

The Spectral Everyday: Introspecting “Uncanniness” in Short Stories of Satyajit Ray

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Abstract: *In this paper, I explore two aspects of the Freudian uncanny in Satyajit Ray’s stories, namely, the mirror and the double and how the everyday spectres which these produce have a real presence. The appearance of spectres in these texts notifies us that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us. So, in an everyday otherwise besotted by hysterical blindness to apparitions, the reading of Ray’s narratives interlaced with that affect of uncanny, I argue, will give us a chance to reflect on everyday ghosts.*

Keywords: Spectre, everyday, uncanniness, Satyajit Ray, Sigmund Freud, stories.

Introduction

Ghostliness is part of everyday experience and our conception of space. It is also a catalyst of historical events and a lens through which the boundaries of past and present begin to blur. Spectrality has done with visions and the act of looking as much as it has to do with sensing and feeling, especially with the uncanny sensation of alienation and helplessness. This sense of creepiness described by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche”) has been canonized in Western discourse. The adoption of a Western trope to interpret the interplay of the everyday and uncanny in Bengali short stories of Satyajit Ray seems forced. However, I would like to argue that Satyajit treaded into the Freudian trope in many of his short stories harking on the undead to unsettle the world of the living. The everyday in such narratives often ceased to be archetypal. His literary games involving spectrality as a situation became susceptible to many types of ghostly becoming. Often, his texts showed little commitment to either a stable psychogenesis or a naturalistic overtone. Surprisingly the land of the

ordinary, the everyday was where the binaries of normal/pathological, real/imaginary, experience/dream, conscious/unconscious, and life/death were staked.

In this paper, I will explore two aspects of the Freudian uncanny in Ray's stories, namely, the mirror and the double and how the everyday spectres which these produce have a real presence. This I caution is not an exercise in re-enchantment. Rather what I am trying to suggest is that the appearance of spectres notifies us that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us. So, in an everyday otherwise besotted by hysterical blindness to apparitions, the reading of Ray's narratives interlaced with that affect of uncanny will give us a chance to reflect on everyday ghosts. Poised at the liminal zone between presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death, the everyday, I argue, appears spectral. Here, I use the terms "spectre" and "spectrality" not only because these have a more serious, scholarly ring to them, but specifically since these 'evoke an etymological link to visibility and vision, to that which is both *looked at* (as fascinating spectacle) and *looking* (in the sense of examining),' (Blanco and Preen 2013: 2) which suggests their suitability for exploring and illuminating phenomena other than the putative return of the dead. It is the spectacles that the everyday yields which give us the scope to reinterrogate the mundane sense of the everyday as it gets streaked by hues of the uncanny. For purposes of brevity, I have divided the paper into three sections. In the first, I deal with themes of the dread of the mirror and the double in Ray's stories; in the second, explore the oddities that the spectatorship of everyday doubles harks at and in the third, I interpellate the anxieties that these bring to the canvas of the everyday.

The Dread of the Mirror and the Double

The large mirror (with powerful bulbs on its sides) that Nikunja Saha uses in Satyajit Ray's story "Bahurupi" ("Chameleon" 1983) serves his vocation in opacity. Nikunja, incidentally is a make-up artist who practices the art of duping people by 'putting on' other's faces. How does Nikunja contrive these disguises? He 'studies' his face in the mirror, (Ray 2008: 376) and then 'studies' other people in different cityscapes in New Market, in sports stadiums, and in ticket queues of Hindi cinema theatres (ibid: 378). Nikunja trains his eyes for a deliberate and detailed ocularity. However, Ray's short story reaches a climax when Nikunja's mirror seems to impersonate the

image of the notorious fugitive thug Bagha Mondol, (a face that he had unknowingly *put* on) and an intense psycho-drama unfolds. Nikunja hears the scolding horn of the police jeep in his neighbourhood, and rushes to pull off his makeup but lo! The plasticine scar doesn't pull through nor does his wig or his beard. He is seized by terror to find his identity at stake and he faints. Restitution follows as Nikunja's wig and beard come off, thanks to the constable jerking him up to consciousness.

