

# Narrating the Unrest: A Critical Study of 'Haunting' in C. Ayyappan's *Ghost Speech*

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 2

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Mathew, Anju. "Narrating the Unrest: A Critical Study of 'Haunting' in C. Ayyappan's Ghost Speech." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S2, 2025, pp. 1–7.

*International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S2, 2025, pp. 1–7.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15307806>

**Anju Mathew**

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English  
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India*

### Abstract

*C. Ayyappan, known for his poignant depiction of the angst and struggles faced by Dalit communities in Kerala, has employed distinctive narrative techniques to capture the profound depth of their suffering and marginalization. One of the unique characteristics of Ayyappan's narratives is that they comprise ghost speech or spectral speech. The spectres in Ayyappan's stories script their lives, and in a sense, their narratives can be described as 'Autothanatography', where individuals narrate or reflect upon their own death. Haunting emerges as a central theme across all these narratives. This paper, titled 'Narrating the Unrest: A Critical Study of 'Haunting' in C. Ayyappan's Ghost Speech', examines the manifold dimensions of haunting, with a particular focus on its psychological undercurrents. The study incorporates the psycho-analytic framework of 'Phantom', 'Crypt', and 'Transgenerational Trauma' laid down by the Hungarian-French psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham to explore how suppressed histories and unresolved grief haunt individuals across generations. The study also examines the sociogenic roots of such psychological hauntings and critically evaluates them.*

**Keywords:** Haunting, Autothanatography, Phantom, Crypt, Caste, Sociogenesis.

Dalit literature in Malayalam has emerged as a powerful narrative space that articulates the lived experiences, struggles, and resistance of marginalized communities in Kerala. For instance, writers like T. K. C. Vaduthala, C. Ayyappan, and Paul Chirakkarode have written extensively on the entrenched injustices of caste oppression in Kerala. Of which, the luminosity of a different literary climate can be observed in the writings of C. Ayyappan, granting him a unique place in the literary discourse. Born in 1949 in Keezhillum, Ernakulam district, Ayyappan developed a deep interest in art and literature. After completing his postgraduate studies in Malayalam literature, he taught at various government colleges in Kerala. He was particularly fascinated by the indigenous art forms and folktales prevalent in his native village, integrating recurring themes from these cultural expressions into his work. Retired as principal from Malappuram Government College, Ayyappan has written a collection of short stories titled *Dreams in Noon-Sleep (Uchayurakkathile Swapnangal)* and another one, *Crabs (Njandukal)*. In addition to these, he has written several plays.

One of the unique characteristics of Ayyappan's narratives is that they comprise ghost speech or spectral speech. "Spectres haunt Ayyappan's stories: dead people appear before the protagonists of these stories to accompany them and speak to them, blurring the boundaries between the present and the past, the everyday and the exceptional" (Kumar 176). Interestingly, the discursivity of these spectral speeches must be scrutinized owing to their significant socio-historical dimensions.

### **The Phantom, Crypt and Transgenerational Haunting**

The belief that the spirits of the dead can return to haunt the living exists either as a tenet or as a marginal conviction in all civilizations, whether ancient or modern. More often than not, the dead do not return to reunite the living with their loved ones but rather lead them into some dreadful snare, entrapping them with disastrous consequences. "Some are predestined to haunt: the dead who have been shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave" (Abraham 287). The ghost of King Hamlet is one such archetype that has reigned the entire literary world for centuries, often posing an enigmatic puzzle to both literary critics and scholarly giants alike. The play Hamlet ends abruptly, plagued by a series of murders, leaving behind certain questions and confusion. A number of critics have made observations regarding the uncertainty evoked by the play. According to Ernest Jones Hamlet delays his revenge because of an oedipal conflict, stemming from an identification with Claudius (Jones 57). The Hungarian – French psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham is of the view that Hamlet's problems cannot be interpreted to a mere personal conflict of repressed oedipal desire rather it can be placed in a larger context (Abraham 2). Abraham argues that Hamlet is not simply conflicted by personal unconscious desires but is haunted by a legacy of hidden traumas and unresolved issues related to his father's death and the family's past (3). He cites a particular instance where prince Hamlet doubts the motives of the ghost, suggesting that the ghost may have something to hide (3). Abraham says that Hamlet's internal struggle stemmed from deeper 'transgenerational issues' rather than solely individual psychological conflicts (3). The ghost of King Hamlet symbolizes not just a call for revenge but also the presence of unresolved familial conflicts, making Hamlet a carrier of these transgenerational hauntings (3). This suggests that his ancestors or the Elsinore castle have been hiding something through generations. Incorporating these ideas, Nicholas Abraham composed an essay titled *The Phantom of Hamlet or The Sixth Act: Preceded by the Intermission of The Truth* (1988), where he examines the unresolved familial conflicts or buried secrets concealed within Elsinore Castle. He delves into the hidden truths surrounding King Hamlet's ghost, the secret it harbors, and the underlying circumstances of King Hamlet's death. To address the ambiguities of the play, Abraham introduces a hypothetical 'Sixth Act', integrating his psychoanalytic framework to provide resolution and clarity.

