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"Space Forms Where No Space Was" – A Study of Spectrality, Liminality, and Cultural Haunting through the Ghost Narrator in Amit Majmudar's *Partitions*

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Abstract: This paper explains the concepts of spectrality, cultural haunting, and liminality as manifested through the ghost narrator in the novel *Partitions* by Amit Majmudar. The story is set against the backdrop of a monumental event in geopolitical history - the Partition of India, which led to a mass exodus in the history of human civilization and claimed the lives and homes of millions of people. The spectral figure of the ghost is employed to explore the immediate and enduring impact of the partition of India and its resulting historical trauma on cultural memory and identity. Drawing on the concept of Hauntology by Derrida, this study argues that the spectral presence of the ghost narrator acts as a witness to the event of partition as it unfolds in real-time thereby also foreshadowing the lasting impact the catastrophe will have on the collective consciousness. The liminal existence of the ghost narrator straddling the boundaries of life and death, present and past, and also presence and absence spotlights the ambivalent and transitional nature of memory. Through the analysis of the narrator as a liminal specter and spectator who experiences and transmits the memory of Partition, the paper throws light on the author's attempt at capturing the cultural haunting that continues to shape the identity of the people. This paper ultimately tries to position the specter as a vital narrative figure, embodying the spectral and haunting legacies of the Partition which resonate to this day. Thus, the paper justifies Dr. Avishek Parui's theoretical framework that literature acts as a production of possibilities, where matter and metaphor converge to produce persistent echoes of cultural memory.

Index Terms: Cultural Haunting, Liminality, Memory, Partition, Spectrality.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."
-William Faulkner

Hauntology is a term first used by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in 1993 in his book *Specters of Marx*. Derrida replaced the word Hauntology for its near-homonym ontology, to represent something that haunts the present from the past in the context of history and memory. Spectrality is a crucial aspect of hauntology which refers to the presence of ghosts or specters, defined by Derrida as
"the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ("to be or not to be," in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity" (Derrida 12).

As Derrida explains, spectrality is seen as a tension between presence and absence, eventually blurring the line between the two. In this context, Derrida refers to the ghost of Hamlet's father, persuading him to kill his stepfather, representing the return of the repressed past to shape the present.

The term "liminality" was first coined by the twentieth-century folklorist Van Gennep in his book *Rites of Passage* in 1909 which means "threshold." The term comes from the Latin word "Limen" which signifies a state of transition, a place between two different stages or places or rites of passage. During this stage of liminality, the temporal and spatial quality and identity of the corresponding is in a constant state of flux.

Amit Majmudar is an American novelist and poet, and the first poet laureate of Ohio. He is a diagnostic nuclear radiologist by profession who juggles between an exemplary medical and literary career. In his debut novel, *Partitions*, he provides a fictionalised account of the Partition of India, one of the most significant and monumental events in the history of South Asia which displaced millions of lives across the imaginary border. The novel weaves together the lives of four victims of the geopolitical upheaval and central to this narrative is a ghost narrator who watches the unfolding traumatic event from a liminal space between life and death. The narrator is a powerful embodiment of spectrality who witnesses the horrors of partition as it unfolds, a liminal figure, hovering between existence and non-existence. Here, liminality is not just a state of existence for the phantom but a creative force within the narrative.

According to Dr. Avishek Parui, Assistant Professor, at IIT Madras and the Founding Chairperson of the Indian Network of Memory Studies, literature offers a "production of possibilities" (Parui 3). In his book *Culture and the Literary*, Parui explores "how matter (things and events) becomes metaphors (semantic and semiotic codes) which enter the space of memory collectively through a combination of remembering and forgetting" (Parui 4). Parui delves into the complex entanglements of matter, metaphor, and memory represented in literature and performs a scholarly undertaking of reading the same as a representative medium for embedding cultural codes with its components of remembering and forgetting as crucial to the formation of collective memory.