Nikunja is an avid user of the mirror; it is a tool which helps him wear faces; in that precise moment when the mirror trades its neutrality to show *somebody else* (and not himself as Nikunja thinks) mirroring assumes a different role apart from its conventional one. For now, the mirror 'is a machine which throws things into relief far from itself; the mirror endows an object with new proportions, and studies objects through other objects which are not quite the same. The mirror extends the world: but it also seizes, inflates and tears that world. In the mirror, the object is both completed and broken: *dissecta membra*. If the mirror constructs, it is an inversion of the movement of genesis rather than spreading, it breaks. The images emerge from this laceration. Elucidated by these images, the world and its powers appear and disappear disfigured at the very moment when they begin to take shape. Hence the childish fear of the mirror which is the fear of seeing *something else* when it is always the same thing' (Macherey 1978: 134). Are we then not to believe that everyday mirrors too are resilient in their ways?

Nikunja's story is about putting on masks, about masquerades, about concealing and revealing faces. Before looking into many of Nikunja's manipulated impersonations let me shift focus to the common and relatively simple assumptions about masquerading.

- The mask is false and the face underneath it is real.
- The mask reveals a face-concealing as it were the face underneath the mask.
- Masquerading reaffirms an enduring self (or selves) inside you, that does not change even if your masquerades, intentional or helpless, make you look different to others.

For Nikunja, makeup becomes a mask that becomes a face. What appears to the eyes for the sake of appearance are faces that exist for the sake of masks. There is a danger here, of course. What if by wearing a mask we become the mask? This turns into a dramaturgical predicament if Nikunja

were to be identified as a *kusilava*¹ or an entertainer. But here one must distinguish between putting on a mask of what one already is and becoming a mask one does not intend to become. The latter turns out to be Nikunja's case. He puts on makeup that inadvertently overlaps with the face of the fugitive Bagha. The *kusilava* in Nikunja can no longer detach himself from his preface² in Bagha. So, when Nikunja faces the mirror, his face (or a face he presupposes to have), not the mask, transforms to make the mask coincide with his face. Let me try to trail this metamorphosis:

- A persona is created by suppressing a face; it is replaced by an image.
- The recreation is made by annihilation; not surprising perhaps that the Mask often claims a triumph of life over death. To hide is to reveal; to die is to live; the greater the knowledge the greater the secret-these are all themes of the Mask events.
- The mask reverses dissolution by fixity, and then in itself, in the Mask, recombines these contraries in its mirrored image.

Each time Nikunja camouflages his identity before the mirror he seems to be telling himself, 'It's not that I am afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens' (Allen 1983: 106). He wears a mask, *looks* at the "other", and is comforted by palming off the death of personas which are supposedly not his own. His cover-up of Bagha foils this masked sense of ontological security. For the first time in his makeup career, Nikunja possesses a face, not a mask. The peek-a-boo he plays with the mirror is arrested. The mirror also ceases to be a neutral prosthesis.³ It no longer extends its range of function to show Nikunja what he cannot see. So, for the first time also, he is gripped with an almost paranoid fear of being seen by the (pure) Other. To put it in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, 'What does *being seen* mean for me?' he asks. (Sartre 1966: 347) His answer is: 'This indication to run away, which dominates me and carries me along and which *I am* – this I read in the Other's watchful look and in that other look...' (ibid:354). So, we may train our eyes to observe others, we may ape others; yet as spectators to my always othered self, we are witness to specular morbidity, our decay in our own eyes. Rainer Maria Rilke puts it:

And we, spectators always,
everywhere,
looking at, never out of,
everything!
It fills us. We arrange it.

It decays.
We re-arrange it, and
decay ourselves.

(Cited in Weiss: 1986:90)

At this juncture, I would like to spell an anticipatory word about the production of textual spectators. Not all who can see or look into a state of affairs are spectators. A spectator as the Oxford English Dictionary defines is ‘one who watches an event’ (Hornby 2005:1470). He is a consistent observer and not a flippant observer. In the eyes of the text, Nikunja fits in the role of a spectator, more precisely, an intent observer. The situation changes with Ratan Babu in Satyajit Ray’s short story ‘Ratan Babu *aar shei* Lokta’, (“Ratan Babu and That Man” 1976).