Abraham primarily composed this act to illustrate his concept of the 'Phantom', referring to the psychological burdens individuals unconsciously inherit from their ancestors without their awareness. This sixth act serves as a literary application of Abraham's concepts of the 'Phantom', 'Crypt', 'Transgenerational Trauma', and 'Intergenerational Trauma'. The Hungarian-French psycho-analyst Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok developed the concept of Crypt and Phantom in their work: *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, published in 1994. They were influenced by Freudian theory and sought to expand it, particularly concerning the concepts of the unconscious. While discussing what motivated them to develop these findings, Abraham and Torok explained that, while analysing their patients, they discovered indicators of unresolved conflicts in their patients that could not be linked to patients' own lived experience but inheriting a secret psychic substance of their ancestors (Lane3). Their research focused on how the unspoken, inherited secrets of forebears shaped the thoughts and behaviours of their descendants. The phantom

refers to unresolved conflicts or buried secrets passed down from one generation to the next without the recipients' awareness, manifesting as a haunting presence that shapes the emotions and behaviours of their descendants (Abraham and Torok, 4). The phantom represents repressed material, and the intricacies of repressed material in the unconscious have long been an intriguing subject in psychoanalysis, first explored by Freud. Subsequently, many others have delved into this topic. While Freud focuses on personal repression rooted in experiences related to individual psychosexual development, Abraham expands the discussion to encompass the influence of ancestral traumas, providing a more comprehensive perspective on how unresolved conflicts can shape not only individuals but lineages. The crypt is a metaphorical space in the unconscious mind where unresolved ancestral conflicts are buried, described as a psychic tomb or vault that conceals repressed material from surfacing into consciousness (4). Acting as a defence mechanism, it protects the individual from confronting painful realities. The phantom represents the manifestation of this repressed material, not in the person who originally experienced it, but in their descendants, haunting future generations (4). Associated with guilt and shame, the crypt 'engenders silence', making it an ideal space to conceal these unspoken secrets (4). It remains unspeakable due to its connection with shame. The phantom can be transmitted across generations through both intergenerational and transgenerational transmission. In intergenerational transmission, the unresolved conflict or secret is passed directly from one generation (such as parents) to the next (their children), often manifesting through unconscious behaviours, emotional patterns, or psychological disturbances. In transgenerational transmission, the impact of the trauma extends further, affecting multiple generations beyond the immediate descendants, leading to long-lasting psychological effects across a family or community. For instance, among the descendants of Holocaust victims, it has been observed that the ramifications of this horror still ripple through subsequent generations.

According to Abraham, "The shameful and therefore concealed secret always does return to haunt. To exorcise it, one must express it in words" (Abraham, "Phantom of Hamlet" 289). The verbalization of this secret is challenging, as individuals are unaware of its existence in their psyche. This underscores the need for an 'empathetic outsider' to narrate the phantom and help the individual bring it to light (291). The phantom is not merely repressed 'personal content', but a "foreign" element passed down, which the individual must recognize as a separate, external force. After exorcising the phantom, it returns to the unconscious not as a haunting force but as something that has been integrated into the self. It no longer functions as a disturbing presence; instead, it becomes part of the individual's psychic reality in a more peaceful, less disruptive manner (292).