The novel, *Partitions*, employs a ghost narrator as a real-time spectator of the Partition of India who peeps into the experientiality of the individual characters rather than into the political grand narrative of the event, "But if I had a throat, and breath to push through that throat, vocal cords to pinch close and shirr, I know what I would say. I am here" (Majmudar 4). The ghost's initial assertion in the novel, "I am here," testifies to his spectrality, and positions him as a spectral marker. The inability to verbalise his desire stands for his yearning to connect with his family - his twin sons and wife, and the reality of his spectral presence which prevents him from fully participating in the world he once physically inhabited. Here, he becomes a strong metaphor for the horrors of Partition thereby embodying the cultural memory. As Parui argues, "Spectrality is produced as an articulation of absence," the ghost narrator emerges as a spectral figure signifying the losses in both personal and historical terms (Parui 4). His phantom presence symbolises not only the absence of his life but also the loss of lives and homes of millions of people, making him a poignant embodiment of cultural memory and haunting.

The phantom narrator keeps an eye on his twin boys and wife for any potential threat as they try to board one of the trains that would carry them across borders. The spectrality gets more pronounced as the ghost narrator claims " I can sense the danger a few minutes in advance, the way animals sense earthquakes (Majmudar 7). This particular potential to sense danger acts as a metaphor for the collective anxiety of the masses characteristic of the period of Partition. His heightened temporal sensitivity in times of peril is the result of his liminal existence which operates independent of the spatial and temporal confines. Here, he is not just a narrative device but a metaphorical representation of the broader collective trauma that is embedded in every corporeal context. Despite the awareness of the impending danger, the spectre is devoid of agency to interfere and alter the course of his sons' predicament. This signifies the helplessness and the non-agentic witnessing experienced by the victims who were mere bystanders of the brutal bureaucratization and political shifts.

The spectral observer is a widower who marries a Dalit woman, Sonia. At the beginning of the novel, he says that he knows only three people in this vast expanse, but continues to describe his sons and the third person occupies a spectral presence in his memory and narrative. The delayed introduction of the character assumes a hauntological quality as the narrator deliberately withholds information about her. But when her introduction is due, the lexicons conferred upon her by the narrator are "no origin" and "fourth natural creature," positioning her in a liminal space between established social categories (Majmudar 4). While describing her, he remarks, "That is part of why I love her, that quality of being found, of having no origin… Neither Muslim, nor Hindu nor Sikh: some fourth natural creature sprung from the soil (Majmudar 4). She is not fully recognized by him as his sons are and embodies a non-corporeal presence in his life even after his death. She effortlessly becomes a metaphor for cultural haunting as he struggles to assimilate her even into his liminality.

Though there are cues for the existence of a loving relationship between the two, the narrator's straightforward admission, "Of Sonia I was still, in some deep part of myself, ashamed," underscores the blurring of borders between personal attachments and societal norms (Majmudar 16). His prejudices are not merely based on personal recollections but profoundly influenced by the cultural contexts in which they were formed. His use of the word "contamination" to describe his marriage to Sonia is a reflection of his internalisation of the marginalised perspective imposed by his culturally prejudiced family. This predicament further affirms his spectral quality, the incomplete transition from life to death, extending his emotional tethering to the cultural norms that defined his life as a superior being hailing from a Brahmin household and his inability to fully transcend them.

The spectre in the novel becomes a spectator of the events taking place on both sides of the border, his sons and Simran in Pakistan, and Dr. Ibrahim Masud in India, further emphasising his liminal presence and ability to transcend imaginary cartographic boundaries. This observation further accentuates his metaphorical habitation signifying a disruption of conventional spatio-temporal boundaries. Here, the linear progression of time and space are suspended making it a chronotope as theorised by the Russian Philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin. The term "chronotope" was introduced by Bakhtin in his essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*,

"to analyze the spatio-temporal basis of all narratives and other linguistic acts. In Greek, 'chronos' means time and 'topos' place… The initial idea was that the chronotope underlines that time cannot be understood without a spatial dimension. In other words, in a chronotope, time and space are intertwined" (Vaara, Reff Pedersen 596).

In the novel, the chronotope foregrounds the fluidity of time and space embodied by the narrator and also the fragmented nature of the Partition. The bifurcation attempts to create a spatial divide but the shared cultural haunting is pervasive on both sides of the border. Further, the ghost narrator's ability to navigate the space-time continuum highlights the entanglement of the experiences of the present, past, and future of those who lived through the Partition. Ultimately, the ghost's presence across different locations and times mirrors the pervasive nature of the legacy of Partition and its ongoing impact on the identities and memories of the victims.