Vacationing in Shini Ratanlal is about to return the greeting of a stranger when he realizes in a flash why he has this rather odd feeling. ‘No wonder the stranger’s face seemed familiar. He had seen that face many, many times in his own mirror’ (Ray 2001a: 24). The mirror is once more interpellated to its conventional function of doubling. But there is more to this vision. Ratan Babu dithers to identify the self-resembling stranger. Resemblance inspires fright if such resemblance proceeds from itself despite itself. Thus, ‘the double becomes exteriorized not only as anguish but as a return of anguish. Narcissus is accoutred in anguish. The *Unheimliche* transforms itself into *Unheimliche*’ (Freud *et al.* 1976: 545). The soliloquy entered upon is a theatrical artifice in which the answer precedes and envelops the question. From here, it is a matter, without further delay, of turning the episode involving the stranger into fiction, thus managing to eclipse and obscure it. We get sand thrown in our eyes, no doubt about it. Ratan Babu hesitantly recognizes the stranger. This hesitance, this ‘as-as-if’ character leads him to see the stranger as one he had long known. The verb, “see as” is, however, quite independent of the verb “see”, for two, connected, reasons. First, I can see an object without seeing it as an object. Ratanbabu sees a stranger, but finds in him one who appears very familiar; and second, whereas seeing something which is an object entails that there is something which is an object, seeing something as an object does not entail that there is something which is an object.

Seeing the stranger entails that there is a stranger; seeing the stranger as one’s mirror image does not entail that it is indeed a mirror image. I would like to take this argument further. The text endowed with spectatorship is

not a spectator. Provided subjectivity it comes to be *seen as* a spectator. And what does the spectator see? The image of (an as-if?) death deprives us of all that which life familiarizes us. The resulting defamiliarization is a negation of what we *usually accept as the familiar* by what *we know is the familiar*. Translated in optical language this would mean taking a virtual image to be the real one.

To return to the story, the stranger is one Manilal who shares a common birthday with Ratanlal, both draw the same salaries, both share similar habits, tastes and so on. Manilal is a facsimile copy of Ratanlal, a glass-less mirror image. It is through Manilal that Ratanlal realizes Otto Rank's view that the double is 'an insurance against the destruction of the ego' (Freud 1991: 356), an 'energetic denial of the power of death' (ibid: 356). Initially, Ratanlal is happy to have found a friend in Manilal; but unfortunately, he soon realizes that death, emptiness, and lack of self, are everywhere. So, when one day in the milling crowd in a market a young chap cries out at the Ratanlal-Manilal duo, 'Hey look at Tweedledum and Tweedledee!', Ratan Babu grows conscious. Right at that moment, he falters recognizing a face in a bustling crowd. It is Pancha, the hotel servant; but Ratan Babu cannot bring himself to face Pancha because the remark made him realize that it would be prudent not to be "seen" alongside Manilal Babu. But can Ratan Babu avoid all those questioning glances transfixed at him? The answer is an overwhelming "No" as innumerable pairs of eyes stalk him.

Ratanlal's mindscape appears to be beset with these "phantom eyes" occasioned by the menacing double. Once the dangerous eye-glass passing from the narrator to the unfortunate protagonist leaps upon the eyes of the reader, it exposes to him the peculiarity of the world of doubles. 'What most often manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain. All very sinister, and all very inclusive. The look may be a sound or a movement, perhaps also a taste or a smell, and even a farmhouse' (Sartre 1996: 346). And such looks kill. Sartre adds that 'we can consider ourselves 'slaves' in so far as we appear to the Other . . . [so] I am in danger.' Indeed, the 'subjective reactions to the Other's look ... are fear... [and] the recognition of my slavery Through the Other's look I live myself as fixed amid the world in danger Thus, in the look the death of my possibilities causes me to experience the Other's freedom' (Synnott 1992: 624). Ratanlal cannot concede this; because it is he who has seized hold of the gaze and wishes to retain it himself. To prevent the power of gaze from being transferred

and curtail chances of it being mingled among others, he kills Manilal shoving him off a railway bridge. The next day he climbs atop the site of the assassination; this time, the text appears as the first spectator to his end. As he leans on the railing, a pair of hands come up from behind and give him a savage push. The story ends ‘Ratan Babu no longer standing on the bridge, but as a token of his presence, a small shining object is stuck in a crack in the wooden railing. It is an aluminium box with betel nuts in it’ (Ray 2001a: 37).

