosh imagines a different possibility: that the subalterns manipulated colonial science from the shadows, leaving behind clues for future generations.

7. Contemporary Horror and Popular Literature

Contemporary Indian horror fiction has undergone a marked transformation, evolving from its mythic, oral, and folkloric roots into a complex genre that reflects the sociocultural anxieties of modern India. While traditional ghost stories—often rooted in village legends and religious fears—focused on haunted banyan trees, vengeful spirits, or cursed temples, today's horror literature has re-situated the supernatural within urban, psychological, and even digital contexts. Writers such as Neil D'Silva, K. Hari Kumar, Rasana Atreya, and emerging voices in regional horror are using ghosts not only to frighten but to expose societal decay, challenge cultural taboos, and memorialize personal and collective trauma.

Neil D'Silva's Maya's New Husband (2015), for instance, is a chilling tale of horror rooted in tantra and occult traditions, but its true terror lies in the domestic sphere, where the heroine is gaslighted, manipulated, and ultimately betrayed. The supernatural here functions as a metaphor for the hidden violence within arranged marriages and the blind faith in patriarchal institutions. D'Silva's other works, such as Haunted: Real-Life Encounters (2018), blend first-person narratives with folklore and contemporary incidents to demonstrate how urban life remains susceptible to ancestral fears and spectral returns. Similarly, India's Most Haunted (2019) by K. Hari Kumar compiles twenty-one horror stories across Indian cities and towns, drawing upon urban legends, regional myths, and psychological horror. In his story "The Mannequin," a seemingly harmless shopping mall mannequin channels a murdered girl's soul, revealing gendered violence hidden behind consumer culture and objectification. Other stories unfold in railway stations, hospitals, and hostels—evoking the uncanny within everyday, overfamiliar spaces. These narratives show how the supernatural is no longer confined to the margins or rural imagination; it is now deeply intertwined with modernity, bureaucracy, class dynamics, and technology. What makes contemporary Indian horror distinct is its embrace of hybrid forms—blending the Gothic, the paranormal, psychological realism, and sociopolitical allegory. In this context, the churel, a vengeful female spirit with twisted feet, becomes more than a figure of dread; she transforms into a feminist icon. Writers use the churel, daayan, or preta to voice the unresolved pain of widows, domestic violence survivors, and women denied agency. Through the spectral, such narratives reframe traditional misogynistic archetypes into avatars of justice and rage. For example, recent horror web series and novels depict these women as reclaiming the spaces—homes, streets, workplaces—that once confined them. The rise of digital horror is another significant trend. Stories involving haunted emails, cursed TikTok filters, ghostly voice notes on WhatsApp, or AI-generated avatars gone rogue signal a shift in how Indian youth experience fear—via screens, surveillance, and the blurring of physical and virtual boundaries. This not only mirrors growing technophobia but also speaks to a loss of intimacy, fragmented identities, and digital grief—especially among urban millennials and Gen Z. The ghost, once tied to ancestral curses, now becomes a cyber-residue of guilt, voyeurism, or unprocessed trauma. Apps become the new spirit mediums; surveillance becomes a form of haunting.

Moreover, many of these contemporary horror tales incorporate intergenerational trauma. Ghosts are often past selves, forgotten ancestors, or metaphors for inherited suffering—echoing Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, where later generations absorb the unspoken pain of earlier ones. The stories highlight how economic liberalization, urban displacement, migration, and mental illness have created new ghosts—lonely parents, failed dreams, isolated students—who populate the haunted terrain of modern India. In essence, contemporary Indian

horror fiction, whether written in English or translated from regional languages, does not aim merely to terrify. Instead, it engages with the hauntological function of literature, as defined by Jacques Derrida, where the ghost represents the return of the suppressed, the marginalized, and the forgotten. By giving form to these phantoms, authors challenge the silence around caste violence, abuse, ecological crisis, and more. The genre has thus become a powerful narrative weapon—a mirror held to India's sociopolitical fractures. The ghost today is not only a presence from the past but also a warning from the future, urging readers to reckon with what still haunts India's modern consciousness.

8. Conclusion

In Indian literature, ghosts serve not merely as eerie plot devices but as profound symbolic conduits through which history, memory, and resistance flow. Far beyond the walls of haunted mansions or forgotten temples, these spectral figures emerge from the fissures of national trauma, colonial legacy, caste-based violence, gender oppression, and collective silence. Indian writers use the ghost as a narrative strategy to speak of that which has been deliberately excluded from dominant historiographies—rendering the supernatural a powerful vehicle of counter-memory. Whether it is the spectral palaces of Tagore's The Hungry Stones, the haunted Anglo-Indian figures in Ruskin Bond's hill stations, or the digital spirits in contemporary horror fiction, these ghosts interrupt linear, empirical modes of history and force recognition of the unresolved. They represent not only the dead but the dispossessed, the disappeared, and the denied—demanding visibility and acknowledgment in cultural consciousness. Spectral narratives thus function as alternative archives, where the unspeakable becomes articulable and where absence is transformed into a potent presence. In challenging Enlightenment rationality and state-sanctioned truths, these literary hauntings evoke what Jacques Derrida terms hauntology—a return of the repressed that unsettles temporal and epistemic certainty. Indian ghost stories, in this light, become sites of ethical engagement, compelling readers to reckon with historical violence and to reimagine justice, empathy, and remembrance. In making the invisible visible, the supernatural in Indian literature transcends fear and becomes a radical act of witnessing.

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