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Ghosts here and there : spectral resistance and the ethics of ghosts in postcolonial literature

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Summary

Minority and postcolonial literature are fundamentally intertwined with differentiated and complex presences of ghosts in a metaphorical sense. They have a variety of names and forms, appear at specific moments and locations, and are capable of producing divergent acts and effects. In some works of ethnic writers, ghosts are represented as otherworldly manifestations that need to be lived with rather than exorcised, including oppressed groups of people in a society, and the repressed individual and communal histories. In some of these texts, the groups of migrants, workers, and colonized people are linked to ghosts or related figures on the basis of their dispossessed and uncertain status between life and death.

A number of literary critics have explored the specific way the figures of ghosts operate in postcolonial literature, including how a ghost is linked to the identification of specific postcolonial subjects in terms of class, gender, race and sexuality, and how it effectuates a reworking of phenomena previously ignored suppressed and overlooked. Noting the ineluctable encounters between ghosts, memories, and subjectivities in postcolonial and minority literature, the aim of this dissertation is to open up a new way of thinking about the narrative potential of the ghostly in spatial, cultural and ethical dimensions. I don't attempt to entail a statement about the ontological status of the ghosts' being. Rather, I perceive ghosts as a concept as well as a metaphor. In addition, instead of perceiving ghosts in general, I will pay attention to the specificity and diversity of ghosts. I will incorporate a variety of notions of ghosts into my analysis of some postcolonial and minority texts to explore the concepts of "spectral space," "ghost language," and "mediums." I will investigate how these ghost-related concepts or metaphors function to facilitate a deeper understanding of the realms of knowledge, history and

identity, as well as to illuminate a new mode of thinking about the ethics of ghosts—the ethics of living with ghosts and being a ghost.

Overview of the Chapters

Apart from the introduction, this thesis is organized in four chapters:

Chapter I, “Haunting Effects of Spectral Spaces in Postcolonial Literature” explores the connection between the current spectral turn and spatial turn in cultural studies by proposing the term “spectral space” as a haunted place or a space characterized by the diverse nature of ghosts. I assume that “spectral space” can be perceived as a space of heterogeneous temporality, a space of fluidity, and a space of uncanniness. In addition, by performing close readings of portrayals of three kinds of spectral spaces in a selection of postcolonial novels, including Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River*, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, I further examine the narrative and ethical potentials of such spectral spaces: how they question the essentialist notion of binary demarcations between the present and the past, inside and outside, self and other, and propel the characters to re-create their time-bound, place-bound and socially constructed identities. In other words, this chapter asserts that the ghostly or the specter not only functions productively to re-conceptualize the relation between subject and space, but also serves as a useful narrative tool for us to imagine a more communal future.

Chapter 2, “Ghost’s Language and the Re-creation of Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*” directs attention to issues of gender and race in ghost narratives. By investigating the specific ways in which female ghosts manifest themselves to and interact with the living characters in three novels written by three minority woman writers—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Maxine Hong

Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, this chapter elaborates the concept of "ghost language" in relation to minority woman's ethnic and sexual identities. It is worth noting that I use the term "ghost language" in an ironic way. I do not suggest language as a linguistic system that is constructed in a rational and orderly manner. Instead, I argue that "ghost languages" are ways of expression outside a linguistic and cognitive frame and even beyond human knowledge. In this chapter, I elaborate two kinds of "ghost language"—two different ways of haunting, namely the ghost's madness in *Beloved* and its uncanny silence in *The Woman Warrior* and *Obasan*. By focusing on the different ways in which these female ghosts demand attention and justice, I suggest that these three woman writers employ ghosts as a medium not only to reflect on different kinds of individual trauma and social oppression of minority people in North America, but also to reveal the literary ghost's potential of empowerment—its potential of evoking the healing of the traumatic past and the re-creation of identity. In conclusion, ghostly otherness has plural forms and is always open to change. Through their diverse alterity, the literary ghosts will survive from one generation to another, keeping evolving and invoking a re-imagining of a new, communal and transcultural identity in the contemporary racial and patriarchal society.

Chapter 3, "Mediums at Work: Toward a Dialogic World" concerns the ethics toward ghosts—how to approach ghosts or ghostly domains when they are unable to be successfully banished and exorcised. While ghosts haunt the living through various forms of otherness or become intertwined within everyday practices like religious rituals or oral traditions, they are either un-representable or un-assimilable. Since so far it remains unclear how the living relate to or communicate with these unapproachable but irreducible ghosts or spectral aspects, this chapter attempts to explore the ways in which the dialogue is brought about and shaped. By employing the concept of "a

medium” and examining how its literary representation represents a mode of negotiation in two South African Gothic novels—J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, I explore the ethics toward ghosts, that is the process of treating and dealing with ghosts in a respectful and responsible manner. I suggest that there are at least two kinds of mediums—a passive medium in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and an active medium in *The Heart of Redness*. Both of them serve to reveal different situated and specific accounts of the interaction between different domains, including the present and the past, the real and the unreal, modernity and tradition, center and margin, self and other, and so on. Their work of mediating oppositional entities can not only be seen as an effective way in which one approaches his or her internal or external otherness, but also provides us with a model of negotiation by which we can live with ghosts, establish a mutual understanding with them, and create a more dialogic society.

In the concluding chapter, “The Ethics of the Ghostly: A Ghost Medium in J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*,” after examining the concepts of spectral space, ghost language and medium, and their literary representation in the aforementioned postcolonial and minority texts, I assume the ethical and narrative potential of ghosts. By exploring the manifestation of “a ghost medium”—how the protagonist, Michael K, plays the role of an active agent for his status as a living ghost—in J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, I suggest that ghosts are ethical subjects rather than objects of social constructions. They have an ethical power to trigger new modes of thinking and produce ethical subjects. In sum, reflecting on the diversity and specificity of the ghost in postcolonial and minority works, this dissertation aims to re-conceptualize the ghost as a useful metaphor or conceptual tool, which has critical possibilities in reconstructing the ethics of both living with ghosts and surviving as ghosts.