The Oddities of a Deadly Gaze

Ratan Babu becomes the object of a spectatorial experience of the text. But can there be a spectator who is both the perpetrator of an objectifying gaze and the subject of the absolute spectacle that the object unfolds? To find an answer we would do well to read the text of one such spectator in Satyajit Ray’s *Batik Babu* (Mr Eccentric 1972). Incidentally, something unusual strikes the narrator in the story *Batik Babu* as he finds this man bent forward, leaning on his walking stick *gazing* intently at the grass by the roadside. Transfixed for a few moments, he pushes his fingers into the thick grass and recovers a small disc – a button. This is Batik Babu who has his precious collection of one hundred and seventy items of apparently very “ordinary” things like a root of some plant, a rusted padlock, an ancient tin of Gold Flake cigarettes, a knitting needle, a shoe brush, old torch cells and so on. Equipped with this strange power of visualizing events long past these objects scream wealth, telling of the seductively mysterious deaths of men or as Batik Babu puts it – ‘it isn’t just death but sudden or unnatural death – murder, suicide, death by accident, heart failure things like that’ (Ray 2001b: 260).

In a typical subject/ object relation, the role of the observer is constructed as follows: the observer’s (the subject’s) gaze (that invisible connection between an observer and the observed) is directed – or, rather, focused upon a given object. The observer, in focusing the gaze upon the object, “creates” the object – or, at least, renders it visible. The object becomes a kind of repository for the gaze – “a trap for the eye” (Collins 1992: 75). Still, there is no guarantee that the object will be the focus of attention. There is not any determinate or obvious connection between the “object of the gaze” and the chaos of images that fill an attentive mind. The seductiveness of an image (in a painting, for example) would cause rational observers “to lose” themselves to the demands of “an aesthetic experience”.

Batik Babu the eccentric observer, however, undergoes certain somatic deviations (his soaring body temperature) which have the potential of shifting the subject of the exchange to the identity of the observer. One can argue in such a case that the observer, not the object, is changing –in a phrase, coming into being.

Batik Babu is not cast in the role of a passive, unobtrusive spectator; the emphasis placed in the story on his act of looking highlights his active gaze. The reader ... is simply someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the text is constituted. For Batik Babu, the visible world appears as a screen of disrupted appearances resembling the theory of abstract painting in that it requires that he both look at the world and look away in the same process. The idea of looking away here means an absolute scepticism about the authority of representation. Dr. Bhowmick believes that all of Batik Babu's stories are nonsense; Mr. Khastagir opines that people like him pollute the air; and for once the narrator listening to his stories asks himself, 'Was he perhaps insane?' For that matter, madness is "reason dazzled" (Foucault 2009: 101) or unreason. As such it requires confinement in the asylum, with constant surveillance, and with chains and shackles for those who are dangerous. The chains and shackles were largely removed in the nineteenth century, to be replaced by the mirror. Madness would no longer be punished: 'Madness would see itself, would be seen by itself – pure spectacle and absolute subject Madness is made to observe itself' (ibid: 249). Murdering Naskar, Batik Babu becomes a spectator to his madness and when he pleads with the narrator to take away the ring (the motive for the murder), he baits for a possible cure to his rising body temperature or perhaps his madness. Batik Babu's gaze is now multi-functional. It is here that we find in Satyajit Ray the streaks of a creative person. As Ashis Nandy has contended it is this creative person who creates a kind of shadow self 'which is perfectly compatible with dominant social ideals and one's over-socialized self but wears successfully the garb of unconventionality. This shadow self allows freer play to one's under-socialized self, having greater access to the primitive, the non-rational and the intuitive' (Nandy 2011: 266).