### **Inter-Generational Haunting**

A scrupulous analysis of the discursivity embedded in Ayyappan's story *Ghost-Speech* (2011), originally written in Malayalam as *Prethabhashanam* later translated into English by Udaya Kumar, executes this narrative function, wherein the ghost's act of narration resolves the phantom buried in the individual's unconscious. The short story *Prethabhashanam* by C. Ayyappan, originally written in Malayalam and later translated into English as *Ghost Speech* by Udaya Kumar, presents a powerful subaltern narrative blended by thematic depth and stylistic techniques. The narrative is constructed entirely through the monologue of the spectral figure. The story is set in Kerala during the era of the Landlord-Tenant System, wherein the landlord exercised absolute ownership over the land while the tenant cultivated it under specific obligations, including the payment of rent or a share of the produce. Tenants and their families were subjected to systemic disenfranchisement, facing the constant threat of eviction at the arbitrary will of the landlord, rendering them vulnerable to homelessness and exploitation. In *Ghost Speech*, an upper-caste Christian girl named Rosy Kutty is possessed by the ghost of their maid, who belongs to the *Pulaya* caste. The maid had been

sexually abused by Kunjakko, the girl's brother, under the pretext of a romantic relationship. The maid used to come to Rosekutty's house to tend to the harvested paddy, which had been spread out on the attic floor for drying. During one such visit, Kunjakko enticed her through romantic overtures, to which the maid eventually yielded. When alive, the maid asked him to marry her, but he scornfully rejected her, questioning how an upper-caste Christian man could marry a *Pulaya* woman. The maid earnestly desired to marry Kunjakko and build a family with him, envisioning a future where she would bear his children. However, for Kunjakko, she was merely a means to fulfill his carnal desires. Upon hearing her request for marriage, he subjected her to both physical and mental abuse. Rumours spread throughout the entire village, and her father violently assaulted her upon discovering that she had been socially stigmatized as a 'fallen woman'. She was forced into committing suicide and after her death, the maid's ghost emerges, and long-buried family secrets are unveiled.

From the spectral speech, it becomes evident that Rosy Kutty is haunted by the phantom of a long-buried family secret. She is portrayed as girl having some sort of 'emotional instability'. The story starts with the line, "Hark, give ear to my words. I will speak to you and separate the grain from the chaff in your mind" (Ayyappan 350). This concealed truth in the unconscious is shown to torment the subject without any awareness regarding the origin of the conflict. The separation of the "grain from the chaff" in the mind metaphorically suggests the presence of the phantom and the subsequent attempt to release it from the subject's psyche through the ghost's act of narration. Abraham points out that there is a specific moment when the individual becomes aware of a 'gap' in their understanding or communication regarding the secret. This awareness leads to the emergence of a phantom in the unconscious (Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom" 290). As Abraham notes, "This recognition may not be a conscious realization but rather an instinctive understanding of the underlying emotional absence. (290) According to him, this produces a twofold and contrary effect which is the "prohibition of knowledge coupled with an unconscious investigation" (291).

As a result,

...the 'haunted' individual is caught between two inclinations. On the one hand, he must at all costs maintain his ignorance of the secret, hence the semblance of unawareness (nescience) concerning it. On the other hand, he must eliminate the state of secrecy, hence the reconstruction of the secret in the form of unconscious knowledge. (291)

That is, on the one hand, the subject consciously chooses to remain uninformed to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths, while on the other hand, the unconscious mind is at work reconstructing the secret. As a result, the internal conflict and tension between these opposing desires manifest in observable behaviours or symptoms which is the cause of Rosekutty's mental illness.

The operation of the phantom and the disruption it inflicts on the subject's psyche are reflected in the ghost's subsequent speech which ensues as:

I am not interested in the puny pleasures that lies can buy  
Not knowing the truth of a murder and a suicide-- is that not  
What preys on your wakeful hours, hunting you down to exhaustion?  
Relax now. I am about to paint your eyelashes with the nudity of truth. (Ayyappan 351)

As mentioned earlier, this haunting produces a twofold and contrary effect. On the one hand, the phantom thrusts the individual to remain ignorant about the buried truth to avoid encountering unpleasant realities. The phrase 'puny pleasures' suggests the illusory happiness offered to the subject, stemming from the phantom's operative nature that avoids truths causing discomfort. On the other hand, the unconscious mind strives to excavate hidden truths, as implied in the words 'Not knowing the truth... hunting you down to exhaustion.'"The internal conflict and tension between