Ibrahim Masud is a physician from India who must abandon his home and well-established clinical practice because of the eventual communal riots of the separation. Gul Singh is the security guard of his clinic who pleads with him to leave the city, emphasising the violence enacted on Muslim shops, houses, and individuals. Masud's clinic also gets targeted in the communal violence and Gul Singh explains "it is the same all over the city, every Muslim storefront a blown-in cavity of ash, flanked by intact Hindu or Sikh shops" (Majmudar 26). The destruction of the Muslim storefronts creates a spectrality where the absence of the stores symbolises the presence of cultural haunting. The city itself becomes a liminal space where the ashen remains of Muslim shops are skirted by unharmed Hindu and Sikh shops in stark contrast. This coexistence mirrors the fragmented and transitional state of the liminal space which reconfigures the old cordial relationships and identities.

The narrator also listens to Gul Singh recounting the violence enacted on women's bodies. The photographs of mutilated Sikh women's bodies with their perpetrators' names etched on them serve as spectral markers of the haunting corporeal violence,

"Small photographs of Sikh women mutilated in Rawalpindi pass from hand to hand. Their naked backs or foreheads have been scrawled upon like the walls of a demolished gurdwara: Aslam Khan ki biwi. "Wife" of Aslam Khan" (Majmudar 26).

Even after death, these women are not allowed to rest but are transfigured into apparitional reminders of the violence that has taken place. These bodies become metaphorical markers of performative corporeal violence and continue to permeate cultural memory. They are also likened to demolished gurudwaras which portray the blurring of borders between the private and the public spaces as Parui argues "Again the inside-outside, public-private divides are grotesquely inverted…with violence becoming the most recursively enacted social and public performance" (Parui 122). The narrator's spectrality strips him of any power to intervene, thus making him a non-agentic witness of the horrors that unfold. Again, the ghost becomes a metaphor for the helplessness experienced by millions of victims who were subjected to corporeal violence but were unable to escape or prevent the cataclysmic turn of events.

Alok Bhalla, a scholar, translator, and poet argues in his book *Partition Dialogues*, "Victories are celebrated on the bodies of women…when women are attacked, it is not they per se who are targets but the men to whom they belong" (Bhalla 233). This statement substantiates the communal violence played out on women's

bodies through branding and mutilation. The corporeal violence not only does bodily harm to women but sends a message to their male relatives asserting their dominance over the entire community or religion.

Simran is a teenage girl of fifteen years hailing from a pious Sikh family on the Pakistani side of the border. The narrator begins to observe this family as Simran's father and her cousins contemplate the murder of their family women. The dramatic quality of the narrative is heightened as the father asks Simran to prepare milk for herself, her younger sisters, and her mother so that he can poison them to avoid the dishonour of living under the clutches of men from another religion. The narrator becomes a witness to this deliberation as his liminality immobilises him from intervening. The father's decision also positions the women in a liminal space where they are no longer alive or dead until the decision is finally carried out. His observation and realisation of the family's decision to kill the women highlight the spectral presence of fear and honour that govern their choices. The father's contemplation goes like this,

"To live in their shacks: his girls their wives, daily servitude, nightly violence, in a few years not even remembering their true nature. Coming to smell as they smell, eat as they eat. Bearing Muslim sons who would grow up never knowing their grandfather was a Sikh steely as his kangan and proud. Conversion…Die now and they would die Sikhs…this must be the women's glory" (Majmudar 37).

The father regards the cultural erasure of his family women's Sikh identity as worse than death itself lest they are physically violated. This fear of cultural and identity erasure, the perception that they would live and serve in a Muslim household assumes a hauntological quality and terrorises him to the extreme of preferring death for them.

In the novel, the above incidents portray women's bodies as spectral or historical spaces where the horrors of Partition are brutally inscribed. These circumstances of gendered violence echo Dr. Anjali Tripathy's observation in her article titled, *History is a Woman's Body: A Study of Some Partition Narratives*,

"Urvashi Butalia in her critical memoir on partition titled The Other Side of Silence metaphorically titles one of its chapters as "History is a Woman's Body," showing how history was played out on women's bodies during the partition and how women became passive, suffering subjects of history" (Tripathy 80).