Zooming in the viewfinder, I face questions. Is it the seductive power of spectatorship, its magnetic charm that allures Batik Babu to hunt and collect the one hundred and seventy-third item in his collection? Does the spectacle named "that man" reduce Ratan Babu to a spectre? Will Nikunjo be reprieved or will his new hobby in clay modelling, in creating anonymous "yous", land him in yet another trouble? Each of these queries carries the

impression of the confusion of the traveller, the wandering consciousness of one not quite at home with one's surroundings, oneself, or one's death. It is the extraordinariness of the otherwise calibrated lives of men that haunts the texts. In display is the beguiling experience of the profundity of existence. The spectator is game to its easy vulnerability.

The Anxieties of the Everyday

Given the anachronic disposition of spirits the enterprise of the everyday is game to their temporality which is paradoxical – 'as at once the ghosts "return" and make their apparitional debut' (Buse and Stott 1999:11). This play of the dead defying absence and returning to *become* present is found in Satyajit Ray's short story "Anath Babur Bhoy" ('Anath Babu's Terror', 1962). In it, the narrator Sitesh Babu eager to learn of Anath Babu's expedition of spending a night at the haunted Halder mansion cannot hold back his inquisitiveness. Anath Babu on his part describes in detail the hospitality the mansion offers him, of lying comfortably in an armchair, hookah by his side, the rich smell of the best quality tobacco filling the room. 'Quite a pleasant situation wouldn't you agree?' (Ray 2008a: 55). Anath Babu quips. The narrator says. 'Sounds good. So, you had a pleasant night?' (ibid: 55). Anath Babu pauses for an uneasy silence. Sitesh Babu grows impatient and blurts out, 'Do you mean to say that you didn't have any reason to feel frightened? You didn't see a ghost after all?' (ibid: 55). The technique of suspense deployed, Anath Babu takes a dreaded move. He leads the narrator to enter the site of his "highly successful adventure". The door is closed. Sitesh Babu pushes it open and goes in. And he sees the face of fear – the spectacle of death, lying cold and stiff. It scares Sitesh Babu to death paralyzing his senses, and his mind. When Sitesh Babu regains consciousness, he envisages the spectral imagery, for he now *knows* that even tomorrow he will find Ananth Babu 'wearing a black jacket and heavy boots coming out of the jungle in the eastern end of the Haldar mansion, a neem twig in his hand, grinning from ear to ear' (ibid: 56). Visually, it is this sequence which aggravates an uncontrolled and unidentifiable dread; the dread is of the ghost of Anath Babu stalking our very own everyday world. Anath Babu *becomes* a non-body, a no-body and yet uncannily some-body agitating the calm of everydayness.

Anath Babu's ghost appears not on a moonless night purported to be the *best possible time* for ghosts and spirits to come out but at dawn, traditionally unfitting an hour for ghosts. So his *fort-da*, his dis-reappearance dislodges

the neat diurnal/nocturnal divide. For once the all-illuminated diurnal is aligned to a dreaded dark. With it, everyday life escapes control; buried ‘secrets’ are revealed or en-lightened. But there is more to nocturnal/diurnal dichotomy vis-à-vis its relation to the affect of uncanny. Even though Anath Babu’s spectre haunts in the darkest of dawns, this does not dispel the fear of darkness at night; rather it only protracts the hours of darkness. Darkness frightens. Travellers at night are exposed to danger.