these two opposing forces is what truly haunts Rosekutty, driving her to exhaustion. Abraham observes that “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others,” or, as he puts it, “the burial of an unspeakable fact within the loved one” (Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom” 285). For Rosekutty, she holds immense affection for her brother. From the ghost’s words, it can be inferred that something concealed is linked to her brother’s murder, and this gap in the truth has been recognized by Rosekutty, which is haunting her now. This secret is being probed by her unconscious mind, having many hidden layers. The narrative agency has to dispel the phantom embedded in guilt and shame. The spectral agency accomplishes the same by revealing the long-silenced truth. The narrative reveals that an attempt to abuse Rosy Kutty was made by Kunjakko while she was sleeping. To prevent this act, Rosy Kutty’s body was possessed by the ghost. A deeper secret is subsequently disclosed by the ghost, that is, the maid’s mother had been exploited by Kunjakko’s father, making the maid and Kunjakko siblings. For years, the maid’s family served Kunjakko’s family, enduring relentless subjugation as part of the entrenched social hierarchy. These women were oppressed by the powerful landlords, yet were unable to voice their suffering. The ghost reveals that even its mother harbored doubts about its parentage, as Kunjakko’s father’s younger brother had also sought her. This long-concealed secret, hidden by the family for years, was ironically brought to light only after the maid’s death, when it encountered the divine. Despite being warned by his father to end his relationship with the maid (without revealing the truth), Kunjakko persisted. Later, when Kunjakko attempted to exploit Rosy Kutty, taking advantage of her illness, he was killed by his father to protect her. This long-buried secret, entwined with shame and guilt, is later transmitted as intergenerational trauma. This is the long-buried secret, or, in other words, the phantom or an unresolved conflict passed down from one generation to the next. Abraham notes that the persistence of the phantom disrupts the subject’s mental well-being, manifesting in symptoms that trigger inexplicable or involuntary actions and expressions. These disturbances create uncanny effects, such as “hallucinations” and “delirium”, which Abraham refers to as “gratuitous” acts and words. (286). This can be read in relation with the final words of the ghost, “I was afraid that if I leave you without telling you everything, some disaster would befall you” (Ayyappan 355). This ‘disaster’ can be interpreted as the ill effects that phantom can cause to the individual if it is not reduced. Finally, the ghost concludes its narration by saying that “I give you, my freedom” (Ayyappan 355). As Abraham notes, “Once the secret or trauma is brought into consciousness and fully processed, understood, accepted, and exorcised, the phantom no longer haunts the individual” (Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom” 291). This is the ‘freedom’ that the ghost offers to Rosy Kutty. As the ghost narrates the long-silenced family secret, the phantom is revealed, and its oppressive influence begins to fade. By bringing the hidden trauma to light, the ghost facilitates the release of the phantom. Toward the end of the story, the ghost asks, “Where is the chain? Look at your feet, there is no chain,” (Ayyappan 355), signifying that the barrier imposed by the phantom has been lifted. The disappearance of the chain can be interpreted as a proof of the phantom’s dissolution, symbolizing the subject’s liberation from the unconscious burden of repressed guilt and shame.

### **Caste, Gender, and the Politics of Spectral Agency**

The world of deaths, spirits and rituals of propitiation has occupied an important place in the cultural history of lower caste practices in Kerala. For instance, rituals like the *Theyyattam*, performed in Kerala’s northern districts like Kasaragod, Kannur, Kozhikode, and Wayanad have been studied as commemorating the unjust killing of lower caste subjects, invoking them as Gods and propitiating them. On the one hand, such rituals are seen as acknowledgments of past injustices and attempts of reconciliation, on the other hand, they are treated as inscriptions of a history marked

by oppression and injustice (Kumar 177). The author himself has stated that the popular myths and customs that prevailed in his native cultural practices provided him with the raw materials for his writings and the spectres who appear in his stories are no exception to this. However, Ayyappan's ghost narrators took a different turn. The spectres in Ayyappan's stories script their own lives, and in a sense, their narratives can be described as 'Autothanatography', where individuals narrate or reflect upon their death. Spectrality becomes the very condition of their voice and agency. The ghost narrators in Ayyappan's world draw their ability to act from their lack of accommodation in the social world. The recurring trope of suicidal agency may need to be understood in this context. The author employs spectral agency to reveal the buried truth, as it remains difficult for the living to bring it to light due to the entrenched dynamics of caste and patriarchy. By introducing a spectral presence, the narrative circumvents the social and cultural constraints that govern life. This spectral figure, positioned outside the boundaries of the living world, escapes the boundaries imposed by caste-based oppression and provides a unique space for the expression of marginalized voices that would otherwise remain silenced. There is an instance in the story where God calls the maid as a sinner during their encounter after her death, when she has become a ghost. She was called as a sinner since her nakedness was exposed by her own brother. However, the ghost asked a challenging question in return: "Old fool, how can a Christian have a *Pulaya* girl as his sibling" (Ayyappan 354). In the text, thereafter, it is described that "suddenly God couldn't speak as if he had swallowed a whole plantain" (Ayyappan 355). This is a question directed at the absurd and exploitative system of caste. This intergenerational transmission of unresolved conflicts from the previous generation illustrates the deeply entrenched and oppressive nature of the caste system, which perpetuates itself across generations. The persistence of these unaddressed traumas demonstrates how caste-based hierarchies and injustices are not limited to individual experiences but are continually reinscribed into the fabric of familial and social structures, impacting successive generations.