In both contexts, women are cast into the molds of passive subjects of history, while their personal spaces are transformed into cultural and historical battlegrounds. Simran eventually escapes her tragic plight and reclaims her agency thereby refusing her imposed martyrdom. She proves the argument that the female body acts "not only as a site of violence but also as a locus of resistance and an agency for the articulation of an independent voice" (Tripathy 83). Thus, women's bodies become powerful metaphorical spaces for communal violence as well as for resistance and agency. As the ghost narrator continues to haunt the narrative, these women's bodies, marked by historical and communal violence continue to haunt the cultural memory. Also, the event of Simran reclaiming agency over her body creates a new space in the narrative, one that defies the expected historical and cultural norms characteristic of partition narratives.

After repressing and digressing for a while, the ghost narrator finally reflects on his marriage to Sonia, a Dalit woman, and the initial reactions of his neighbours who mistook Sonia for a maidservant owing to her dark complexion. The reactions of the neighbouring bricklayers also raise scepticism and highlight the spectral presence of caste-based prejudices that haunts him even after death. The narrator was treated with utmost respect by the Muslim bricklayers for having married a woman from a lower caste, seemingly transcending his cultural boundaries. But the high esteem with which the bricklayers approach the narrator baffles him as he confuses respect for mockery, for a moment. This circumstance creates a tension between his Brahmin origin and his current "tainted" self. Rather than comfort, the respect he garners from them creates a sense of anxiety in him. He says, "I got smiles, salaams, I got a sahib. I was not used to this, being a Brahmin born and a Brahmin still, though happily tainted…Were they mocking me?" (Majmudar 59). He refuses to let go of the persisting sense of superiority arising out of his Brahmin origin when he engages in conversation with the bricklayers. Even in death, his denial to transcend the social hierarchies creates a spectrality for the deeply ingrained social norms. At this juncture, he finds himself in a liminal space where his Brahmin identity is both accepted and challenged. His marriage to Sonia positions him in that complex liminality where he is no longer accepted by his Brahmin neighbours nor he is a friend of the low-caste Muslim bricklayers.

The phantom narrator becomes a witness to another uncanny moment in the life of Simran as she recourses back to her home, the exact site of the planned collective murder from where she narrowly escaped. Her home becomes a spectral marker for death, loss, and haunting memories and she experiences deep psychological and emotional turmoil. She even believes that "she has outlived her own death" (Majmudar 78). In a manner that is almost dreamlike and involuntary, she lies down next to her mother's corpse and covers

herself with the same bloodstained sheets. She experiences a cognitive suspension which Parui describes as "a crisis of embodiment whereby the subject's ownership on their own body apropos of the material reality around them is shattered due to an endless consumption of shock and shudder" (Parui 110). At this juncture, the narrative's hauntological quality is amplified which blurs Simran's position between life and death, relatively positioning her in a liminal space. This moment also spells out her repressed grief and her longing to reunite with her family even in death thereby highlighting the trauma that continues to devastate her. The haunted space almost immobilises her and she sleeps there overnight lying beside her mother's corpse which underscores the inescapability of the cultural haunting of partition. The narrator embodies this inescapability as he witnesses her plight but is condemned to be a helpless bystander unable to intervene. Thus, the narrator again becomes a metaphor for cultural memory which continues to haunt the collective consciousness of those affected by partition.

Another chilling scenario witnessed by the narrator is a conversation between two young Muslim men, Qasim and Saif, about human trafficking during the times of partition which portrays extreme dehumanisation and commodification of the female body. Their conversation goes like this,

"The money these days…is in girls…They are everywhere, left unattended, needing only to be roped and put in a truck. No fathers, no brothers around, and if present, powerless ones…it's a free grab. Certain nawabs are paying three thousand rupees for each piece" (Majmudar 93).

The description of the girls as "pieces" and "free grab" strips them of any humanity and reduces them to mere commodities for trade. This episode transforms the girls into spectral figures, their humanity erased and their identities reduced to mere monetary value. The narrator embodies the cultural haunting of this dehumanisation, and becomes a non-agentic witness, unable to intervene or stop the exploitation. This scene also serves as a powerful metaphor for the gendered violence characteristic of the partition and demonstrates how women's private aspects of life - family, safety, and bodily autonomy are exposed to public violence.