Darkness is enforced with a power cut in Ray’s story “Loadshedding”. But is illumination achieving the triumph of light over darkness always able to conquer and subjugate the idea of danger and fear associated with the idea of the ‘nocturnal’? Phani Babu in Satyajit Ray’s short story “Loadshedding” (“Powercut” 1978) stranded on an island of darkness during a power cut in the night city may provide us with a clue to the answer. As he gropes his way up the stairs to his flat, he collides against a tin pot around the sixtieth step; a deafening sound throws him off gear and leaves his heart pounding for breath. As Phani Babu nears his flat, music flows in – a Rabindrasangeet. It must be the transistor playing next door, Phani Babu soliloquizes. The self-reflexive text utters, ‘in surroundings as these, this kind of sound from the radio helps tide over the feeling of the uncanny. Of course, this must be said that Phani Babu has no fear of ghosts at all’ (Ray 2008b:242). To his surprise Phani Babu finds the door of his flat unlocked: it is the doing of his servant Nabin, he thinks. He fumbles to reach the *alna* (a clothes rack) to keep his shirt and his umbrella, but his fingers reach elsewhere –shattering some ‘glass’ to pieces. It must have been a picture frame or a mirror. Phani Babu remembers that he indeed has a picture of Paramanshadeb (a saint by the name) in his room but it is placed on the opposite wall. Next, he settles for a chair; but the chair in his room has no handle, he soliloquizes but then he dismisses the doubt. The light from the parts of the city still illuminated reflects their shadows onto the sky. It is a metaphor for the growing contradictions within the city; artificial light seems to be the natural condition in place of darkness. Relegated to the periphery during the power cut, the light starkly outlines the darker regions of the mind.

At each step in the story, Phani Babu is immersed in a certain incertitude of mind. He doubts how his home has been left unlocked, why the pieces of furniture in his room are not in their places, and why the *almirah* has been left open. But Phani Babu is quick to dispel the doubts as quickly as they arise. But the doubts are never sufficiently gotten rid of it. It is never sufficiently certain. There is a certain disquiet about the real nature of his

supposedly familiar surroundings of the “home”. The everydayness ruptured there is an enticing interplay of the everyday and the uncanny. The final assault comes when the phone rings making Phani Babu realize that he is not *at home*; because he doesn’t possess one. The telephone ring is a good transmitter of the *unheimliche*. ‘The text becomes knotty and stops. A cut. A desire for the indisputable’ (Freud *et. al.* 1976: 541). And yet though one professes to practice the everyday as “certain” there is always a reason “to hesitate”. The home at once familiar is coloured by a dash of the unhomely. The everyday habitat appears strange and is estranged in turn. Phani Babu manages to sneak out as the owner of the flat comes calling. The text tells us, ‘Phani Babu has no more *to fear*’. Just then power is restored, and to add an uncanny bite, Phani Babu notices that a brand new fashionable Japanese umbrella has reached his hands.

Conclusion

The everyday in Satyajit Ray’s stories melts away as shadowy and irrecoverable disintegration, as unconscious; but it is one that never truly falls away, gets lost, goes lacking, turns to zero, is rendered null and void. It remains as a dialectical grace note, as forever incomplete and partial. To paraphrase Lefebvre it is, ‘something – which is certainly not a thing is encountered once again. ... It vanishes and at the same time it makes itself known (Lefebvre 2002: 342). So, what is this something? Lefebvre answers, ‘A mixture of nature and culture, the historical and the lived, the individual and the social, the real and the unreal, a place of transitions, of meetings, interactions and conflicts, in short, a *level* of reality’ (ibid: 47). It is this oddly perplexing level of reality; I argue that texts to do with the ghostliness of everyday living exploits. The zealous gnome in Anath Babu who catches us in a bolt out of the blue, the morbid specularly of the act of mirroring, the phantasmic double and so on. The everyday serves as the sticky palimpsest for these shuffling uncanny moments.

Notes

1. There is an important qualification in identifying Nikunjo as a *kusilava* or an entertainer. Nikunjo enacts a performance not to entertain others but himself.
2. I have borrowed Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s notion of *pre-face* meaning the preparatory rehearsals that precede the consolidation of any

work, that is of any computable finished object. Here the reader doubles as the viewer can share in Nikunja's anxiety of not being able to undo a rather dangerous pre-face. See Sibaji Bandyopadhyay 2007: 7.

3. Here I subscribe to Umberto Eco's notion of a mirror as a "neutral prosthesis" which allows us to catch visual stimuli from where our eyes could not reach.

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