Women endured significant exploitation and systemic oppression under the landlord-tenant system, which prevailed in Kerala prior to the implementation of the Land Reform Act in 1963. In the 1980s, K. Saradmoni, one of the pioneers in Dalit and gender studies in Kerala, introduced the term 'Slave Caste' in her seminal work *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* to define a unique form of social oppression based on caste that existed in Kerala since the early medieval period. The study meticulously documents the systemic oppression and brutalities endured by women from marginalized castes. The 'Perinad Revolt' popularly known as *Kallumala* Samaram took place in Perinad and nearby villages in the Kollam district of Kerala on October 24, 1915. The revolt was a response to the long-standing tradition of denying lower caste women the right to wear gold or metal ornaments. Mahatma Ayyankali's Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) and Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan's (popularly known as Poykayil Appachan) "Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha" (PRDS) were instrumental in fostering the social and cultural upliftment of Dalit women in Kerala, addressing the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender. C. Ayyappan, himself, belongs to the *Pulaya* community and crafted the story within this socio-cultural milieu.

### **Sociogenesis of the Psychic Conflicts**

Unlike Hamlet's ghost, which demands action and vengeance to uphold power, hierarchy, and monarchy, functioning as a spectral embodiment of royal hegemony, Ayyappan's ghost seeks to narrativize or reconstruct a life that was excluded from the social order. While both ghosts embody psychological haunting, the origins and dimensions of their haunting are situated within distinct social paradigms. The suicides of Dalit students in prestigious institutions have sparked critical discussions across the country in recent times. Some institutions refuse to admit Dalit students

under the pretext that they are insufficiently qualified, a practice that reflects deep-rooted caste discrimination. This unaccommodating practice in the social realm leads to feelings of alienation and isolation among students, driving them to suicide. In his landmark work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon emphasizes the psychological trauma inflicted by colonization. He argues that the psychological effects of racism and colonization are not merely individual but socially produced (or sociogenically determined). In this context, it can be argued that social injustices, such as caste-based discrimination, severely affect the bodies and souls of the oppressed, transforming into intergenerational trauma, as seen in Ayyappan's Ghost Speech. This examination points fingers at sociogenesis, the idea that social conditions and historical structures, particularly racism and caste-based oppression, shape the development of psychological disorders (Dwivedi 116). Therefore, to psychologically cure individuals grappling with caste-based inequalities, it must be adapted to context-specific sociogenesis (the origins of psychological issues rooted in societal structures), which in turn calls for a broader shift in societal structure.

## References

1. Abraham, Nicholas. "The Phantom of Hamlet or the Sixth Act: Preceded by the Intermission of 'Truth.'" *Diacritics*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1988, pp. 2–19, doi.org/10.2307/xxxxxx. jstore.
2. Abraham, Nicolas. "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1987, pp. 287–92, www.jstor.org/stable/1343493 . jstor.
3. Ayyappan, C. 'The Ghost-Speech. Translated by Udayakumar. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing*, edited by K. Sathyanarayanan and Susie Tharu. Penguin India. 2011.
4. Dwivedi, Divya. "The Psychomachia of Caste and Psychoanalysis in India ." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2024, pp. 97–120, https://doi.org/10.26812/CASTE.V5I2.1754.
5. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Black Cat, 1961.
6. Jones, Ernest. "The Oedipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive." *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 21, no. 1, Jan. 1910, p. 72, https://doi.org/10.2307/1412950.
7. Kumar, Udaya. "The Strange Homeliness of the Night: Spectral Speech and the Dalit Present in C. Ayyappan's Writings." *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. XVII*. 177-191., 2013.
8. Lane, Christopher. "The Testament of the Other: Abraham and Torok's Failed Expiation of Ghosts." *Diacritics*, edited by Nicolas Abraham et al., vol. 27, no. 4, 1997, pp. 3–29, www.jstor.org/stable/1566259.