Deturbanning as a form of gendered violence is targeting and subjecting "Sikh men in particular to ritual forms of violence, central among which was the deturbanning and cutting of Sikh men's hair before burning the victims to death or killing them in other ways" (Misri 26). The narrator witnesses one such act of deturbanning and cutting of hair (kes) of a Sikh man called Prabhcharan in a populated square of the city. The scene is marked by profound graphic violence and police brutality. The turban and the long hair sported by Sikh men are not just religious identities but also markers of masculinity and Sikh identity as argued by Deepti Misri in her book, *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence and Representation in Postcolonial India*,

"by tracing the theological significance of uncut hair or of the turban as ritual markers for the male "amritdhari" Sikh body, it becomes possible to reveal these forms as moments of gendered violence and of a violent regendering of Sikh men and masculinity" (Misri 12).

The police-instituted violence enacted on the victim Prabhcharan becomes not just a form of cultural erasure but also an event of emasculation. His body becomes a metaphor for the targeted gendered violence on Sikh men and their identity which reduces "the otherwise strong and agentic male subject" to "an emasculated and paralytic state" (Parui 116). The public nature of this violence surrounded by spectators transforms this scene into a spectacle, where the onlookers are as non-agentic and helpless as the ghost narrator and the victim.

One of the most poignant moments occurs when the ghost narrator witnesses his former home being taken over by another family. The new family is also a victim of the loss, deterritorialization, and displacement of the partition of India who attempt to re-territorialize themselves on the other side of the border. The narrator observes the man of the family as he enters his house and the ghost stands on the doorway blocking him, "I stand in the doorway, the host. A man enters. I let him pass through me - just so he can feel a chill" (Majmudar 115). This situation portrays the futile attempt of the spectre to protect his former home and the new family's unintended erasure of the narrator's history as they remove his portrait from the wall and attempt to repurpose his belongings. This episode also highlights how personal spaces and histories are dramatically invaded and erased in the wake of larger political shifts. The former home becomes a liminal space where the familiar and the unfamiliar are entangled in terms of the narrator's belongings and the new family's presence. The liminality also emphasises the co-existence of the past, present, memory, and erasure. The home, like the ghost, becomes a spectral marker for the cultural haunting and also a palimpsest smeared with the new family's attempt to inscribe their narrative into the space.

The ghost narrator observes his twin boys' encounter with a girl called Maya Rani, belonging to a marginalised community and her dwelling on a rooftop of an abandoned building. The terrace, where she offers refuge to the twin boys, acquires a liminal quality as it acts as a momentary shield from the horrors of Partition.

Maya Rani's existence on the margins of society and her ability to move between rooftops confers her a ghostly quality similar to that of the narrator. The spectrality is heightened by the twin boys' observation of her dark skin which reminds them of their mother Sonia, a reminder of their haunting loss, and a reinforcement of the marginalised positioning of the two. The twin boys' attraction towards Maya Rani stands in stark contrast to the narrator's sudden recollection of Sonia and his attempt to repress her memory. This act of deliberately suppressing her thought, "But I am not looking at Sonia. The thought of her weakens my smile. I must not look there" underscores the narrator's selective forgetting owing to his shameful marriage to a Dalit woman (Parui 97). The narrator's selective forgetting is not only an act of self-preservation from guilt or shame but also a manifestation of the spectral quality of memory. Thus, Sonia's memory becomes a metaphor for the larger cultural amnesia characteristic of partition, reinforcing the idea of spectrality as an "articulation of absence" (Parui 4).

The ghost narrator's final confrontation with his wife Sonia is a moment filled with spectrality, liminality, and cultural haunting. His consistent avoidance of her can be interpreted as an act of spectral repression - a ghost attempting to escape his haunting past. Sonia's kidnapping, captivity, and coercive conversion to Islam spotlights the extreme vulnerability of the marginalised people and their victimisation at the hands of agentic victimisers. Her experiences of being caught between her previous identity and the new forced one thrust her into a liminal space where her cultural and religious identities are brutally blurred. Finally, Sonia's act of committing suicide becomes a profound metaphor for cultural haunting and her final attempt at declining the newly imposed identity. Her death also signifies the end of the ghost narrator's selective forgetting, making him confront the irreversible impact of the Partition of India. This moment highlights the central theme of how spectrality allows the persistence of unresolved traumas of the past to exist, haunt, and shape the present, through the employment of the ghost in the narrative.

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